

## Matthew 7:13-29 Kingdom Decision

### Introduction

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a series of comparisons that call for a decision. Having heard Jesus, which gate will you enter, which path will you take?

We've heard the echo of the Ten Commandments through this sermon. Jesus is also echoing here the call to decision that Moses gave to Israel just before His death. Deuteronomy 30:15-20,

<sup>15</sup> "Behold, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; <sup>16</sup> in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. <sup>17</sup> "But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. <sup>19</sup> "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, <sup>20</sup> by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

There are two ways. A way of obedience that leads to life, and a way of disobedience that leads to death. How are we going to respond to the words of Jesus? He challenges us to make a choice. He calls for a decision.

Jesus uses simple, powerful metaphors in four comparisons that call us to this decision. He describes two paths, two trees, two claims, and two foundations. We will consider each of these in turn. The sermon is going to end with these four comparison, but we will not be quite done. Two verses at the end of chapter 7 help create a narrative frame around the whole. We will address those two verses as our conclusion to the whole series.

### Two paths – The way of life is counter-intuitive. (7:13-14)

We begin the end of the sermon with a comparison of two gates that lead to two paths that end in two very different places. Here is that text again, Matthew 7:13-14,

<sup>13</sup> Enter through the narrow gate;  
for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction,  
and there are many who enter through it.  
<sup>14</sup> For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life,  
and there are few who find it.

There is a gate, a way to enter; a path or road to walk on; and a destination.

The wide gate leads to a broad path that ends in destruction. The narrow gate leads to a narrow path that ends in life. The language of the metaphor draws our attention to three realities. First, we can't help but notice the stark difference between the two destinations. Very little is said about what it is actually like to walk either path. But what is very clear is, that one ends in destruction, and the other ends in life. Life for Jesus and for His listeners is linked to the eternal Kingdom of God. That is how we are to understand this metaphor. We end up either in the Kingdom of God forever, experiencing the fullness of life, or we end in destruction, cast out of the Kingdom.

A second reality pointed to by the metaphor is that there is both an entrance onto each path, and that the path must be walked before the end is reached. It's the idea of life as a journey. Countless

poets have followed Jesus in this kind of metaphor. It makes me think of Robert Frost's, "The Road Not Taken."

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

I also think of the whole Lord of the Ring's trilogy, a journey from Shire to Mordor and back again.

"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is calling us to make a crucial life decision. Which path will you walk?

The metaphor makes a third emphasis by describing the way of destruction as broad, and the way of life as narrow. The way of life is counterintuitive. It is not what you think it is, going off your own vision of the good life, or the righteous life, or the desirable life. Your natural inclinations are going to lead you, with most others, onto the broad path. The narrow path is also countercultural. Society is much more likely to point you toward the broad path. This is where the many are going. This is our culture. Few find the narrow way.

Let's think a bit about each way, starting with the broad way.

#### *Broad Way*

Why is the broad way, broad? Why is the gate obvious? Going back to the metaphor about our eyes being the lamp of the body, we have this major problem. We are by nature depraved sinners. We put ourselves at the center. But our very desires darken our rational thought. We are trying to see using a bad lamp.

Jeremiah 17:9 teaches, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

To describe the way of death as "broad" implies that it is easy to find and easy to follow. It is easy to find and easy to follow because our moral compass is naturally skewed. If we follow our heart, whatever direction we go in, it's going to lead us to destruction.

Another way to understand why the way of death is broad is to see it as a path that incorporates a multitude of options. The way of death is the way away from God. So if God is in the center and you set off in any direction away from God, you are going the way of death. You're on the broad path. It almost does not matter which direction you take. You're going away from God.

To give the path just a little more definition, here are three ways we might go away from God. Three approaches to life that put us on the broad path.

#### (1) External standard

Let's start with the approach to life Jesus is addressing directly in this sermon. The broad path that practically all of Jesus' listeners are tempted to take, is the path of biblical religion. That's the path that leads to destruction. Let me be careful here: I do not mean, accurately interpreted biblical religion. I mean biblically *argued* religion. It is the religion of the Pharisees who teach a path to life based on faith in God, participation in biblically ordained ritual, and living according to a biblically defined moral system. This is the broad path. It is the path of religious obedience. We can make ourselves acceptable to God through faith, plus ritual, plus moral obedience. We do not have to be

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost. "The Road Not Taken." Accessed August 28, 2025.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>, 8/28/2025

<sup>2</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1965) 110.

perfect. The ritual will take care of some of that. God is forgiving to a degree. Still, there is a standard we must meet. Stay within the lines through belief, ritual, and morality - and above all, avoid doing anything that gets you kicked out!

Jesus has rejected this approach to life as a wrong way to understand Scripture, and He's done it by showing us how high God's moral requirements actually are. God's standard is too high. Even if you just used your own standard of moral judgment, the way you judge other people, that would be too high. We don't consistently live up to *our own* standard, much less any true standard of holiness that God would find acceptable.

Most religions provide an approach to life on this spectrum. Introduction into the religion is the gate. You are either born into it or you convert into it. There is a standard to meet. That standard has something to do with faith and doctrine, plus ritual, plus moral obedience. Living up to the standard is the way; it's the way into the eternal kingdom, or heaven, or paradise, or nirvana - however the religion is describing life after death.

There is another approach that rejects the external standard, but still puts you on the broad path.

### (2) Internal standard

It is the way of internal standard, or being true to yourself. External standards are imposed to control you, to make you into something you are not. The way to life really comes by defining yourself, defining your god, defining your own moral vision. Be true to that. Be genuine to your own internal standard. If you discover that and live according to that, you will be happy.

The way of internal standard is, in the end, just as legalistic as the way of the external standard. There is a standard that you have to live up to. This way may sound freeing. It fits well into the broad path. But the burden of defining reality based on your own intuition, your own reasoning, your own experience can become very, very heavy. Imagine telling a child, "You define your own way. Just be true to yourself. Follow your heart." It continues to amaze me how often such statements come up in TV and in the movies. Just last night Brenda and I were watching a show we both like. The teenage daughter of a single mom had entered into her first romantic relationship. One of the reasons we like the show is that the family attends church, they all have lunch together on Sunday, they begin every meal with a prayer - not just to God, they actually pray to Jesus. In this scene, the teenage daughter confided in her mom that she had not had sex with the boy yet, even though most of her friends had already had sex. Her mom asked, "Do you love him?" That is her criteria for when it would be okay to have sex, I guess. Her daughter answered, "I don't know." The mom said, "Well, I believe in you. You will know when it is love. You will know when it is time." That's all the wisdom she had to offer her daughter. "You'll know. Figure this out yourself. Follow your heart. Go with your own internal light, your internal standard of what is right." And what happens if she messes up big time? Well, it is all on her. It's all on this teenager, because she is left following her heart. There is no one can help her. She has to go with her own internal standard and live with the consequences.

Both of these ways define the good path in terms of living up to a standard - whether it is an externally defined standard, or an internally defined standard. A third way does everything it can to avoid the idea of a standard, and really to avoid the idea that there might be life after death at all.

### (3) Avoidance

Let's call this, "the way of avoidance." This could include the apathetic, who just don't care to think about these things. It could include the atheist or materialist, who has chosen to believe that there is no spiritual world or afterlife. It could include the person who just wants to live for today without even worrying about tomorrow. They may know that their behavior comes with consequences, but they enjoy today too much to think about that. This person avoids talking about moral obligations, sin, eternity, the soul, religion. They might go to church, but more to please their parents or as a social occasion. They reject any nagging moral obligation imposed by external religious sources and avoid the spiritual "be true to yourself" gurus. Contrary to the mass of humanity through all time,

contrary to their own sense of love, justice, right and wrong, they avoid the whole discussion of God and immortality.

The way to destruction is quite broad. It is the way of the human heart and mind. It is the way of human religion. It is the way of human self-determination. It is the way of human avoidance. As Isaiah says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way (Isaiah 53:6a)."

What about the narrow way?

*Narrow way*

"Narrow" implies a constricted set of options. Jesus also uses the language of finding the narrow way. You do not have to find the broad way; you come by it naturally. But you have to search for the narrow way.

I once took a class on exegetical preaching, where we have to preach to the class and get feedback. A fellow student, who I liked a lot, chose this passage. And I was really troubled by the way he taught it.

Basically, he taught that the narrow way is the way of living a biblically defined moral life. His conclusion was *not* that Jesus rejected the whole idea of being able to live up to a standard. His conclusion was that the Pharisees only obeyed an external, legally defined version of the standard. They were not concerned enough with their words and with the heart. They were hypocrites in giving, and prayer, and fasting. There is a standard. They just misjudged the standard. What Jesus is really saying is that we have to live up to this much higher standard of what it really means to be good. We have to not lust in the mind, turn the other cheek, give sacrificially, love our enemies, pray and fast in secret, store treasure in Heaven. This is the narrow way.

And that is simply not right. We cannot live up to a standard of righteousness that would be anywhere near acceptable to our God. If this is the narrow way, none of us are on it. I do get the confusion. There is a sense of rightness in us. We know we ought to do good. And we know that Jesus is teaching obedience and that the way has something to do with obedience. But how do we have obedience without having to live up to a standard?

In other places, I have emphasized the two questions of covenant. I go over this concept, especially in my series on the Pentateuch and my series on Romans. I can't cover all that ground right now. But the two questions of covenant will help us understand how grace and law work together on the narrow path.

The first question of covenant is this, "What makes me righteous enough to enter into relationship with holy God?" We can think about this question in terms of grace and law; grace being what God does for us, and law being what we do. What percentage is God's part? What percentage is our part? What do you think? How much of this is on God, how much is on you? What makes you righteous enough to be in relationship with God? There is one clear answer to this question. To enter into relationship with Holy God, it must be 100% grace, all on God, and 0% law, none on you. If you have to maintain any holiness yourself, you are going to fail. You are poor in spirit, sinful by nature. And Jesus is telling us, sin begins in the mind, then the words, then the actions. You are a sinner, and the wages of sin is death. You have earned that judgement over and over practically every day of your life. You must pay that penalty, or someone must pay that penalty for you. Jesus paid it on the cross. Either you receive that gift of grace and you are 100% forgiven based on God's work of grace, or you reject that gift and you pay for yourself the penalty of sin – and that's death, 100%.

What is the gate onto the narrow path? Jesus is the gate. You enter by faith. The answer to the first question of covenant is radically simple. "What makes me righteous enough to enter into relationship with holy God?" 100% grace, 0% law. Ephesians 2:8-9,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

There is a second question of covenant, “Now that I have entered into relationship with my holy God, how then should I live?” Let’s ask again. What percentage is law - our part - and what percentage is grace - God’s part? We might say still says, it’s all God, 100% grace, but that does not really ring true with Scripture and all the language calling us to obedience. We are to make some effort. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices. We obey. So then is it all on us, 100% law? That does not ring true, either. We abide in Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. To tell you the truth, I really do not like answering this question with percentages. If I have to, I am going to go with 100% grace and 100% law. That’s bad math, but good for relationship. This is the marriage conference answer. It is not our job to focus on how much the other person is giving to the relationship. It is our job to give all of ourselves to the relationship. We know that God gives 100%. Even when we feel He is absent, He is right there with us. He knows what He’s doing. On the other hand, we never give 100%. And I’m not saying this to put up a new standard that you’re not acceptable if you don’t give 100%. God is quite aware that you’re not able to give 100%. And this is where pursuing the vision comes into play. We have been released from a standard. We may never give God 100% of our heart all the time, but that is still our vision, it is still our desire. And one day we will, in the eternal Kingdom. This is where we are headed. And so, for now we give all we can. And some days that’s more, some days that’s less. And we do not do it in the strength of our own flesh. We do it by abiding in Jesus. Even our part depends on Him working through us.

Unlike the first question of covenant, which is radically simple, this second question is very messy. We learn how to really live for God as we walk the narrow path with Him. I mean, not only is Jesus the gate: He is also the way. So walking this path with Him is a walk of faith in Him.

And it’s going to be hard. In fact, the Greek adjective that I’ve translated, “narrow way,” for way in Jesus’ metaphor could also be translated, “hard way,” or, “difficult way.”<sup>3</sup> Both are true. It is not the way we would naturally choose. It’s narrow. It is counter-cultural. It is limiting. It is also a choice to submit to God as the One who gives definition to life. And that means it is going to be challenging. It’s going to be hard to live for Him.

This is why it is so helpful to distinguish between the two very important questions of covenant. You do not enter the way or stay on the way through obedience. You are in Christ, 100% by grace. He is the gate and the way to eternal life. But having entered into relationship with Him, and having a new outlook on life, a new perspective, a new heart, new motivation, obedience is very much part of this relationship. Now, how do I love my heavenly Father? How do I serve my King; worship my God? That’s the question that our heart is now asking. I am not doing it to meet a standard. I’m doing it because I seek God, I love God, I want to live for God. It’s now a question of relationship; pursuing that vision.

The order of Ephesians 2:8-10 is critical. The place of obedience, or doing good works comes after the issue of salvation is already settled.

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

I have gotten ahead of myself in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is creating a foundation for future understanding of the gospel. His audience is not there, yet. A lot of this teaching is going to come later from Jesus, and especially from after His resurrection through His apostles. For now, there’s a pressing question for the people in Jesus’ audience. They are not surprised that the gate and the way to life are narrow. They can accept that. But who has the right to explain what that narrow way is? There are a lot of voices telling us the true way to real life - life now and life eternal. How do we know which voice to listen to? And who can show us the way?

That is the focus of the next comparison Jesus makes.

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<sup>3</sup> Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 132). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

### Two trees – Test spiritual authority by its fruit. (7:15-20)

Two trees. Test spiritual authority by its fruit. This is Matthew 7:15-20,

- <sup>15</sup> Beware of the false prophets,  
who come to you in sheep's clothing,  
but inwardly are ravenous wolves.  
<sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits.  
Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes* nor figs from thistles, are they?  
<sup>17</sup> So every good tree bears good fruit,  
but the bad tree bears bad fruit.  
<sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot produce bad fruit,  
nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.  
<sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.  
<sup>20</sup> So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Jesus uses two metaphorical figures here to talk about one subject. His subject here is false prophets, those who falsely claim to speak for God in defining the narrow way. Jesus' first brief metaphor paints a very negative picture. False prophets will come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. Outwardly, they look harmless. They look like one of us. They're sheep. But inwardly, they want to eat the sheep around them; that is, use people for their own gain in such a way that is going to be destructive for those people.

In the most extreme cases, you can imagine cult leaders who move to a compound where the community exists to feed their ego. They have several wives. They wield absolute authority. And they end up destroying the lives of their followers. They are obviously false prophets. Bad trees.

Jesus has in mind less obvious wolf-like leaders. Jesus is calling out the Pharisees as false prophets. They are requiring that the people meet a standard that no one can meet. And they are hypocritical in their devotion, really after honor, and praise, and earthly gain. They use their followers to satisfy their own sense of purpose. But their offer of life is false. I think Jesus is pretty clear in His critique later in Matthew 23:15,

- <sup>15</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

But in rejecting the way of the Pharisees, Jesus is pushing back against some strong cultural assumptions here. His listeners might be thinking, "But the Pharisees have so much knowledge. And they are champions of our religious and national identity. Their teaching is grounded in more than a thousand years of tradition. They are zealous. Look at how serious they are about living according to biblical law. They have formal theological training. They know the Scripture. They must know what they are talking about. And they say, their way is the narrow way. It is for the few who meet the standard of God's righteousness. So, how do we know you are right, Jesus? Again, who do we trust to show us the narrow way?"

Of course, it is a fair question. We do look to spiritual authorities for help. We look to priests, and pastors, and Sunday school teachers, podcast speakers, internet videos, moral champions. Who are we to trust? Jesus says, "look to the fruit." Good spiritual authorities will both preach and practices what they preach. If they truly love God, if that is the kind of tree they are, it will show in things they say and do. Good trees produce good fruit and bad trees produce bad fruit.

If your leaders are from God, if they know God, if they have submitted themselves to Him as master and are truly seeking His Kingdom by loving Him and loving people, that will show. The fruit of a transformed character will show in their lives.

And going just by the context of this sermon, we can imagine what kind of fruit Jesus would say to look for. Look for leaders who are good at showing mercy. For leaders who humbly admit when they

are wrong. Look for leaders who mourn over their own anger and their lust; who speak words of life; who show honor and respect to members of the opposite sex. Look for leaders who tell the truth in small things; who are more concerned to reconcile than to defend their own reputation. Look for those who give up their own rights, and time, and resources to bless others. Look for those who bless everyone around them, even their enemies. Look for those who pray, and fast, and give in secret; who do not strive after recognition from men; who are not driven by treasure, or position, or connections on Earth, but who care deeply about seeking the Kingdom of God; who seem to be self-aware about their own sin and who can take criticism, so that when they confront sin in a brother or sister, they do it with humility, and love, and gentleness.

Look for that. Look for that kind of fruit. And be careful to not set yourself in judgement over every little failure, or wrongdoing, or imperfection in your leaders. They're not going to be perfect in this, but they should be producing this fruit to some degree, and they should be growing as they pursue Jesus.

**Two claims – Spiritual relationship with Jesus is characterized by humble obedience. (7:21-23)**

The third contrast also has something to do with people who put themselves up as spiritual authorities. This contrast is a contrast between two different claims. It is in Matthew 7:21-23.

<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*.

<sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'

<sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

In this next contrast we have two groups of people, both claiming to be disciples of Jesus. And this contrast applies to all people who will claim Jesus as Lord on the day of judgment. But Jesus heightens the effect by pointing out especially people who claim to have done ministry for Jesus, and to have done ministry with spiritually powerful effect.

In the picture He is describing, Jesus refers to "that day": "many will say to me on *that day*." In this Jewish context, "that day" is the day of judgment spoken of by the prophets. "That day" is when it is decided who will enter into the eternal Kingdom of God. This is the scene Jesus is creating. On that day of judgement there are two sets of people making a claim on Jesus. Right off the bat, Jesus tells us that not everyone claiming to serve Him as Lord is going to be received into the kingdom of Heaven.

The first group are those who do the will of Jesus' Father in Heaven. And we might think that we are right back at works religion. If you do the will of the Father, you are in. But this is not about living up to a standard. This is about the heart. Obedience is the fruit of a changed life. If Jesus really is your Lord, then you are really praying to God sincerely, "Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." The first question of covenant has already been answered. This is about the second question. This is your heart for God. You mean it. As in the previous metaphor, the fruit reveals the tree. The one who has become poor in spirit, mourned their sin, and humbly submitted to the grace and lordship of Jesus is the one who is trying to obey God. Of course, they are not perfectly successful. But they are in real relationship with Jesus. This fits with what Jesus says in John 14, "If you love me you will obey my commandments." That is a simple statement of fact. If, indeed, you love Jesus, you are seeking to obey Him. Sometimes you're successful. Sometimes you fail. And when you fail, you thank Him for His forgiveness, you ask again for His help and guidance, and you will continue to walk with Him. Humble obedience is the mark of one who has truly believed. When they call Jesus, "Lord, Lord" on that day, they will be received into his eternal Kingdom because they are already in Him by faith.

That's the first half of the contrast. The ones who enter are the ones who obey. The second half of the contrast tells us whose claim will be rejected - and it is a bit surprising.

<sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me on that day,  
‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name,  
and in Your name cast out demons,  
and in Your name perform many miracles?’

<sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE  
LAWLESSNESS.’

Whose claim is getting rejected here? These are not the apathetic or atheistic. They are not pagans. They’re not Muslims. They’re not Hindu. Based on this criteria, all of those will be rejected, because the criteria is do you truly know Jesus or not; or, more specifically, does Jesus claim to know you? Jesus’ point here is not about all of those who clearly reject Jesus Christ as the Son of God. His point here is about the many who claim to know Him as Lord, who will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. And even more surprising, He is talking about not only people who claim to know Him as Lord, but who claim to have actively participated in spiritual ministry in His name, and they’re not getting into the Kingdom of Heaven.

At the beginning of the sermon, Jesus told the crowd, “your righteousness must be higher than the Pharisees.” They are His most immediate target in this metaphor and in the last. They are the trees that do not produce fruit. They are the ones who claim God as Lord, who claim to serve His name, but who will be rejected entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The key to entry here is not whether you have lived up to a standard of righteousness, but whether or not you are truly in relationship with Jesus. When Jesus says, “I never knew you.” He is not saying he does not know their names – you know, “They haven’t done enough to stand out, I don’t know who you are. Why would I let you into my Kingdom?” That’s not what He is saying. He is saying, “You call me Lord, Lord, but you never submitted to me as your Lord and Savior. You never humbly received my offer of grace. You took my name on your own terms, not my terms. We have no relationship. I never knew you.”

This is the first question of covenant. It is not about what you have done in the name of Jesus. That is a second question issue. The problem here is people who tried to answer the first question through the second question. “It’s how we *live* for Jesus that makes us acceptable.” No. it’s, have you humbly submitted to relationship with Jesus. That’s what makes you acceptable. Does He know you?

I say that Jesus is targeting Pharisees here. But His language is not, is it? I think it’s probably what would have made most sense to His listeners. So yes, I think it’s definitely a poke at the Pharisees. But it’s also confusing to some degree. Because Pharisees are never going to call Jesus, “Lord, Lord!” Jesus is really looking ahead now to Christian ministers. He is looking ahead to the Church age, when there will be leaders who claim power and authority to do ministry in His name. There will be evangelists, and pastors, and priests, and teachers, movement leaders, prophets, healers, miracle workers who stand before Jesus on judgment day, who claim to have done all these spiritually powerful works in the name of Jesus, and Jesus is going to say, “I never knew you.”

We are not to judge the trees of Christian leadership by their spiritual gifts. We are to judge the trees of authority by their spiritual fruit. It’s not all the ministry you do, even if the ministry has spiritual power in it. As Paul told the Corinthians,

<sup>1</sup> If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have *the gift of prophecy*, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1–2).

Spiritual power might have an ungodly source, or it might not be power at all – it might only look like power. Or it might be God working *in spite* of the sinfulness of the person. Whatever the true nature of the spiritual power, it is not ministry-giftedness that shows the true nature of the minister. It is the fruit that reveals the tree. It’s character. It’s love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, self-control. But the fruit is not the critical issue. The fruit is evidence of true faith. But true faith is in knowing Jesus. That’s the critical issue here. Jesus will pray in John 17 on the night of His arrest,

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. Entry into eternal life, which is the same as entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, depends on this one thing. Having you been reconciled in your relationship with God through faith in Jesus?

So is it possible that a person can truly be so deluded as to stand before God on the day of judgement and claim to have done real ministry in the name of Jesus, only to find out that Jesus doesn't think they have a relationship at all? Yes, this is definitely possible, and it's a real issue for the Christian Church. Let me just point out some different ways this happens. A big one is that there are many, many people who think they are Christian just because they grew up in a Christian family. They grew up going to church. They follow the form. They sing the songs or go through the rituals. They have a certain nostalgia, or sense of belonging, or a sense of the mysterious that they get from going to church. I know this is a serious problem in the Moravian church in America, the church I grew up in. The songs, the special services, the brass band, the sense of belonging. I love it! But many will say, "Lord, Lord," on the judgment day and Jesus will say, "Yes, I saw you in your culturally Christian life, but I never knew you." This problem all over the world for everybody who grows up as a cultural Christian. Moravian, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Orthodox, Assembly of God, Non-denominational, whatever. You don't know Jesus simply because of the environment you grew up in, and that you call yourself by His name: Christian.

Christian culture is not the only reason a person might be self-deluded about their relationship to Jesus. There is also the problem of personal experience. Something moves me emotionally and I translate that as true faith. I feel love and acceptance in this group that I haven't felt before. I feel like I have purpose. My marriage got restored. I was helped in a time of crisis. I was overwhelmed by the worship. I spoke in tongues. There is this whole range of personal experiences that I might wrongly interpret as the new birth. Now, emotion is part of my relationship with Jesus. But emotion is part of being human. So it's not telling me that I for sure have a relationship with Jesus. Have I yielded to Him as my Lord and Savior by faith? That's the issue.

One more. There is also this problem of spiritual power and success. And this is the issue targeted specifically by Jesus here. There are people who have moved up the ranks in Christian circles, and they assume that they know Jesus because people listen to them; because they're gifted at strategy; because things happen when they get involved; because they prayed for someone to be healed and they were healed; because they lead incredibly moving worship or people come forward when they give an evangelistic invitation. Because I have given of my skills, and gifts, and time, and resources in ministry and have seen results, I know I am of Christ. Well, maybe. Maybe. Maybe that is the fruit of being a good tree. But apart from the fact that there are a surprising number of narcissistic personalities in Christian ministry, according to my counselor friends, it is possible for a whole range of personalities to find meaning, and purpose, and success in doing ministry without ever having actually yielded to Jesus. Because you're good at it doesn't mean you know Jesus. It is possible to conduct ministry on your own terms, for your own satisfaction, for your own agenda or your churches agenda in the belief that this somehow makes you known to Jesus. It's not what makes you known to Jesus. Have you yielded to Him? Truly seen Him and received His offer of grace?

Can we believe that there are people who will get to judgment day and say "Lord, Lord, look at all the spiritual things I did for you," and yet, they never knew Jesus? Yes, sadly, it is quite believable that there will be many Christians – many Christian ministers who stand before God on the day of judgement, claiming the name of Jesus without ever having actually yielded in faith to Jesus. And in the last metaphor we judged our spiritual authorities by the fruit. In the next metaphor we are going to ask, "what is their attitude towards the Word of God?" They don't teach their own narrow way. They teach the biblically defined narrow way. They teach the Word of Jesus.

This last contrast is the contrast between two foundations.

**Two foundations – Life success is characterized by humble obedience to Jesus. (7:24-27)**

This is Matthew 7:24-27,

<sup>24</sup> Therefore

everyone who hears these words of Mine

and acts on them,

may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.

<sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.

<sup>26</sup> Everyone who hears these words of Mine

and does not act on them,

will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

<sup>27</sup> The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

Jesus is hitting His audience hard here. There is a very real sense in which Jesus intends to scare them - and to scare us, to be quite frank. Think about the language He has been using. Two ways. One to destruction, one to life. Two trees: one with bad fruit that is going to be cut down and burned. Two claims. Those whose claim is true and who know Jesus, who will enter the Kingdom, and those whose claim is false. And Jesus will say, “Away from me! I never knew you!” And here, if you build your house by hearing and obeying the Word of Jesus, your house will stand. If you do not, your house, your entire life, everything you have built will fall to pieces.

Why does Jesus use intentionally scary language? Because the danger is very real. If your house is on fire, you are not going to complain if someone scares you out of your wits by banging on the door late at night. If you have a treatable cancer, you want the doctor to tell you. Jesus is telling us. The danger of not paying attention to the word He has just given us in this sermon is destruction, death, and hell. But if we will listen, will pay attention, will submit to His grace, He will take us on the narrow way to wholeness, life, and Heaven.

We can apply this metaphor to the first question of covenant and to the second question of covenant. The first question determines our eternal salvation. Have we yielded in faith and received His grace? Have we confessed that we are poor in spirit; that we are unable to meet any kind of righteous standard; that He alone is our rock, our security, our assurance, our life? If you stake your life on Jesus Christ, your life will be eternal. It will not fall. Knowing God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, this is the one great treasure that it is worth selling everything else to gain. Give it all up. Trust in Jesus and His word, and your life is secure.

We can also apply this metaphor to the second question of covenant. Having placed your faith in Jesus, you stand on the rock. But life is messy. You have begun the way of obedience. You are pursuing the vision of righteousness. But you can get confused. You can enter by grace and then try to live by law. You still believe that there is some standard you must live up to. You are trying to live the Christian life in your own flesh. You worry and struggle with guilt, and shame, and fear. It is also easy to get distracted by earthly treasure. We also forget to be humble and we become judgmental. Our prayers focus more and more on today’s daily bread than on “holy be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done.” Christians can lose faith in the moral vision of Scripture. We know Jesus, but we are building our house, our career, our family or entertainment according to the architectural pattern of the world. Maybe we do not show anger to a degree; or show lust to a degree; we do turn the other cheek to a degree; we love our enemy to a degree, but only to a degree that we have become comfortable with, that works for us in our family, our society, in our church.

Is that humble obedience? Is that building our house on the Word of Jesus Christ? In this sense of the metaphor our eternal home may be secure. But what of the things that we’re building for God on Earth? What of the relationships we’re trying to establish on Earth? What will be the effect of only

obeying Him partially, to a degree and not pursuing Him fully? In that second question's sense even a true Christian's house might fall.

Jesus is ending here the Sermon on the Mount with a call to a decision. And we can also understand this call according to the two questions of covenant. Two different kinds of decision that we're being called to make.

The first has to do with the first question, "How can I, a sinful person, enter into relationship with Holy God?" If you have not submitted to Jesus Christ as your only hope, as your Lord and your Savior; if you have not entered the narrow gate by receiving His offer of grace and forgiveness, then He is calling you to make a decision. Ask Him to open the eyes of your heart. Seek Him. Knock at the door. Yield your life to Him and He will forgive you and He will come into you. Prayer is just simply conversation. Talk to Jesus. Tell Him that you need Him; you believe in him. He is your hope. That is the first primary call to decision that you're being invited to make here at the end of the sermon.

If you have already placed your faith in Christ, you know you are already on the narrow way, you know He is the way, the truth, and the life, you're being called to re-affirm your decision.

This is the second question of covenant, "Knowing that I am in relationship with Him, how then should I live?" You're being called to keep pursuing the vision of life that He has laid out here. Build your life on Him.

Is it messy? Is it hard? Yes. Living for God in obedience, "your will be done, God" – that's hard. We struggle in our flesh, in our minds, in our hearts. We struggle in our families, and societies, and churches. The narrow way is hard.

But it is not the standard you have to live up to in order to be accepted. You are accepted in Jesus. And at the end of your day, you can say, "There it is, Jesus. It was a good day with you." Or you can say, "I messed this one up pretty bad. Either way, I am in your hands, Jesus; I'm safe in you; I'm loved and secure. And tomorrow is a new day." As hard as living for Jesus may be, the reality of grace offers you this rest. Living for Him is Psalm 23. It's going to quiet waters and green pastures, and going out on the path of righteousness, and coming back and resting in Him. Will you do that? Will you commit to this high vision of life, that high call to righteousness that He has given you in this sermon? He is challenging you, inviting you to make a decision, to build your house on Him.

We have two final verses to read and a few comments that are going to conclude this series.

### **Concluding context – They were amazed (7:28-29)**

These last two verses are not words of Jesus. These last two verses give us a brief description of how the crowd responded. And together with the first two verses in Matthew 5, these last two verses of Matthew 7 create a narrative frame around the Sermon on the Mount. I will read both. This is Matthew 5:1-2 and Matthew 7:28-29,

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. <sup>2</sup> He opened His mouth and *began* to teach them, saying...

<sup>28</sup> When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; <sup>29</sup> for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as their scribes.

They have listened to Jesus and they are amazed. Why are they amazed? I'm sure there are a number of reasons, but let's think about what Jesus just finished saying. We are used to Jesus at the center of Christianity, but this is the beginning of His ministry. His audience does not know anything about the cross or resurrection yet. These are Old Covenant Jews. How they would have heard this, what would amaze them, probably goes right over our head, but we need to hear this. In His last two contrasts, Jesus said, "Many will come to me on the day of judgement. They will call me Lord, Lord. And I will say that I never knew you." Do you know what Jesus just said? Jesus is going to be the one people come up to on the day of judgement. I mean, what? He is the one they are calling "Lord" - not God the Father, but this man, Jesus. Entry into the Kingdom depends on whether they knew Jesus, not whether they know Yahweh. Do you know Jesus? Jesus just made the day of judgment and our

eternal destiny all about Him. And that's crazy talk. And then in the last metaphor, Jesus says, "If you build your house on my words, it will stand. If you don't, it will fall." Again, not, "if you build your house on God words, but on my words." Life is about knowing *me*. Obeying *me*. Who says things like that? Jesus is giving His audience here a glance into His true nature. He is telling them that He is not only a man. He is God who became man. And this is going to come out more and more through His teaching. Our salvation is all about him. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are the center of life. We will see Jesus on the day of judgement, and the criteria is, "Do you know Jesus?"

The crowds responded to the words of Jesus with amazement. This is like nothing they had ever heard before, both what Jesus says and the way Jesus says it. There really is a decision here to be made. And the decision is all about Jesus. Is He a false prophet? A tree that can't produce fruit? Or is He who He says He is? Are His words true? Is He, not only, the One who can show us the way, is He himself the way? Is He the source of life?

Studying the Sermon on the Mount for this series has been a huge blessing for me and I am left amazed. The vision of life; the ethic of Christian behavior; the authority of Jesus to say what He says. There is nothing like this sermon anywhere else in any other writing. There is no one like Jesus anywhere else, ever.

And here at the conclusion I see the vision Jesus is painting, or at least I'm beginning to see it. Of course, I don't fully understand the picture. But I see that it's hard. Jesus' vision of a righteous life is an impossibly high vision. And that disturbs me inside. There is tension in me. And I think it's exactly where Jesus wants me, where He wants us. I think He wants us to be both satisfied and unsatisfied; able to rest and wanting to press ahead. Some internal dissonance – tension - is good for us. The sin nature tugs us to build houses on sand. Jesus is directing us back to the hard work of trusting Him; seeking to grow in Him; seeking to be more like Him; keeping Him as the vision of our life that we're aiming for. We are becoming, and that's hard. He is going to get us home.

And this is how Jesus can call us to a vision of life that is both a true struggle, and also a place of rest. Jesus can commission us to live this way and to go and make disciples of all nations. And that's going to be hard. And He can at the same time reassure us, "You are safe in me. You can rest in me." I do hope this series spurs you on to press ahead towards the vision that Jesus has painted for us; press ahead in becoming who Jesus has called you to be. I also hope this series helps you to rest in Jesus even as you labor for Jesus. And knowing that the Sermon on the Mount calls us to this very challenging vision of righteousness, I will leave you with this invitation to rest, that Jesus gives in Matthew 11:28-30.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."