

How Must We Respond?

Matthew 7:28-29

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And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

– Matthew 7:28-29

I. Jesus and the Crowds

A crowd of thousands had sat on the mountainside in Galilee and listened to this carpenter-turned-rabbi from Nazareth preach the most amazing sermon any of them had ever heard. “Could anything good come from Nazareth?” and yet here was a man who had not studied or trained with any of the rabbis in the area, one whose teaching contradicted the rabbis and who openly stated that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not sufficient for entering the kingdom of heaven.

A. Jesus' Urgency

Jesus' preaching was so different, so full of authority, so clear and so urgent. Not only did this unschooled carpenter-turned-rabbi from Nazareth have the audacity to preach, but He even told them that if they did not live out His teaching, they would be facing a great and terrible crash when the storm of judgment came. His call to them was clear and urgent: They must abandon all self-righteousness and seek the greater righteousness He proclaimed. They must enter by the narrow gate and walk the difficult way. They must be known by Him and must bear good fruit by following His word.

Jesus' sermon could not have been clearer or more urgent.

B. The Crowds' Astonishment

And the crowds responded to Jesus' teaching with astonishment. They were amazed. Literally, the Greek word means that they were blown away and struck by the power of Jesus' words. Never before had they heard a rabbi speak in such bold and striking ways. Jesus had directly confronted the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. (“*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you can by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*”) He had also directly challenged their teachings by saying repeatedly, “*You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . .*”

He has taught the true meaning of the Moral Law of God without consulting or quoting any known authority. In fact, He spoke with such authority that it was almost as if He had written the Law Himself. He claimed to know best the true, deep, heart-oriented meaning of each command of God.

Yet the most remarkable thing Jesus taught about the Law of God was not His interpretation of the commands forbidding adultery and murder but rather His astonishing claim that He had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Clearly this was no ordinary rabbi and the crowds who had gathered to hear Him teach were impressed, astonished, amazed, blown away, stunned.

And yet . . . What is missing from Matthew's recording of their reaction? What does he NOT say about the crowd? Quite simply, although the crowd was astonished, we do not read that they believed. They were amazed, but Matthew does not say that they repented and followed Jesus. Rather, as far as we know, the crowd was amazed and astonished and then left and went home and life continued as it had been before.

II. Jesus and His Church

What if we had been there? What if we had heard Jesus preach this sermon?

A. The Voice of Jesus

But here's the truth: Every time we gather for church on Sunday morning, Jesus meets with us and speaks to His church. We may not have been there on that mountainside 2,000 years ago, but we have an opportunity to hear the voice of Jesus every Lord's Day morning in the preaching of God's Word.

The Bible is God's Word and Jesus is the Word of God, so the words of Scripture paint a picture of Jesus and are His voice to us. So every time we open the pages of Scripture, we may hear the voice of Jesus. Yet Jesus has also appointed the preaching of His Word in the worship of the church to be a special means of grace, a special time for Him to speak to His people. He says that when we gather in His name, He is in our midst. It's not that He's not always present with us, but He is more present in authority and grace when we gather.

It's easy to get confused. It's easy to think of preaching in the church as the preacher speaking to the congregation. In reality, all of us should be listening for the voice of Jesus speaking to each of us individually and to all of us collectively.

B. The Response of the Church

So this morning as we read these verses, we read of the reaction of the crowd to the voice of Jesus. It's an opportunity for us to allow the Lord to search our hearts and to help us consider how we respond to the message of Jesus when we hear His voice.

I. An Emotional Response

The response of the crowd to Jesus was an emotional response. They were astonished. They recognized Jesus authority and were deeply moved, emotionally impacted. Some sermons are emotionally gripping. Sometimes I find myself as the preacher being gripped by the emotional impact of the message. I believe an emotional response is appropriate when we hear the voice of Jesus.

When God convicts us of our sin, we should respond in grief.

When God shows us the perfections of Jesus, who is holy and righteous and wonderful beyond description or comparison, we should respond in wonder.

When God shows us how the work of Jesus in keeping God's Law and fulfilling all righteousness, in going to the cross and taking the wrath of God on Himself, in rising again from the dead and conquering death and hell forever, in ascending into heaven and taking His seat at God's right hand where He prays for us and rules over us, we should respond with joy and enthusiasm.

However, while an emotional response to the voice of Jesus is appropriate, it is not sufficient . . .

2. A Saving and Obedient Response

What God seeks from us is not emotion but faith and obedience. God wants us not to just be amazed by Jesus but to believe in Him and follow Him. We need to have our hearts not just be warmed and moved but transformed and reborn.

For the one who is not yet born again, not yet a true believer, the response God seeks is true faith in Christ and real repentance from sin. The sinner who sees the ugliness of His sin and the wonder of Jesus needs to do more than weep. He needs to turn to Jesus in faith and love and turn from his sin in hatred and disgust for the offensiveness of it in the eyes of a holy God.

God doesn't want the sinner to be impressed; he wants him to be converted.

For the one who is a true believer already, trusting in Jesus alone for salvation, God seeks faith, repentance and obedience in an ongoing way. We don't just believe in Jesus and repent of our sins once; we do so every time we hear His voice. We must turn to Him and again reject and hate our sin. We must also seek to live out the holy life we see in Jesus and desire to see more and more in ourselves.

So what makes the difference between an emotional response and a saving and obedient response?

III. The Holy Spirit and Our Hearts

On the surface, we may think this is an easy question to answer: It matters whether I truly believe or not. Yet what does it mean for us to truly believe? The crowds believed that Jesus taught with authority and were deeply impressed by His teaching, yet apparently did not have saving faith.

So how do we know?

A. The Deceitfulness of the Heart

Some people would say, "Well, you just know in your heart." But those who know Scripture and those who know their own hearts will know that this is no reliable guide.

Jeremiah 17:9 says,

***"The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?"***

So, how do we know? Well, emotions alone are not enough, for sure.

Jonathan Edwards has been called the greatest mind in American history, a keen theologian and philosopher. He was the theologian of the First Great Awakening in the 1740's and made the most careful analysis of revival and responses to preaching that has ever been done. One of his greatest works is *A Treatise on Religious Affections*, in which he evaluates emotions and emotional responses to preaching, among other things.

In this great work, Edwards identified several kinds of emotional responses which, in and of themselves, do not indicate true conversion and a real Spirit-empowered, transforming response to God's Word.

He says Each of the following by itself indicates nothing:

- 1) intense emotion;
- 2) a physical reaction to emotion — although Scripture does note at times that spiritual feelings affect the body, Psalm 63:1; 84:2; 119:120; Daniel 10:8; Revelation 1:17; Habakkuk 3:16;
- 3) talking with fluency and eagerness, Proverbs 25:14; Jude 12; II Peter 2:17;
- 4) emotions not excited by self-effort, I John 4:1;
- 5) emotions accompanied by bible verses — Scripture can be abused, and even used by Satan, II Peter 3:16;
- 6) emotions with the appearance of a fullness of love; which actually can be counterfeited;
- 7) experiencing many different kinds of emotion, any of which can be counterfeited, especially when Satan inspires someone of great self-importance;
- 8) the joy and comfort of a religious experience, which can occur without the Holy Spirit;
- 9) time and effort spent on religion — hypocrites have great energy;
- 10) verbal expressions of praise — words alone do not prove the condition of the heart;
- 11) self-confidence — people who have a high opinion of themselves usually are self-confident;
- 12) being able to please and inspire others through the demonstration of religious feeling, I Samuel 16:7; Psalm 55:12–14; Isaiah 11:3; I Corinthians: 4:5; Revelation 2:17.

Edwards very carefully gives Scriptural evidence for why these kinds of emotional responses are not, in and of themselves, indication of a heart that has been changed by the Lord.

B. The Power of the Holy Spirit

Ultimately, the difference is made not by an emotional experience but by the Holy Spirit. To see this truth most clearly, let's compare the reaction of this crowd to Jesus' teaching with the reaction of the crowd at Pentecost to the first truly Christian sermon, preached by Peter in Acts 2.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. – Acts 2:37-41

The crowd at Pentecost was not just astonished or amazed; they were cut to the heart. They responded not with mere emotion but with a serious question, "What shall we do?" Then, they followed through with action, by repenting, embracing Jesus, being baptized and joining the church.

What made the difference? The real question is "Who made the difference?" It was the Holy Spirit. He is the One who brought conviction and real change of heart to these people at Pentecost. Were there some who were just going along with the crowd, some among the 3,000 who were not genuinely saved? Maybe. We do read in just a few chapters about Ananias and Sapphira, who seemed to be in it for the wrong reasons, to impress people.

But the difference between the response of the crowd to Jesus and the response to Peter was NOT found in the messenger – Peter wasn't a better preacher than Jesus. The difference was also not found in the message – Peter's Pentecost sermon wasn't more powerful than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Neither was the difference found in the crowd – both crowds listened and were emotionally impacted by the messages. NO, the real difference was the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit wrote Peter's words on the hearts of the hearers and those words, by the power of the Spirit, cut these people deeply and brought them to salvation.

The Holy Spirit must change our hearts and deeply impress the word of God on our hearts or else no real change will happen.

Yet what does it look like when it's real? Jonathan Edwards gives several indicators of true, Spirit-worked heart change, of real affection for God:

1. We are deeply moved by who God is. We love God for God's sake because He is God and is awesome, powerful, holy, wonderful, beautiful, gracious, wise. We do not love Him just for His gifts to us. We love Him for Himself!
2. We love Christ because He is the perfect God-man who is without equal in power, love, authority and excellence

3. True Spirit-worked affection for God comes from the mind being enlightened and enabled to understand divine things in a clear and wonderful way. Thus, mind and heart and not separate.
4. True affection for God is certain of divine judgment and doesn't try to lessen or minimize the truth of coming judgment.
5. True affection for God, worked in us by the Holy Spirit, leads to humility and not pride.
6. True affection for God comes with a true change of nature, as we are transformed inwardly from being a sinner enslaved to sin to being a child of God who loves God and loves holiness.
7. True affection for God makes us gracious and gentle toward others, bringing a tenderness of spirit.
8. As true affection for God grows, it only increases our hunger for spiritual things, making us long more and more for Christ.
9. True affection for God will lead to more consistent and faithful Christian practice.

Now we may see some of these things in ourselves more clearly and strongly than others. But if God the Holy Spirit is really changing our hearts and is really working in us a true and saving love for God and for Christ, then these marks will be seen.

If we do not see the, but we desire to see them in our lives, this is a good sign and is the work of the Holy Spirit, too. We must pray and keep seeking the Lord in His word that He may nurture that spark of divine light and fan it into flame in our hearts.