



Part 16 – Two Trees and Two Pleas

Matthew 7:13-23

In the final section of his 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 and accompanied by hardship. There is no splitting the difference. Either we will go the way of life or the way of destruction (vv. 13-14). We will either be trees that produce good fruit or bad fruit (15-20). And we will either profess Jesus

as Lord in sincere faith or in hypocritical unbelief (vv. 21-23).

Two Gates

Last week our focus was on Jesus' words in verses 13 and 14 concerning the wide and narrow gates. He warns his hearers that the gate that opens to salvation life is as hard and narrow as the gate which leads to destruction is wide and easy. The first generation of Christ's followers will witness this with their own eyes as very few will join with them. During the first three centuries, even as the church grows exponentially, the way of discipleship will remain hard.

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 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

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 likens the destiny of false professors of Christ with that of bad trees. They will be "cut sown and thrown in the fire." Make no mistake, Jesus is warning of the judgment of hell. Elsewhere Jesus warns his hearers of "Gehena," the word Jesus typically used to describe 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**).

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

Mere profession does not determine destiny. This is a significant theme in the Scriptures: “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

“Rooted and Grounded in Love”

- Jesus contrasts those who “do the will of my Father,” with those who merely profess faith. The outward evidence saving faith is the presence of fruit. But what is the source of this good fruit in Jesus’ metaphor? It brings to mind Paul’s words in Ephesians three where he prays for God’s people “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—**that you, being rooted and grounded in love**, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:17-19).
- The fruit of the truly Christian life is not the product of our own strength. Again, Paul prays “that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (**Eph. 3:16**).

Two Pleas

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

“...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 the faith through which sinners are justified. Later James tells us that “faith without works is dead” (**James 2:20, 26**). Living faith is characterized by sincere love and trust which manifests in growing obedience to the Lord. Dead faith on the other hand, consists in words and appearances only. And so by referring to those who “do the will of my Father in heaven,” Jesus is identifying those whose faith is living and thus their confession “Lord, Lord,” is genuine.

Vs. 22 – “Many will say to me...” – 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 they performed spectacular deeds such as prophecy and exorcisms and various miracles. But here is no indication in Jesus’ words that they actually did any of those things. Indeed, the context suggests that their claims to supernatural power are false.

Vs. 23 – “And I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” – These are certainly among the most terrifying words in Scripture. Jesus speaks as the just and righteous Judge of all the earth.

- “Declare” – The word translated “declare” “is solemn and public and connotes irreversibility.”³
- “Depart from me” – This is the sentence. The unrepentant are cast away from the Lord’s saving presence.
- “Worker of lawlessness” – The crime named in the indictment is sin which is lawlessness. Sin is far more than mere mistakes or imperfections. Sin is the breaking of God’s holy law; a disregard for his righteousness and goodness. Left unrepentant and habitually indulged, such lawlessness becomes a witness against us before the bar of God’s justice.

In the end, it will not be our claims to have done spectacular deeds for Christ that opens wide the narrow gate of salvation life. Likewise, as good as discipline is, our striving could never be sufficient payment for our sins. Indeed, even the profession that Jesus is Lord is worthless if our profession is devoid of devotion (**1 John 1:6; 2:4**). The question is whether the Lord knows us as his own. Does Christ dwell in our hearts through faith? Is that faith translating into faithfulness just as a well rooted tree translates water and nutrients into good fruit?

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

³ Osborne, p. 274