

## Matthew 7:13-23

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**CENTRAL THEME:** *'by their fruit you will know them.'*

Christianity is not a theory. Real faith in the real Jesus leads to a radically different lifestyle. It's not that beliefs don't matter, but rather that true gospel belief leads to a gospel lifestyle.

### **Context:**

7:13-29 form the conclusion to Jesus' teaching about life in the kingdom of God, which began at 5:1. Our experience of faith is so often mixed and compromised, but Jesus here reminds us clearly that the reality is stark alternatives. Two paths, two trees, two houses, and two clear destinies.

### **1. Two ways (13-14)**

The image is simple – two ways, accessed by two different entrances, leading to two different destinies. The narrow way is accessed by a narrow gate. The alternative is a broad road accessed by a broad gate. The narrow way leads to life, the broad road to destruction. The word for narrow is related to a term for affliction. And the word for wide is related to ideas of comfort and prosperity (see Psalm 18:19). Our temptation is always to make things easier. When we read the seemingly impossible demands Jesus makes on his disciples in 5:1-7:12 we are tempted to water them down. We think that we must have understood things wrongly if our understanding of what it means to be a disciple looks so very difficult. But Jesus has taught precisely that throughout these chapters: to be his follower will make for a difficult life in this world. It is not easy to be humble, gracious and prayerful. It is not easy to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you. But that is what is required. No wonder so few travel on the narrow way. But as narrow as the way may be, the destination is life; eternal, abundant, joyful life. The opposite is true of the broad, popular road. It is easy, it is well-travelled, it means living by standards that make sense to everyone around us. But the end is the ultimate limitation – the destruction of eternal death.

→ This has implications for how we understand the Christian life, and how hard we expect it to be. Too much western Christianity turns Jesus into a lifestyle guru. Sin is seen as the thing that keeps me from a fulfilling life and which damages my relationships (which is of course true, but only half true – sin is fundamentally an offence against God). Jesus deals with my sin, enabling me to know a life of freedom and joy now (again, that is true, but only half true, as is seen from the examples of the lives of godly Christians from Acts to the present day). We need to affirm *both* that we have *'every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus'* now, *and* that to follow Christ is to *'take up your cross'* and walk the narrow way.

It also has implications for what we say to those considering Christianity. Too often evangelical churches have adopted an approach to evangelism that makes the entry to faith in Christ enormously broad and easy, with the demands getting harder and the way narrower as time goes on. Such an approach does not fit well with Jesus' teaching here. We do of course need to balance this with other statements which are broad and wide in their invitation (Matthew 11:28-30; John 7:37-38); and which stress

the joy and blessings which are ours *now* in Christ (see Ephesians 1:3ff). That said, we are far more in danger of ignoring the demanding words of Matthew 7 than the broad invitation of chapter 11.

Jesus' words here also sober our expectations in evangelism – few find the narrow way (though he may be focussing in 13-14 on the response within Israel, rather than the global response to the gospel. If people in the group get too hung up on how many will be saved, Jesus addresses that very point in Luke 13:22-30...)

## **2. Two trees (15-20, 21-23)**

False prophets / teachers have always been a danger to the people of God. Paul warned the church about it in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:29-31), and it is a consistent theme in the New Testament letters (see for example 2Peter 2:1ff). We must take Jesus' words seriously. Some Christians are far too naïve. If anyone teaches against a particular author or speaker, they declaim this as being judgemental. But Jesus is clear that there will be some who appear to be helpful Christian teachers, but who are in fact wolves in sheep's clothing. So, how are we to spot them? By their fruit (16). Given the place of these verses in the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, this 'good fruit' surely means living a life such as Jesus has described in chapters 5-7. This fits too with the way fruit is used in passages like Galatians 5:19-23.

One wonders too whether the immediate context of verses 13-14 is also instructive: one of the common features of the false prophets in OT times is that they always prophesied good news – saying that God was pleased with the behaviour of the people, and that they did not need to fear judgement (eg 1Kings 22:1-28; Jeremiah 28; Micah 2:6-11, 3:5-8). Perhaps the particular false teachers he has in mind are those who peddle deceitful false truths that make the Christian life easier: there's no need to worry about holiness; God loves us however we behave; etc.

NB, we must not hold to these verses in a way that leads us to jettison 7:1-5 with a suspicious, judgemental spirit that is always looking to sniff out the whiff of error in every sermon or book. But nor must we apply 7:1-5 so strongly that we reject what Jesus says here in 15-20...

## **21-23**

These are sobering words – some who address Jesus as '*Lord*' and perform miracles in his name will be exposed as spiritual frauds and eternally rejected.

In spite of the paragraph break in our English translations, it makes most sense to see these verses as part of verses 15-20. In part these verses show us how it is that we are so often fooled by false teachers. The focus of 15-20 is fruit. The focus of these verses is gifts. We are impressed by gifts. God, however, is looking for true spiritual fruit – which is grounded in simple obedience to God in the daily realities of life, living out the teaching of ch.5-7. A real experience of God's grace leads to a change in lifestyle. In Ephesians 2:8-10 Paul explains that salvation is all of grace, our works contribute nothing to it... but that it leads to good works. Indeed the shape of most of the New Testament letters bears this out. The opening chapters explore the gospel, and are followed by chapters on living out the implications in the seemingly mundane realities of daily life at home and at work. Jesus taught the importance of obedience in

chapter 5:19: *'therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...'*

Gifts tell us nothing about what is going on in someone's heart. When we read in Matthew 10:1 that Jesus gave power to the disciples to heal, we are not told that it was given to all of them except Judas. We should therefore assume that Judas healed people and cast out demons. And yet he is eternally condemned... We should be less concerned with how large a church someone has grown, how many people have been converted under them, and how popular their books are. What matters to God is whether they teach the narrow way, and whether their lives are full of the fruit of simple obedience to God in line with Matthew 5-7. NB, it's very hard to assess the fruit of people whose lives we cannot see. This is one of the issues with the internet – we can be heavily influenced by gifted teachers but have no ability to see anything of their lives. That is a dangerous / unhealthy dynamic.

Of course, there is a broader application for us too. When it comes to our own lives, God wants obedience. It's no good thinking that acts of service to God make up for disobedience to his commands. We are saved by Jesus' death alone, and God wants his saved people to obey him. If people are unsettled by this we should do two things. First, encourage them to make sure they *have* put their trust in Christ! Second, point them to 5:3-4. False teachers are marked by arrogance (2Peter 2). Humility of spirit is a hallmark of the genuine follower of Jesus.

## **APPLICATION**

These verses impact on how we evangelise, what we expect from the Christian life, and how we assess popular Christian authors and speakers.

## QUESTIONS

- Is the Christian life mainly one of joy, or of hardship? [*it's both!*]
- How much do you think you should talk about the difficulties and costs when sharing the gospel with someone?

### Verses 13-14

- What words does Jesus use to describe the Christian life?
- And what about the non-Christian life?
- Why is this an appropriate way to describe following Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount?
- How should this image impact our expectations of the Christian life and our expectations in evangelism?
  - It is possible to stress the negatives too much and ignore the wonderful blessings of life in Christ; but what happens if we don't teach people clearly about the demands of discipleship before they decide to follow Jesus?
  - What encouragement is there in verse 14 for those who don't like the idea of a 'narrow, restrictive religion'? [*it starts narrow, but leads to life! Whereas the broad, easy way leads to destruction*]

### Verses 15-23

- Why do so many of us not like it when someone says 'X is a false teacher'? [*if there is pushback, it's good to look at 2Peter 2:1 which shows we should expect this in every age*]
- What do we learn about false teachers in verse 15?
- Why might they be more dangerous than those who overtly persecute the church?
- How are we to spot them?
- What do you think he means by 'fruit'? How might the context of verses 13-14, and of chapters 5-7 more generally, help us?
  - How can hold to what Jesus says in both 7:1-5 and 15-20?
- In verse 21, what does Jesus envisage will happen to the false teachers?
- What is surprising about verses 22-23?
- [You might want to look at Matthew 10:1-4 to show that even Judas had the power to perform miracles!]
- What is Jesus' reason for rejecting them in spite of all they have done?
  - What things might we be impressed by in Christian leaders? What instead does God care most about?
  - What is the sobering warning in these verses? [*some people who think they are genuine Christians, will be exposed as frauds and rejected by God*]
  - What should we say to someone who is unsettled by this and worried that they might not be accepted by God in the end? [look at 5:3-4! Those who are worried are in no danger. Such a humble, 'poor' attitude shows a right relationship with God.]