

The Sermon on the Mount

Session VII

A Christian's Choices

Matthew 7:12-29

We've now made it to our final session in the study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In these final verses of the sermon we are going to see that in v.13-27 Jesus focuses on choices that all believers will have to make. Choices of the path of life we will choose; our ability to recognize false prophets and so on..... This final section of chapter 7 is joined to the first by v.12.

Let's begin:

How We Treat Others:

Matthew 7:12

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

What do we commonly call this verse?? And do you think that there is anything strategic as to why Jesus spoke this verse at this point in the sermon??

This is a very familiar verse. We call it "***The Golden Rule***". I do think that Jesus spoke this verse here for a very specific reason. Recall that he has just completed his discussion of "***dogs and pigs***" in v.6. When we discussed that verse, we noted that great care and spiritual awareness was required on our part. People in this category are the exception, not the rule. Now, here in v.12 we see ***the rule*** of how we are to relate to others.

We must always keep in mind Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. In these verses he confirms the Old Testament law of Leviticus 19 which addressed the treatment of others. Additionally, the context of the Leviticus passage and the parable of the Good Samaritan confirm that this is not just how believers are to relate to one another. Instead, they address how believers are to relate to the world. When we think about ***what we love, and how we want to be treated*** first, and then treat others in accordance with this standard, we have a much greater guide!!

Conclusion of the Sermon:

As we prepare to push through the final verses of the sermon, let's step back for just a moment and put a bit of perspective on this entire message. There is no denying that throughout the sermon, Jesus was focused very intently on instructing his followers how they were to conduct their lives. However, we have also noted that his message was directed to our hearts, not just to some form of outward obedience. When our character takes on the attributes of the Beatitudes; when we love and treat others the way we want to be treated from a heart of love and care, ect ect,,, then the obedience is just an outward reflection of the nature within!!

Given this, we must always remember that Christ's call for certain ethical norms of behavior from his followers can never be taken as some works-based form of salvation!! Salvation is by

grace alone, given by God alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. However, as followers of Jesus, we are still sinners and in need of ethical instruction to address the many choices that will come to us in this life.

This has been the message of the Sermon on the Mount, a message of ethical instruction aimed at the heart of every true believer in Christ. It is given to us in order that we might have a great life in Christ and shine that great hope we have to a lost and dying world as they observe how we walk through this trying and difficult world.

Jesus is now finished with his ethical teaching. Beginning in v.13 he turns the sermon to warnings around some specific choices we will face. When we have embraced the previous ethical norms and characteristics in the depths of our hearts, then we will be prepared to face these choices!!

Let's now turn to these consequential choices that Christ presents. Every believer will face these choices in their life in some manner:

The Choice of Two Paths:

Matthew 7:13-14

Can you see the pattern here??

Jesus opens this example of human choice with an assertion. Then he moves to providing two parallel grounds in support of the assertion. *Name the assertion statement here in v.13-14, and the two parallel grounds.*

This one is pretty straight-forward. The assertion is found at the very beginning of v.13: *Enter by the narrow gate.* Then the parallel grounds supporting the assertion are the middle of v.13 and beginning of v.14: *For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction..... For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life.* The first path is wide, spacious and accommodating to many. The second path is narrow and its way is difficult.

Let's keep some temporal context in mind. Jesus was speaking to a 1st century AD Jewish audience in the land of Palestine. These people had to walk everywhere they went. When we look at the geography of Palestine we see several types of terrain. Along the coast was a broad, flat coastal plain. This area was the place of the great highway Via Maria ("*The Way of the Sea*"). It was a broad, flat, easily traveled road and served as the single major trade route from Egypt, into the Roman world.

A secondary route ran along the spine of the mountains of the Jordan Rift. This road was known as "The King's Highway". It was a major route because it connected into areas of Syria and modern Iraq / Iran. However, it was an arduous journey. In Palestine it had numerous extreme elevation changes.

Many smaller roads existed in these extremes. The people were very familiar with how physically hard it was to travel in these various conditions. When they had choices, they would often walk further in order to take the easier path to avoid the extremes and dangers of the more arduous routes. Jesus was using this context to make his example.

Let's make some application points from this set of choices. I think there are at least five points to discuss here:¹

1. God's path for us is not a wide, spacious, comfortable path. Being a God-centered person as we walk through this world is not easy. The world has a completely different set of values and it is impossible to stay on His path without His grace in our lives.

We should never let this become a “depressing” point. Yes the world will hate us. Yes the world does not share our values. Yes the world will ostracize us and persecute us. However, our joys are greater than possible negative thing the world can throw at us!!! We have the eternal assurance found in the salvation of Jesus Christ. We have the joy of a daily walk and relationship with the Creator of the universe!! And the list goes on and on.....

2. The second application point to draw from this passage is that God's way cannot be determined by watching the majority of people. This world is fallen. Quite simply, despite so many efforts in evangelism, most will not come to know the great salvation that we have.
3. The narrow way to life cannot be pursued if we are motivated by a desire to walk with and please the mass of humanity. We've all seen examples of times when the momentum of society gets behind something. Believers can either stand on truth or seek to “go along with the crowd”. *Can you think of any recent examples??*

The one that jumps out to me that has recently occurred in the United States is concerning the institution of marriage and establishing same-sex marriage as legal and acceptable. The mass of our society has come to the post-modern opinion that marriage is to be defined by the times and the community, not some absolute authority.

We cannot expect the lost to hold to our biblical ethical norms. However, we have seen numerous examples of churches and denominations that have set God's Holy Scripture aside on the definition of marriage in order to “conform” or “please” the masses of men!!

This is nothing new. In the 4th century a man named Athanasius stood against the tide of the church which sought to define the nature of Jesus as something between “man and God”. The church, under the leadership of Arius, sought to challenge the *divine-human* nature of Jesus. Their motto was: “*There was a time when he (Jesus) was not.*” This was

the first major schism of the early church after the Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. Athanasius refused to follow Arius and the mass of church leaders. Had he not stood strong, there is no telling where our doctrine of the nature of Christ would be today.....

4. These paths are not “*ends in themselves*”. They have *eternal significance*!!! I think this is very obvious from the text and doesn't need much further elaboration.
5. There are only two paths. There is only one path to avoid destruction, it is the narrow gate, whose way is hard. We will never be able to walk this path, only the blood of Jesus and our subsequent changed nature will prompt us to pursue this path.

I want to sum up this example of choice with a series of Scriptures that go directly to this very point:

Jesus spoke to this truth in John's Gospel in the most straight-forward way possible:

John 14:6

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Moses also hit this very point in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 30:15-19

15 " See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 17 But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,

The last example I would offer is from Joshua:

Joshua 24:14-15

"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

We are going to digress for just a moment on a key **theological** and **philosophical** point here. This is a point that our churches have debated since the time of Augustine. We will not solve it here and I must tell you that the subject is simply huge and worthy of much individual study and prayer. However, this juncture in our study provides us with an opportunity to see how our process here of **biblical exegesis** interfaces to the larger context of **systematic theology** and ultimately **philosophical theology**.

Not all of you will agree with my position here, and I respect that. I do feel that this topic and these passages give us a glimpse of God's intent in the atonement, as well as a glimpse at the ultimate scope of humanity that will experience it. Jesus' theme of personal choice is stressed in this passage.

The "choice" that Jesus is ultimately presenting here is to either place our faith in his atoning sacrifice (which hasn't happened as of the sermon, but he knows is coming), or to reject it. He is essentially laying the decision at our feet. We have chosen to sin, God has chosen to pay the price for that sin. **If**, as some hold, God has established at some point before the creation "**who**" He will allow to choose the narrow path, **then** there is really **no human choice** (no free will). In this view, God determines beforehand who will accept him and who will reject him. Such a position struggles with the concept of the **problem of evil**. The reason is that **if** God has **pre-determined** all things (not just divinely foreknown, but actually chosen), **then** God must have also **pre-determined** Adam to sin. This would appear to place God as the "**author of sin**" and by its very definition it makes Him **culpable** for it and likewise also conflicts with His **holy nature**.

We will not solve the theological differences that exist between those who hold to more determinist positions and those who hold believe the Bible speaks of true human freedom in the choice of salvation today. I just wanted to demonstrate how I feel that this passage and related texts, support the theme of "choice" in salvation and thus the road we follow.

The Choice of Two Trees: (Remember – Look for structure)

Mt.7:15-20

As we do in each passage, identify the structural elements you see being employed here.

Structure:

This passage has a bit more complex structure:

1. **Warning:**

Verse 15 opens with a command word προσέχετε (prosechete) "**you beware!**"; "**you be on guard!**"; "**you be watchful!**". ***Jesus is commanding his followers to be on guard against who? Does he indicate that these "may" come?***

False prophets who come in disguise to fool believers that they are true prophets!! Additionally, Jesus doesn't say that they "may" or "may not". He says they will come!! They appear harmless, or as one of us. However, they are not. They come to destroy!!

2. **Principle:**

Verse 16 gives us the principle of how we are to recognize these false prophets: "**„recognize them by their fruits,,**". Throughout the sermon Jesus has stressed the heart message of who we are as believers. Who we are on the "inside" will be reflected by our actions. Jesus employs a Greek rhetorical question in v.16 to make this point.

Another point of Greek grammar is that we can tell the answer to the question by the manner in which it was written. Anytime the author used οὐ + an indicative verb, the expected answer to the question was “YES”. However, anytime he used μή + an indicative verb, then the expected answer was “NO”. In v.16 Matthew employs μή + an indicative form of “recognize”. Therefore we know that the answer to the question is clearly “NO”.

3. **Examples:**

Verses 17-18 flow directly from the rhetorical question. Jesus moves into providing positive and negative examples of his point. Good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit. The concept is simple to comprehend and doesn't require a great deal of discussion.

4. **Judgement is Real:**

Those trees that do not bear good fruit will eventually be cut down and thrown into the fire. *Does this convey some form of “works-based” salvation?*

Once again we see the heart-focus of the sermon coming through. Our outward lives manifest the inward condition of our hearts. When we know Christ as our Savior, we are changed, we have a new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17). As such our lives will manifest this new nature. Likewise, those who do not have this will have lives characterized by their unredeemed nature. As sad as the final judgment is, and unpopular to talk about, **it is real!!!**

5. **Repetition of the Principle:**

Notice that in v.20 Jesus reiterates the principle of v.16. A man's “fruits”, his actions, portray his inward heart!!

Context of Camouflage:

I want to turn now to another key aspect of this passage. The **“context of camouflage”**. *Why does this context apply?*

A teacher, who comes to us and preaches a radical message that is blatantly out of step with the Scriptures, will result in very few Christians who accept such a message. Jesus knew this. Satan sends his false prophets into our midst in disguise!! They will subtly change the message so that on the surface it sounds correct, but when we really examine it, it is truly false doctrine, “bad fruit”. *Give me some examples of how we have seen this in our time?*

Examples are literally everywhere. Perhaps the most blatant in the U.S. currently is a group of false teachers who are preaching a ***“Prosperity Gospel”***. Their message is simply one where God

is placed into the role of our servant who is there to ensure that we live lives of health and wealth and happiness. They “*tickle the ears*” of illiterate Christians who are incapable of discerning that this message totally reverses the roles of the man : God relationship!!

Importance of the message:

For believers, this is one of the most important messages that Jesus gave us. There is absolutely no doubt that false prophets will come in disguise as believers. The Apostles heard this message and fully grasped its message. We can see this as we look to the New Testament writings of Peter, John, and Paul, which account for over 80% of the NT books!! Some examples:

- A. **Paul:** Paul devotes the entire book of Galatians to attacking the Judaizers for their false doctrine and attempts to lead the Galatian church astray by teaching a salvation by works as opposed to faith.
- B. **Peter:** In his second letter, Peter boldly warns of “*wolves in sheep’s clothing*” in 2 Peter 2:1-3 using much the same language as Jesus.

2 Peter 2:1-3

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

- C. **John:** All three of John’s Epistles deal with the subject of false teachers. However, 1 John is the most explicit. In the churches of Asia Minor, a very early form of Gnosticism had crept into the churches. In this false doctrine, the very nature of Jesus was being challenged. The early Gnostics taught that anything material was corrupt. Therefore Jesus could not have been truly human. Look at one clear example:

1 John 4:1-3

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

Bonus Question: Why does denying the humanity of Jesus Christ destroy the heart of the gospel?

Mankind physically sinned. We disobeyed God. This sin brought the eternal condemnation of God upon us. God required innocent blood to atone for the sins of the corrupt. The blood of lambs in the Old Testament simply pointed forward to the concept of the perfect Messiah who would deliver sinful man from the wrath of Holy God.

Jesus was the true Lamb whose sacrifice provides the provision for redemption. If one denies that Jesus possessed the element of true humanity, then one denies the incarnation of Christ. If one denies the incarnation of Christ, then they deny the crucifixion of Christ. If they deny

the crucifixion, then there is no possibility for resurrection and the conquering of sin and death!!!

These slick-tongued false prophets tried to preach a message that removed the humanity of Christ because humanity is so sinful. However, embedded in their theology is a denial of the true gospel message of Jesus!!!

Remember, Peter and John would have been present for the Sermon on the Mount!!

Recognition:

Jesus and Peter have made it clear that these guys are subtle and bring their heresy to us in disguise. So, how then are we to ensure that we can identify them and not be fooled??

We will know them by their fruit is what Jesus tells us. Yet we also know that they are coming to us in disguise. The examples I gave you from Galatians, 2 Peter, and 1 John all attest that false teachers come to us in disguise. *So, how can we know if their disguised message is false??*

We can only recognize false doctrine after we understand true doctrine. Let me give you a real life analogy from the U.S.:

The U.S. Secret Service is a division of the Treasury Dept. One task of this service is in the protection of our currency from counterfeiters. Men and women spend years of continual study in order to recognize counterfeit money. They do not spend time studying counterfeit money. Instead, they spend years studying the details of true U.S. currency. Their premise is this: When one knows the details of real currency, then they are properly prepared to recognize counterfeit!!

This same principle applies here. Believers who do not develop spiritually and mature in their knowledge of doctrine and develop their faith relationship with God are ones who are susceptible to fall for camouflaged false doctrine!!!

In the U.S. we see this all around. Detailed and focused study of God's word has taken a back-seat to things like fancy music and spirited sermons. These things are great. However, they do NOT replace the need for personal development. If we do not have a solid grounding in the basic tenets of our faith, then we are at risk of falling prey to false teachers!!

The Choice of Two Claims:

Mt.7:21-23

We are going to dwell on a couple of key points in this passage. Look at this and tell me what you see as the over-arching message??

In this passage and the next we see a clear contrast between those who hear and obey vs. those who hear but do not obey. But let's stay focused on this passage. Jesus is speaking about people who will look to him, presumably on the Day of Judgment, and claim to be his disciples. Yet Christ is saying that not all of these are really his. *This is a hard message. What is Christ contrasting??*

Let's contrast the elements behind "**professing**" vs. "**possessing**". In the circles of churches in the U.S. we often refer to the difference between having a mere mental / verbal assent to Christ vs. a complete and total heart-felt trust in Jesus Christ and his atonement for our sin on the cross!!

Verbal assent is the very concept at the heart of v.21-23. If all we have is a mere mental or verbal assent to Jesus as Lord, then we do not truly hold him in our heart. As such, the heart-focus of the sermon again comes to light. It is not enough to just "say" Jesus is Lord; it has to be part of how we live each day. And as we have studied throughout the sermon, our outward expressions are a reflection of our inward convictions!!

I love the analogy of the chair. I can look at a chair. I can examine how it is constructed. I can analyze the materials used. I can look at the welds and screws and pins, etc etc. All of these things help to inform my mind as to whether this chair is likely able to support my weight. This is akin to mental assent.

However, it is not until I stop "studying" the chair and sit down upon it, placing the entirety of my weight on its frame to hold me up. This is where mental assent turns to true heart-felt faith. Once I sit on the chair, I have placed my complete trust in it. This is analogous to true faith.

There is nothing wrong with study and seeking to understand something. However, mere mental knowledge of Jesus as Savior is not enough!! We have to place our complete and total faith in his finished work on the cross as Lord and Savior of our souls!! I love the quote from John Stott on this concept:²

*"Our final destiny will be settled, Jesus insists, **not** by what we say to him today, nor what we say to him on the last day, **instead** by whether we **do what we say**, whether our verbal profession is accompanied by moral obedience."*

The Choice of Two Houses:

Matthew 7:24-27

This passage is closely related to the premise behind the previous. How can we discern that?

Our translations vary in how they render the Greek text. However, I prefer those which open v.24 with some type of connective term like: **“Thus”, “Therefore”, “So then”**. I contend this is the proper way to render οὐν in the Greek text and its intended link to the previous passage.

Tell me how you see that these passages are inter-related?

In v. 21-23 we discussed the concept of mental / verbal assent as opposed to true heart-felt faith. Here Christ speaks about the danger of **“hearing vs. doing”**. Notice that v.24 and v.26 each depict a man who **“hears”**. ***However, there is a critical difference between these two men. What is it??***

Both men are "building a house". Additionally, both men are said to **hear** Jesus' words. However, the **difference** lies in what happens **after** they have heard. The **wise man** puts what he has heard into action and is likened to a man who builds his home upon the rock. The **foolish man** does not and is likened unto a builder who constructs his home on a foundation of sand. ***Once again, on the surface this might sound like a “works-based” salvation. Is that what Jesus is saying??***

Of course not!! The point of v.21-23 was that mere verbal profession is not sufficient. Here in v.24-27 we see that simple hearing, listening, studying, ect ect are not sufficient. There is no doubt that both profession and hearing are important. However, these alone are insufficient. When we place our complete faith in Christ, then our outward obedience is a reflection of our inward conviction!!

Let's look at two passages from 1 John which address the very point that our works shall accompany our faith:

1 John 1:6-7; 2:4-6

⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

Who is this Preacher?:

Mt.7:28-29

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

As we noted early in our course, Jesus amazed the people because he did not teach them like the scribes and Pharisees did. He spoke *as one having authority!!* The divine authority of our Lord was apparent throughout his ministry. His authority as our ultimate ***Teacher, Messiah (Christ), Lord, Savior, Judge, the Son of God, and as God Himself!!***

So much more could be elaborated upon by examining each of these roles in detail. It is important for us to see Matthew's observation here. So often in our day, we hear people refer to Jesus as a great man, or a great teacher. Clearly he was both of these. However, there is a message here in these two short verses that go to our ability to defend the gospel and present Jesus to the lost. That message is:

Look at the reaction of those who witnessed this sermon!!!

They knew there was something different about Jesus. They knew that they had just stood in the presence of something greater than a mere *great teacher or man*. They had stood in the very presence of God, and heard first hand, the greatest sermon that would ever be delivered!! Someday we will all get to experience this first-hand. Until then, we can read the majesty in his words and witness the awe of those who were present.

This concludes our study of the Sermon on the Mount. It is my hope that this brief study has but spurred you to dig deeper in the greatest sermon ever spoken!! I also hope you have grown in your personal walk with Christ and are better equipped to teach others from this great sermon.

It has been my privilege to study with you!!

Literature Cited

¹ D. A. Carson. *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World An Exposition of Matthew 5 -10*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1987, 130-33.

² Stott, John R. W., and John R. W. Stott. *The message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian counter-culture*. Inter-Varsity Press, 1992, 206.