

“Building Codes”

Psalm 127

In the movie “Life as a House,” Kevin Kline played George, a middle-aged architect who’s failing at the important things in life, like a relationship with his son. Oddly enough for an architect, he lives in a rundown house between two stylish homes in a fancy neighborhood. He has wanted to tear the house down and build a beautiful new one for a long time, but never got around to it. The movie opens with George lying in a hospital bed, where he has learned he has cancer and only months to live. He decides to spend the time he has left rebuilding his house, and that’s a picture of him getting his priorities straight and getting his life in order.

I think George’s life is a good reminder that you can have success in a lot of things but fail at the most important thing. It depends on who’s directing your life, you or God.

Today we conclude our summer series on the psalms from the Old Testament. The title of the psalm is “A song of ascents, by Solomon.” That title lets us know that the psalm was intended for moving up toward the temple in a worship processional, or we could think of it as steps toward maturity as believers. Even the king who built the temple didn’t accomplish a thing apart from God’s help. We depend on God for everything. The psalm has two basic themes: blessing and uselessness. Living for God’s purpose means blessing, and living for yourself is useless. The key is the phrase, “in vain,” and it appears three times:

- Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (1a)
- Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain (1b)
- In vain you rise early” (2).

Look at what the text doesn’t say: it doesn’t say that work in *general* is in vain, only certain *kinds* of labor. When God isn’t behind your work, it’s a waste of time. Do you remember the story of Babel in Genesis chapter 11, when people try to keep from doing what God has told them to do, which is be fruitful and multiply, and to exercise dominion? The people say,

“Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4).

That kind of labor is useless, so God confused their language and wrecked their plans. You can have all the talent and resources in the world, but when you go against God’s plans, it’s all useless.

What does the psalm affirm?

First, unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. (verse 1a)

The Bible uses “house” as a metaphor whatever you’re building your life around, whatever system you’re building, like “the house of David,” or “the house of Israel.” When the people were faithful and obeyed the LORD, they prospered, but when they let themselves be

seduced by idols, they tried to build their house in vain. Unless our life goes along with what God's doing, it's pointless.

Jesus talked about the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount, which I think is a commentary on this psalm. He told a story of two men constructing houses. One man, the smart one, put his house on a solid foundation. The other, a foolish man, put his house right on the dirt. The constant in the story is a house. We're all building a house, in the sense that we're all trying to build a life. The variable in the story is the foundation—one on rock, which represents Jesus, and the other right on the ground, on shifting sand, which represents anything else besides Jesus.

We all know how important a good foundation is. Not long ago I saw a beautiful craftsman home, built around 1905. It sat proudly on one of the biggest lots around, surrounded by an apple orchard. It looked very impressive, and it went up for sale, so I thought someone would restore it. But when the house sold, bulldozers came right in and flattened it. Why? It had no foundation—it was fabricated right onto the dirt. Of course the house wouldn't last; the only surprise was that it lasted as long as it did.

We're all building, doing the things that make up a lifetime. Think about all the choices facing us—it's as unlimited as our imagination. You can make houses in lots of different styles, from Bauhaus to Victorian, from glass and steel to Swiss chalet. In the same way, people display an incredible array of gifts and talents and interests. That's what makes us so interesting. And we're all putting our abilities to use in shaping our house. That's the constant. Every house is going to look different. And that's okay. But build your house directly on the dirt, try to make the structure itself the foundation, and it can't sustain the building.

Let's apply this to the household, or life, you're building. Is your family important to you? Great! It should be. Give thanks for your family as a gift from God, but don't make it the basis for your life. That's not fair to your family members, and you'll end up trying to live your life through them. You can say the same thing about anything in life—job, volunteer pursuits, whatever. Anything honorable is a gift from the Lord, and that makes a good house, but a bad foundation.

So what we're saying is, it's not good enough to make God an addition to your house. It won't work to make him simply one more room. For our house to make sense, for it to be what we want it to be, for it to hold together in the long run, we've got to let him be the builder, and build it on the foundation that is Jesus Christ.

I know a man in Seattle who was a part of the dot-com boom. He made a fortune and built a great big, 20,000-foot house on the waterfront. But as he was building it his marriage fell apart and his wife made him move out and kept the house. In the end, his efforts were in vain. Who was he building the house for? And what was its foundation?

Apply that to the church. It's not enough to say God inspires what we'd probably do without him anyway. It's not enough for church to be our thing, our goals, our strategic plan, our

success, or even our haven from the world. The key is this: we have to make sure God is the one doing the building, calling us together, shaping us to look more like Jesus, making Christ Pres. a church that Chesterland can't live without. Make sure *your* building is *his* building.

Second, unless the Lord protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good (1b).

Families build homes, and sentries guard a city, but both activities are futile unless the Lord is on your side. Ultimately, the *Lord* protects a city, not its own defenses.

I think we forget this in modern times, because we don't have to live within city walls like people did for thousands of years. If your well-being depended on the strength of walls, and if living space was at a premium because you were confined within the city ramparts, you'd probably think about walls in terms of the protection they provide.

In the movie Troy, the good prince Hector tells his wife what to do in case he's killed and the Greeks break through the city walls. The high walls around the city were impressive; they seemed unbreachable, but Hector was concerned that his wife have a way out in case the enemy broke through. He told her, if the Greeks break through, they'll kill the men, throw the babies over the walls, and take the women. You've got to escape, he tells her, because this is what will happen. And we all know the story of how the Trojan horse brought the enemies within the gates. Ultimately, walls don't give security; only God can do that.

A city without God crumbles from decay within. I think what caused the Roman Empire to fall was not the barbarian from the outside, but the moral slide within. Living for God is what makes us strong. It's a mistake to leave God out of your life, to count on anything else for your security. Trust God, and let him be your security. Put him in charge—and then relax.

Three, unless we're doing the work God has for us to do, our work is pointless (2).

One of the outcomes of the fall, when Adam and Eve chose to do wrong instead of follow God's way, was that work became an enemy. As a consequence, God told Adam,

All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from the earth. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. All your life you will sweat to produce food, until your dying day. Then you will return to the ground from which you came. For you were made from dust, and to the dust you will return (Gen. 3:17-19).

Solomon designed a lot of projects, and the center of his building program was a house for God. When you build a temple it's pretty clear that without God there's no point, don't you think? But that applies to everything we do. Solomon wrote about life's pointlessness without God in Ecclesiastes,

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
 says the Teacher...
 “Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

Or as another translation has it,

“Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.”

Make sure *your* work is *God’s* work. See all your labor as ministry, doing the kinds of things that make Jesus real to a world that needs him, and enjoy what God will do through you. It doesn’t all depend on you. God is the critical factor.

Solomon knew that without God, the temple was just a big, empty box. Without God at the center, the church is useless to the world. You might as well write above the door, “the Spirit of the Lord doesn’t live here any more.” Without God at the center, our work is nothing more than killing time. And our families are just a collection of people who stay together out of convenience.

Four, people are at the heart of God’s blessing. (verses 3-5)

The Psalm teaches us people and not things are what make us rich. This is a part of the blessing of life when God is at the center. Everything we do becomes meaningful, because it is a gift from the Lord. The two major areas of our life—work and family—become fruitful when we make God priority.

Now if you are single, or widowed, or unable to have children of your own, this isn’t a sign that God has removed the blessing from your life. But sometimes even the absence of a blessing we want very much, it testifies to us of the preciousness of people. They’re how God desires to bless us. Of course, not everyone is able to have the children they desire, and when that happens, God still has blessing for us his family, the church. But we have to hear first of all that if we are able to have children, that is a good gift from God.

A lot of the time our world doesn’t value what God values. We don’t protect unborn babies, and we don’t protect the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, which is what God’s word teaches and the church has held since the beginning. (If you have any doubt about that, check out the online version of the *Didache*, which means the teaching, a discipleship handbook from the first century.) Too often our society sees children as a nuisance or a choice, but when we build on the foundation of Jesus, who says “Let the little children come to me and do not stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to them”—when we do that, we value our children as a gift from God, an asset, a great joy. The people he puts into our lives, our spouses, our children, our brothers and sisters in Christ, are our most precious gifts aside from our salvation. God’s hand is in these relationships. They aren’t simply a drain on our emotions or energy or money.

When the LORD builds our house,
 When the LORD guards our city,

When the LORD gives us children,
We come alive, and faith becomes the best adventure in the world;

When the LORD builds the house,
our work becomes worship, and has meaning and purpose.

When the LORD builds the house,
our families become blessed.

When the LORD builds the house,
we're secure.

I'm trying to learn this lesson as I follow the Lord's leading in our life. There's a whole bunch of unknowns in life—but when we trust God to take care of us; that turns out to be the very best place to be. In trusting him, there's peace.

Solomon discovered this. After a lifetime of piling up wealth, wisdom and prestige, he found the only thing that matters is serving God with whatever energy and resources he gives us, to enjoy God and worship him and keep his commands. He writes,

Now all has been heard;
 here is the conclusion of the matter:
 Fear God and keep his commandments,
 for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Five, God frees us from anxious toil. (verse 2)

So, here's the overarching theme: God's blessing is what saves us from uselessness. That comes out in verse 2, that "the LORD gives sleep to those he loves." Jesus makes this point in the Sermon on the Mount, again commenting on this psalm. He says,

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:31-33)

Our fretting and anxious toil doesn't bring peace or satisfaction or meaning to our lives. Human defenses can't make us secure. These things come from the hand of God, and he can do more for us while we sleep than all our frantic scrambling can while we're awake. The Lord gives us the gift of limits, of boundaries, of having to say "I've done all I can, and now I close down for the day." Like the prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." Because God has designed us in such a way that we are frail and helpless and need him. Paul heard that message when God told him, "My power is made perfect in weakness." When we lay our heads down in peace, we trust in God's sovereign care.

Think about how these truths go hand in hand: God made us needy so he could fill that need. He designed us to rest one day a week, and he commanded us to do it. The fourth commandment even makes rest holy, set apart, like God.

So don't forget to rest, because when you make space for God, you're reading his plans, and letting him build your life. And that's a life that's not useless; it's blessed.