

Commencement Speech at St Stephen's College by

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Firm Foundations

Matt 7:24-27

It is my great privilege to welcome each one of you to St. Stephen's College as we begin a new academic year together. To our newest students, congratulations on becoming part of a community with a rich history of scholarship, leadership, and service. We are delighted that you have chosen to begin this important chapter of your lives with us. I also extend a warm welcome to your parents and families, whose encouragement, sacrifices, and unwavering support have made this moment possible. To our distinguished faculty and dedicated staff, thank you for your commitment to nurturing minds and shaping lives.

Today is a day of new beginnings. Your period in school is over and now you are in St Stephen's. Every new beginning is both a privilege and a responsibility. It offers a fresh opportunity to lay foundations that will support the life you aspire to build. The years you spend at St. Stephen's will certainly equip you with knowledge and skills, but more importantly, they should shape the kind of person you become. Build your life upon the enduring foundations of integrity, choosing what is right even when it is difficult; truth, pursuing knowledge with intellectual honesty and humility; character, allowing your values to guide your decisions both inside and outside the classroom; and service, recognising that education finds its highest purpose when it is used for the good of others. Degrees may open doors, but it is integrity that earns trust, character that inspires respect, truth that brings wisdom, and a spirit of service that leaves a lasting legacy.

So in many ways these three or four years at St Stephen's is like laying the foundations for a building. The foundations that you lay here will make the difference in your life after college. This morning I would like us to look at the gospel reading from St Matthew which was read to us. Jesus uses a parable of the wise and foolish builders in order to teach us about good foundations.

The parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders

Foundation on the Rock

²⁴ *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*

²⁵ *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.*

Jesus then teaches by means of stories. He tells them the story about two people who build their houses on different foundations. The one who hears the words of Jesus and then puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The person who **hears and obeys** is like this person who has strong foundations.

The rain came down and the winds blew against that house yet it did not fall because it had its foundations on the rock. In our lives we also face many storms and the winds may beat upon us threatening to tear us down, but if we are rooted and grounded in God's word and do the will of the Father by practicing righteousness in our lives then we have nothing to fear. It is in fact through testing that we begin to know where we stand with God and with our faith. Only a storm will reveal the truth. The rains hit the roof, the waters erode the base and the winds blow on the side. One is battered from all sides.

The truth on which Jesus is insisting in these final two paragraphs of the Sermon is that neither an intellectual knowledge of him nor a verbal profession, though both are essential in themselves, can ever be a substitute for obedience. The question is not whether we *say* nice, polite, orthodox, enthusiastic things to or about Jesus; nor whether we *hear* his words, listening, studying, pondering and memorizing until our minds are stuffed with his teaching; but whether we *do* what we say and *do* what we know, in other words whether the lordship of Jesus which we profess is one of our life's major realities.

This is not, of course, to teach that the way of salvation, or the way to *enter the kingdom of heaven* (21), is by good works of obedience, for the whole New Testament offers salvation only by the sheer grace of God through faith. What Jesus is stressing, however, is that those who truly hear the gospel and profess faith will always obey him, expressing their faith in their works. The apostles of Jesus never forgot this teaching. It is prominent in their letters. The first letter of John, for example, is full of the perils of a verbal profession: 'If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie ... He who says "I know

him” but disobeys his commandments is a liar.’¹ The letter of James, on the other hand, is full of the perils of an intellectual knowledge. An arid orthodoxy cannot save, he writes, but only a faith which issues in good works; so we have to be ‘doers of the word, and not hearers only’.²¹

What are the foundational values we inculcate in college? St. Stephen’s College is committed to the pursuit of excellence in higher education, character building, total development of personality and responsible citizenship.

1. **Academic Excellence** Discipline combined with freedom of thought and expression. Allowing students to be curious and questioning, Building a national consciousness
2. **Character building - Honesty and Integrity** Instilling a commitment to truthfulness and moral uprightness in all actions. Teaching children to be trustworthy and accountable. **Justice and Fairness** Encouraging students to stand up for what is right and defend the oppressed (Micah 6:8). Promoting equality and fairness in all interactions **Respect for All** Teaching students to respect themselves, others, and authority figures. Emphasizing the inherent worth of every individual as created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27).
3. **Total development of personality -An attitude of service and humility** Teaching students to value others above themselves and avoid pride and bullying (Philippians 2:3-4). Encouraging modesty and a servant-hearted attitude. **Forgiveness** Encouraging students to forgive others as God forgives us (Matthew 6:14-15). Promoting reconciliation and letting go of grudges.
4. **Self-Discipline and Responsibility** Teaching students to exercise self-control and make wise choices. Encouraging accountability for their actions and decisions.
5. **Gratitude** Cultivating a heart of thankfulness for God’s blessings and the kindness of others (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Encouraging children to express appreciation regularly.

¹ 1 Jn. 1:6; 2:4.

² Jas. 1:22–25; 2:14–20.

¹ Stott, J. R. W., & Stott, J. R. W. (1985). [*The message of the Sermon on the mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian counter-culture*](#) (pp. 209–210). Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Foundation on the Sand

²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

On the other hand, there are those who hear the word of God and do not put them into practice. Such people are like the man who built his house on sand without any deep foundations. The rain came down and the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash. If one does not practice the righteousness that Jesus teaches us then it is very difficult for us to face the storms of life. When we are tested then will be found wanting.

What are the foundations of our lives -Sand or Rock?

Foundations on sand can be:

1. **Lies and deceit** – Not being honest in your day-to-day work
2. **Resentment and Anger** - Resentment about others who are doing better than you. Anger comes out of that resentment which is taken out on others.
3. **Pride and Prejudice** - Looking down on others and thinking that you are the best and no one else is worthwhile. Prejudice can come due to the colour of the skin or anything else.
4. **Disrespect and aggression** –
5. **Lack of discipline and irresponsibility**

As you begin this year at St. Stephen's College remember that you are building foundations brick by brick. These bricks are not just about grades, but it is about character. It is about being people of integrity, ethical, thoughtful, compassionate and serving others. Let your education foster intellectual curiosity, disciplined thinking, and the courage to seek truth with humility. Develop into women and men of integrity, justice, compassion, self-discipline, and gratitude, Take responsibility for your actions. May your years here shape not only successful careers but also faithful, servant-hearted leaders who will make a positive difference to our nation and the world. God bless you all