

Get Real!

Only a Few are Truly Saved

Matthew 7:12-29

Mark Vroegop

12 "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

13 "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes (Matt 7:12-29).

Since June we've been looking at this great sermon of Jesus called the Sermon on the Mount, and we've learned that Jesus' primary target has been to expose what I call veneer religion – a kind of spirituality that looks righteous on the outside but really is not. It is culturally religious belief based upon what you know, what family you are born into, what spiritual things that you do, what things you do not do rather than a relationship with God based upon a change of heart, personal brokenness, and a lifetime of repentance. Veneer religion often sounds like this:

"I grew up in a Christian home, went to Sunday school all my life..."

"I've always been a Christian"

"I know that you're not supposed to do those things but 'once saved always saved' "
"I know I'm saved, I'm just backslidden"

Veneer religion is knowing the facts about who Jesus is, being able to recite certain doctrinal truths, and even being involved in ministry to others, while at the same time not being a genuine believer. The scary reality is this: every church is filled with self-deceived people who are not genuinely converted. They have an "appearance of godliness but deny its power" (2 Tim 3:5). It is a sobering reality that we must carefully consider. Not everyone in this room who claims to be a believer really is. Richard Owen Robert, probably the most prominent living authority on revival, was once asked what would happen if revival broke out in the United States. He instinctively replied, "Millions of church people would be saved."

So my aim today is to ask you, plead with you, and beg you to consider if you are genuinely converted. Romans 8:16 says "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." And today I simply want you to take a careful look at your soul and ask yourself, "Am I real?" The Sermon on the Mount comes down to this question.

Let me assure you, I am not suggesting that someone can lose his or her salvation. I believe unequivocally in the perseverance of the saints or eternal security. My concern is not about losing salvation; my burden is whether or not it is genuine.

Jesus ends this great sermon with a call to choose. He lays out for his listeners two gates, two ways, two groups, two kinds of trees, two kinds of fruit, two kinds of builders, two foundations, and two houses. He ends this sermon with a crystal clear call to make a choice or to think carefully about the choice that you've already made.

A Golden Summary

Jesus is about to call for a decision. Just before he draws a very clear line in the sand, he summarizes the over-riding ethic of the Sermon on the Mount in verse 12. It is often called the Golden Rule – "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (7:12).

In 5:20 Jesus made a startling statement. He said that "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." His warning was meant to shock! There was no one more righteous (from a human perspective) than the religious leaders. It reminds me of a friend of mine who was a pastor, and after a particular series on genuine conversion, his wife came to realize that she was not truly converted. They had small children, and when they told their kids that their mother had just genuinely received Christ, the kids responded, "Mom, if you weren't saved, then who is?" Jesus wants a genuine righteousness.

The problem with the religious leaders was that their religion didn't come from a work of God in the heart. They thought that they kept the law, but they were actually breaking it. And that is why Jesus gives this summary. It is a reminder about what is the heart of true religion: **a changed heart leading to a changed life.** Real religion and a summary of the Law and Prophets are to treat others the way that you want to be treated. Loving one's neighbor is the fulfillment of the Law (Gal 5:14).

The conclusion then should be obvious. If you claim to be religious but you are not filled with love for others, then you are not really religious. If you claim to be a follower of Jesus but you do not do what he says, you are not really a disciple of his. You can claim to believe certain truths, but if your actions, attitudes, choices, and the fruit of your life doesn't line up, then there is a problem. Actions reveal who you really are.

Three Warnings

What follows in 7:13-27 are three warnings that contain fourteen contrasts: narrow vs. wide gate, difficult vs. broad way, life vs. destruction, few vs. many, true vs. false prophets, sheep vs. wolves, good vs. bad trees, good vs. bad fruit, life vs. judgment, doing the Fathers' will vs. saying 'Lord, Lord...', wise vs. foolish person, hears / obeys vs. doesn't hear / doesn't obey, built on the rock vs. built on the sand, and withstanding a storm vs. collapsing during a storm.¹ These warnings relate to three questions: 1) What path are you on?, 2) Who are you really?, and 3) What are you going to do? Each of these is designed to press deeper and deeper into the reality of the right response to this sermon.

Gate Warning: What path are you on?

According to verse 13, there are two gates and two paths, and they are described as wide and narrow. The wide gate has three characteristics: 1) it is easy, 2) it leads to destruction, and 3) there are many who enter by it. The image is rather scary in that this path is far more popular, and it seems to be the right path because it is filled with such momentary ease and satisfaction. But there is a huge problem lurking at the end of the road: it leads to destruction. So Jesus aims to paint a tragic picture of a vast number of people following the crowd, doing what everyone else is doing, taking an easy and enjoyable path but they do not realize the impending doom.

The picture of the other gate is very different. First, it is described as narrow which means that it is hard to find, not easily seen, and easy to miss. The idea here is that there is a wall with a very large, welcoming gate, but along the wall is another thin passageway that would be very easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. Secondly, it is a hard way which means that it is a path that is filled with challenges, difficulties, and which requires intentional steps. Third, this

¹ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 213.

way leads to life (eternal life). Fourth, those who find it are few. In other words, the vast majority of people – those who aren't looking and careless – will miss the right gate.

So what is Jesus saying here? Jesus commands that we enter by the narrow gate. The tense of the language here indicates a decisive choice. He is not just telling us that there are two gates and two paths. No, he is warning us about two paths and telling us, commanding us to choose the narrow one.

The narrow gate is Jesus alone. In other words, any other way does not lead to life; it only leads to destruction. He is calling here for a definitive and decisive decision as to whose path you are going to be on. A decision to follow him and him alone leads to life. A decision to follow the crowd on an easy path leads to hell.

The narrow gate means that Jesus is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). There are not multiple ways to get to God, to be a Christian, or to be forgiven. There is only one way: trusting in Jesus. This means that you understand who you are as sinner and who he is as Lord. To enter the narrow gate means that God has given you the gift of repentance and the ruling of your life has been turned over to Christ. To enter by the narrow gate means that you really understand who Jesus is and its effects on your life. His call is to believe on him and follow him. The gate and the path are linked.

There are many people today who know about Jesus. They know the facts about him. They may have been prayed to him, even asked him to be their Savior. But a prayer alone doesn't produce new life. Entering the narrow gate means trusting fully in Christ such that the trajectory of your life is forever changed. In other words, you cannot live like you on the broad path while claiming to believe in the narrow path. The issue is which path are you really on? What are you really trusting in?

And my fear is that there are millions of people in churches all over our country who know facts about Jesus but they do not really know Jesus. They know about the narrow way, and they think that knowing about it and believing in it equals entering through it. It doesn't.

Fruit Warning: Who are you, really?

The second warning relates to the issue of fruit, the evidence of faith, or who we really are. It is one thing to claim to believe in Jesus; it is another thing to give evidence that your faith is genuine. Again, Jesus is pressing against words and statements that sound good but cannot be backed up.

The first fruit warning comes via a statement about false prophets. Jesus warns that there are people who look like sheep but they are really wolves. In other words, their message and content sounds like it is right but it isn't. They are "ravenous wolves." However, false

prophets are not his point. Fruit is. Jesus says, "You will recognize them by their fruits" (7:16). So the way that you distinguish a true prophet from a false prophet is not by what the prophet says, but by how the prophet lives. Words alone are not sufficient. Actions must follow.

To make the point even stronger Jesus uses an illustration from nature. He wants us to see that the production of fruit is both natural and normal. It makes no sense to find grapes on thorn-bushes or figs on thistle plants (7:16). Good trees produce good fruit. Unhealthy trees produce bad fruit (7:17). It is impossible for it to be any other way (7:18). Further, a tree that doesn't bear fruit is no longer useful, and so it is cut down and destroyed (7:19). The implication of judgment here should be so obvious.

The point of this is stated one more time just to be sure that it is clear: "Thus you will recognize them by their fruits" (7:19). By using false prophets and fruit, Jesus aims to show us that the test of whether or not something is real is by what kind of fruit it bears. Words and talk are cheap; anyone can claim to believe anything. A changed life or spiritual fruit is the only real evidence that you really are who you claim to be. Words and religious activity are not enough. Jesus is looking for the life-changing fruit that springs from a personal relationship with Him.

Jesus, however, is not done with this issue. He presses it even further toward those who would think that their religious activity **is** their fruit. Jesus imagines someone saying, "Well, I'm okay. I know that you are Lord; I've even called you that. I've spoken boldly in your name, cast out demons in your name, and even done mighty works in your name." The point is the three-fold repetition of "in your name." This person has seen God do some wonderful things, and he or she knows that the name of Jesus is powerful. The problem here is not inactivity or passivity. No, the problem is that this person is incredibly busy doing all sorts of things in the name of Jesus, and the spiritual success that they see leads them to believe that they know Jesus. So they assume that because they are near spiritual things, do spiritual things, and see spiritual things that they are spiritual. And Jesus says, "Not so fast!"

Jesus says that the criteria is "doing the will of my Father" (v 21), and knowing Jesus personally. Those who get this wrong are told, "I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (v 22). Ponder that statement with me because it is stunning. Jesus is suggesting that there are some people who do all kinds of ministry while not knowing him, and the result is that he calls them "workers of lawlessness." In other words, ministry – even effective ministry – without knowing Jesus is lawlessness to him. It is lawlessness to him because anything devoid of personal relationship with Christ is abominable and damnable – even if God used it to save someone else.

Who are you, really? That is the question that Jesus is asking us here. Take your words and your religious activity, and just set those aside. The bigger and more important question is: do you really know Jesus and is there really good fruit? You cannot be a fig-bearing tree trying to

convince people that you are an apple tree. No matter how much you know about apples or how much you want to be an apple tree, if you bear figs – you are a fig tree. And you cannot use spiritual activity to hide anymore. Just because you have the right credentials, do the right things, and don't do the wrong things doesn't mean you are real. Just because you've helped people change or see spiritual miracles done through your "ministry" doesn't mean that you know Jesus.

The warning here should be clear but let me restate it so that no one misses it. True spiritual identity is determined not by what one says but by who you really are. True spiritual identity is determined not by the spiritual things you've done but by the Savior who you know.

The gate test relates to what path you are on. Who are you trusting? The fruit test relates to what is coming out of your life. Do you really know Jesus? There is one more.

Foundation Warning: What are you going to do?

The final warning is all about action or what are you going to do with what you have heard? Jesus knows that the multitude that was listening to him will not all take his words and act on them. Once again they will file them away as good words or something that they should consider. But it will always be later. Jesus is not interested in hearing alone; he wants action – "everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them..." (7:24). Jesus' final comparison is well known to any of us who grew up in the Sunday School and sang the corresponding children's song. However, the analogy is loaded with meaning.

The wise man is mentioned first. The person who hears the words of Jesus and does them is like a wise man who builds his house upon a rock. In other words he built his home upon a firm foundation and a strong bedrock. He did not take short-cuts. He took his time and made sure that his home was built right. And the result was stability, safety, and survival when a storm came. The rain falls, the floods come, the winds blow, and the beating of the weather pummels the house. But it stands.

The foolish man is not so fortunate. He builds his house upon the sand. He does not dig down deep to find a sure foundation. He takes the easy but dangerous way. His house encounters the same storm full of rain, floods, winds, and the combined pummeling. However, the outcome of his house is entirely different. "It fell, and great was the fall of it" (7:27). Both houses experienced the same storm and only one was able to withstand. Both houses probably looked well built from the outside but only one had the longevity to pass the test.

Jesus uses this analogy to press home the clear choice that everyone must make. What will you do with the words of Jesus? What will you do now that you have heard these words from him? You are ignorant no more! You can no longer claim that you didn't know. The issue now is not information; it's all about obedience.

The storm must mean the coming judgment of God. Jesus is saying here that a person who merely knows what Jesus says and doesn't act on it is in grave danger of passing the future test of God's judgment. To know that Jesus is Lord, to know that he calls us to repentance, to know that he calls us to evaluate who we really are – regardless of what we've done for him – is a sober call. Jesus is warning us that knowledge alone will result in disaster. True knowledge of him will result in matching actions or the knowledge isn't real.

So we all must ask ourselves, "After 10 messages calling us to 'Get Real', are you going to?"

God is speaking!

Now the response of the crowd in verses 28-29 is stunning. His words were different than anything that they had heard before. There was something unique here that created astonishment. "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching" (7:28). The word for astonished means to be beside oneself, shocked, overwhelmed, and a bit scared. It is used for moments when people were healed, and it refers to the realization that "there is something going on here bigger than me."

The people were encountering supernatural truth. "For he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (7:29). Here is what they came to see: this message that I am hearing is God speaking to me! They felt it. They saw it. They knew it. God was speaking!

And that is what I hope and pray you will sense today – that God is speaking directly to you. I'm praying that you will no longer be passive, sit on the fence, or think that you can put this issue off. The storms of God's judgment are always approaching, and only those who know Jesus are safe.

What path are you on? Have you put your trust in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins? Are you trusting in nothing but him for the redemption of your soul? **Who are you, really?** What does your fruit say? Has your life been changed by Jesus? Are you a different person today? Is there any evidence that you are really a follower of his? **What are you going to do?** Jesus' words must be heard but that cannot be all. They must be obeyed or you've not really heard them. Do you feel like God is speaking to you? Do you know what he is asking you to do? Do you sense his wonderful drawing?

The call of this sermon is to "Get Real!" The question is, "Will you?" You've got to chose. And I pray that you will chose wisely. Because only a few are truly saved.

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