



Part 15 – Beware and Be Warned

Matthew 7:13-23

In the final section of the Sermon, Jesus presses the seriousness of the choices before us. The way of the world is wide and easily accessed. The way of Christ which leads to life is narrow. There is no splitting the difference. We will either go the way of destruction or the way life. Here, Jesus describes the narrow and wide gates (vv. 13-14), false and true prophets (vv. 15-20), and deceived and sincere hearts. In each example

we are pressed to the point of decision. Will it be life or destruction? Our lives will tell the story. Does our faith consist of words only? Or is there a real and growing connection between our confession that Jesus is Lord and the way in which we live?

1. Two Gates

Vv. 13-14 – “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction...” Jesus’ metaphor of the two gates is a reference to the ways of salvation and destruction. Elsewhere Jesus uses a similar metaphor in reference to himself: “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (**John 10:9**).

“Destruction” (vs. 13) means “the divine wrath and the final ruin of unbelievers.” “Life” here stands for salvation life in the new creation.

- It is hard to imagine Jesus saying anything more unwelcome than what he states here, that the way of truth, the way of life, the way of salvation is singular. It is a message that was and remains foolish and offensive to most people. But God saves sinners in the only way that sinners can be saved: by grace through faith in Christ. God’s way of salvation is not a philosophy or a technique. It is a Person: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (**John 14:6**).
- It is often supposed that Jesus is teaching that, in the end, relatively few people throughout history will be saved. But I think this is not a proper conclusion. Indeed, many of the great Reformed theologians have taught that the Scriptures clearly indicate (beginning with God’s covenant of grace with Abraham) that there will be a vast multitude who will be saved. Keep in mind that Jesus is speaking to his contemporaries, the majority of whom will reject him. And, indeed, unbelievers in this world surely outnumber believers. But in the end, God’s grace will be magnified in saving multitudes of people from among all the nations (**Gen. 15:5; 17:1-5; Rev. 5:9; 7:9**).

2. Two Trees

Much of the ungodliness and false assurance that finds its way into the church comes as a result of false teaching. In the history of the church, false teachers have never been a merely theoretical problem. God’s people have always been troubled by false teachers. They deceive people regarding their own salvation. They encourage them to think they are Christians while they persuade them to believe doctrines hostile to the Christian faith as it is taught in Holy Scripture and to live lives of open disobedience to God.

Vs. 15 – “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing...” – Jesus’ words are the origin of the phrase “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” In Jesus’ metaphor, “sheep” is a reference to the God’s people. The false teachers who are likened to wolves come to the church in order to sow destruction. Despite their attractive appearance and their profession, they are mortal enemies of the flock. The wolf was the natural enemy of sheep in that part of the world. False teachers always have a predatory relation to the church. A false teacher may lead, by all outward appearances, a pious life. But that in no way mitigates against their guilt so long as they are teaching error. It is first their errant teaching which qualifies them as wolves.

Vv. 16-18 – “Fruit” is a metaphor for deeds, or a way of life. In one way or another false teachers may be discerned by the fruit of their lives. Such discernment is especially necessary when false teachers craft their message to very closely resemble the truth.

“The plausibility of this false teaching demands that some test be found (cf. **1 John 4:1-3**). Here Jesus sets out not a doctrinal but an ethical test: *You will know them by their fruits*. The fruits are not specified, but the idea is clearly that profession must be tested by practice.”¹

¹ R.T. France, *Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) p. 147

We should add to this that among the bad fruit of the false teachers is the content of their teaching. It is a principle that bad teaching will eventually lead to bad living. We are to test their lives and their teaching according to the Word of God. John Calvin wrote that “All doctrine must be brought to the Word of God as the standard.” It is the Word of God, wrote Calvin, that “holds the chief place,” in judging false teachers.

Vs. 19 – “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” – Here Jesus widens the application from false teachers to “every tree” that does not bear good fruit. He continues his metaphor by likening the destiny of false believers to that of barren fruit trees. Make no mistake, Jesus is warning of the judgment of hell. Elsewhere Jesus warns his hearers of “Gehenna” which was a metaphor for hell (**Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33**).

His words are nearly identical to the warning issued by John the Baptist of the judgment to come:

“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (**3:10**).

Mere profession does not determine destiny. This is a major theme in Matthew’s gospel and in the teaching of Jesus. “Without fruit there is no hope, for fruit is the necessary proof that one has truly believed in Jesus (**Gal. 2:8-10; James 2:14-26**).”²

Vs. 20 – “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” – Jesus repeats that false teachers will be identifiable by the bad fruit their lives produce. God’s people are responsible to weigh the lives of their leaders in order to identify wolves from genuine shepherds.

3. Two Pleas

Vs. 21 – “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven...” – A major concern in the Scriptures is to warn God’s people that there is a massive gulf between a mere profession and genuine conversion. Jesus sounds a similar note in Luke, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (**Luke 6:46**).

“...but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.” – Jesus is in no way contradicting what the Scriptures teach about justification by faith alone (which is proclaimed as early as Genesis!). Rather, he is defining the true nature of saving faith. Later James tells us that “faith without works is dead” (**James 2:20, 26**).

Vs. 22 – “Many will say to me...” – There is debate over whether Jesus is still addressing false teachers or whether he has broadened his focus to include all who have professed faith in Jesus. Certainly Jesus still has the false teachers in mind because of their specific claims to prophesying and miracle working. But the previous verse indicates that this warning ought to be heard by all who profess faith in Jesus.

“...on that day” is a reference to the day of judgment.

“Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name...” – The false teachers will protest that their lives were characterized by charismatic gifts such as prophecy and exorcisms and various miracles. There is no indication in Jesus’ words that their pleas are truthful. Indeed, the context suggests that their claims to supernatural power are false. One cannot help but think of those prosperity preachers who claim to have performed all manner of miracles but use deception and false teaching to enrich themselves.

Vs. 23 – “And I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you...’” – Certainly among the most terrifying words in Scripture. The false confession of those under condemnation is met by Jesus own confession that he has never known them as his own. The future tense of Jesus’ words points to the day of judgment that is yet to come.

“...depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” – His declaration is judicial, “that is solemn and public and connotes irreversibility.”³ Far more than mere mistakes or imperfections, sin is lawlessness. It is the violation of God’s law in our hearts, minds, and willful acts. Left unrepentant and habitually indulged, such lawlessness becomes a witness against us before the bar of God’s justice.

There are two pleas represented in Jesus’ words. One says “Lord, Lord,” from a duplicitous, unregenerate heart. There is a great gulph between the person’s words about Jesus and their lack of genuine faith in and loyalty to Jesus. The other plea comes from a heart of saving faith and love for Jesus. One heart is inclined toward Christ through faith and gratitude which shows itself in growing obedience. The other heart belongs to those who claim that Christ is Lord but the witness of their lives betray them.

² Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) p. 273

³ Osborne, p. 274