

- I. Several years ago during the spring, a series of tornados blew through Forsyth County. I distinctly remember Lanie Pope hunkered down at WXII, pointing at the radar and calling out streets that were only a mile or two from us where a tornado was spotted. Meg and I grabbed our girls and rushed down into a small closet in the basement of the house in which we were currently living. My youngest daughter, Molly, was only 3 or 4 years old at the time. And she was very confused. I tried to explain to her that there was a tornado and we were simply hiding from it so we would be safe. We reassured her that all was going to be okay. After waiting 15-20 minutes I dashed upstairs where Lanie was giving the viewers in Winston the all-clear sign. I walked back down to retrieve the girls. I opened the door and told them the good news. Molly paused and looked up at me with her big brown eyes while hunkered down under a sweater and said, "Daddy, so the big tomato is all gone then?" Yes, the poor girl thought we were hiding from an oversized veggie. Okay, technically a tomato is a fruit, but you got the point. It was one of the worst storms she ever faced in her young life and she was scared to death, produce or not. How about you? What is the worst storm you ever faced? Some of us remember Hurricane Hugo back in '89. It went to the far western reaches of our state and blew so many trees down that small towns like Highlands and Cashiers in the mountains were cut off from the outside world for over a week. An old timer shared with me that he had broken his leg during the storm but the phones were out and the roads closed so he couldn't get any medical attention for almost two weeks. In those parts, it was considered "The Storm of the Century."
- II. So what's with all this storm talk? Someone once said that in life we are usually heading into a storm, or are in the eye of the storm, or are emerging from a storm. In other words, we are about to face hardship, are in the middle of hardship, or just coming out of hardship. Maybe a broken relationship. Maybe dealing with cancer, depression, job loss, poverty, a problem with a child or the inability to have a child. But in life, hardship of some kind or another is just around the corner. The question then is how do we deal with these storms of life? Scripture, in a real sense, provides a map of how to navigate them. Sometimes how to get around the storm or avoid the storms altogether. But more often how to get through them intact...in fact, coming out even stronger and more the people God has called us to be. And that is what we are going to be talking about for the next few weeks.
- III. Today let's look at our first storm story in the gospel of Luke. I remind us that the gospels tell the story of the life, death, resurrection and teachings of Jesus Christ. Luke was a gentile (or non-Jewish) doctor and a friend of Paul the church planter. His gospel then is written for those not familiar with the Jewish world or history. The gospel for non-Jewish Dummies, if you will. We are going to look at the end of Luke chapter 6. But as I like to say, a text without a context is a pretext for it to say whatever you want. So what is going on here? Jesus is just wrapping up a sermon. Not just any sermon but like the mother of all sermons. We talked about this last week. Here is the irony. In Matthew, it is called the Sermon on the Mount. Because Jesus gave it, well, on a hill or mountain. But in Luke's gospel He gives essentially the same sermon and it's called the Sermon on the Plain...no, not because He gives it from First Class on a Southwest Flight but rather He delivers it on a large flat piece of land. Now you bible scholar types might be asking, "So, Ron, are Matthew and Luke talking

about the same time and sermon...one is simply saying tomato, the other tornado? Possibly. One of my favorite hikes around is a place called Rock Castle gorge. The first part of the hike you climb up this ridge and it is brutal. Up and up. You have no doubt that you are on the side of a mountain...and it feels Himalayas-eque as you gain elevation. But then once you are on top it's rolling and parts, well, kind of flat. This is why I believe Matthew and Luke can be talking about the same event. One sees hill the other see flat ground on top of hill. Or there might be a simpler explanation. Let me share with you a pastor secret. If you have a sermon that is gold, as my kids would say, you dust that baby off and you use it again. And believe me, the Sermon on the Mount or Plain is gold. In fact, most pastors and Christians period agree it's the best sermon ever. It's relatively short but has a punch like a prizefighter. Listen to just this one verse. **Luke 6:37 NIV**. Imagine if all people, especially those who follow Jesus, lived this one verse out, how different this world would be! So, yes, I have no doubt that He gave this sermon every chance He got.

- IV. But then Jesus comes to the end. The end with many things is the most important part. The end of a race. The end of a story. The end of a sermon. I can't tell you how many times my wife has said to me after worship on a Sunday morning...well your sermon started out kind of rough today or the middle was a little shaky but at least you nailed the end. We preacher types put a lot of sweat into the ending. You need to seal the deal. Make the point. Leave the congregation with that one thing before they head out to East Coast Wings or Subway. And since this is one of, if not *the*, greatest sermons of all times, Jesus absolutely nails the ending...in this case with nothing less than a storm story. Let's read it. **Luke 6:46-49 NIV**. Jesus begins the end with a kind of "in your face" question. Why do you call me Lord but don't do what I say? That's like saying, "Why do you call me bossman but totally blow off my emails or my memos?" What Jesus is getting at is that many in the audience wanted Jesus' miracles like healings, bringing back people from the dead, free food (feeding of the 5000) and so forth without obeying Him. Well, homey don't play that game. So Jesus ends His sermon with a potent parable (or short story with a sharp moral point.) Two contractors building a house. First one is slow, methodical and thorough. Takes his time and drills down to the bedrock. He knows that the structure is only as strong as the base. He didn't have to go to an Ivy League school to know this. You only need to play with Legos to discover this truth. The storm came as they always do and the house stood firm. But the other contractor either was cheap and shoddy or his mother didn't let him play with Legos as a child. He settled for sand. Abundant, economical but let's face it, sand doesn't hold up well when the rains come. And again, the storms in life always do. So his house ended up little more than a mud pie floating down the river. As the Scripture says, its destruction was complete.
- V. Great closing story, right? But what was Jesus' point by this little storm story? Let me answer that with a little tale of my own. About twin brothers name Walt and Larry. Walt and Larry grew up going to worship with their mom and dad. They didn't always go skipping with bells on but they went, and they sometimes even listened. They occasionally even read their bible and attended from time to time a Christian ministry while in college. They both went on to purse their MBA's and got prime jobs in competing companies. They continued

to attend worship and be involved in a local church. For Larry though it was just something you did on Sunday morning, it helped him in making the right business contacts, and he liked the music even if the pastor was a bore. But for Walt, his Christian faith shaped his life. It didn't only provide purpose and meaning, his relationship with Jesus was his cornerstone or foundation. He didn't just believe in Jesus, he followed Him and tried to live out His teachings. They soon met girls of their dreams and settled down to pursue their version of the American Dream. Larry lived to work. Walt, though, worked to live. Walt and his wife got involved in the church's youth ministry as volunteers. And he spent a week every summer building houses in Central America with the youth group. Larry was too busy climbing the corporate ladder and spent his free time at dinner parties making the right political connections. But then for them both their dream became a nightmare. The storm came, as storms always do. In this case in the form of Kuff's disease. A rare genetic disorder that attacks the brain. Larry discovered it first when going in to check out what he thought was just a nervous tick. Instead of a prescription, after some testing he was given a death sentence. Walt developed the symptoms only a few weeks later. Their doctor gave them a couple of years, five at most. The news hit both the brothers like a hammer. But Walt, whose faith was already strong, went deeper...and found peace, calm, and even joy in the midst of the storm. He treasured each day with his wife and his children and church family as if it were the last, and showed love to everyone that came across his path. He knew death was not the end but only the beginning of a deeper and fuller life. For Larry it was a different story. His flimsy faith fell apart like a ladder made from twigs, and he came crashing down. He turned to prescription drugs and alcohol to calm the inner storm. His wife and children left him as he wallowed in self-pity and bitterness. He would never see the fruit of his labor, retirement on Hilton Head or sailing in the Caymans. The disease destroyed his spirit and heart way before it took his body. Like the Scripture says, his destruction was complete. A tale of two brothers and one storm, but only one left standing. One built his life on rock, the person and the way of Jesus; the other, the shifting sand of the pursuit of wealth and power.

- VI. So did that tale explain the other? If not, let me put it another way. **What we prepare for, we will prevail over.** If we prepare our lives for the storms that will come, because the storms always do, then we will be ready. Like in the case of Rosa Parks. Unlike what we might read in history books, Rosa didn't just happen to decide not to give up her seat that day spontaneously. You see she had a deep, rock-solid faith and she had already decided that she had to stand up against racism no matter the cost. Not giving up your seat might not sound that courageous but others at the time were hung and beaten to death for much less. This is what Rosa said later about that moment: "Since I always have been a believer in God, I knew He was with me and only He could get me through that next step." The storm came, but Rosa with her deep foundation didn't back down, and the flood passed and she was left standing. She prepared for it and prevailed.
- VII. Does that mean that if we trust in Jesus and live out His commands that life will be an easy skip through the tulips kind of thing? Absolutely not. Whether we have a deep faith, shallow as a pond, or none at all, facing terminal illness (or illness period), divorce, losing a

loved one or beloved job can still knock us down for a time. But as we have a deep faith, that relationship with God, we can remain standing when the flood washes over us. It might hurt us but it won't break us. But if our faith is merely of the head, not of the heart or of the hand and feet, as in that we are not living it out, watch out. As James, Jesus' own brother says, "Faith without works is dead," or no faith at all. A dead or an anemic faith will wash away when that tomato or tornado strikes. It's like if I was asked to play defensive line for the Panthers just because I was wearing a Panthers jersey. I would be crushed like a bug. Christianity only t-shirt deep simply can't stand up when the storms come, and friends they always do.

- VIII. So what then? How can we prepare for the storms so we can prevail over them? First **dig deep**. Make alone time with God and reading His word a top priority in your life. If we are not already doing this, go home, download the bible app on your phone, and begin a devotional plan. No more excuses. Believe me, I can personally come up with many. But it's free, it's easy and it can even read the bible to you. And taking just a few minutes out can change our lives as we draw closer to God, the Author of life. Second, **practice what we read**. Ask God to help us and just focus on one thing, like we read earlier, "Don't judge." Don't look down or condemn another person just because they are doing something we disagree with, or because of who they voted for, or what they look like, how they dress, etc. Here is the secret to this: if we begin living out Jesus' teachings, we can sometimes avoid the storms altogether. Again, just consider how much conflict could be avoided if we lived out just this one verse! And third, **find and develop Christian community**. Attending worship here on Sunday morning is vital but we also need a place and a people where we can share, struggle, be prayed for and pray with our fellow Jesus followers. This is why we have our growth groups. And believe me you are going to want these kind of people around when the storms come, because again they always do. Christianity is not a solo event, it's more of a team sport. Don't do it alone. Three ways to build a strong foundation before the storm comes. Remember, it's not an "if" but a "when."
- IX. Listen to following letter from a woman facing the storm. She shares how just a few years after beginning to go deep with God, the following occurred. *"My father was diagnosed with a terminal illness that year and my sister a year later. Over the next three years I had to watch them both die. Over and over He showed me that entering into His strength would only occur when I exited out of my own. Through Scripture and prayer I have learned that I do not have to know where He is taking me as long as I have peace in the One who is leading me."* She continues. *"My heart spills over with sincere gratitude when I think of what the journey would have looked like without the road of preparation He placed on me several years before. He still gives me grace portions in the measurements just right for me as I have learned to live without my father and my sister. His grace never fails."* So what kind of foundation are you building? What kind of foundation am I? One that is firm, built on the life and teaching of Jesus, or one that will wash away with the next storm? Remember, what we prepare for, we will prevail over.