

One Way (Evening Service)

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Now, let's get into our passage. So we're coming to the end of what's called the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus has covered a lot of ground in these few chapters. He's talked about humility and blessing and anger and lust and divorce and revenge and hypocrisy. And the main point of it all, if you had to summarize it all, has been, here's what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus. That's the thrust of it. Here is what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus. That's been the thrust of the Sermon on the Mount, and we've got one chapter left. So let's open our Bibles.

It's a really big chunk we're trying to cover here tonight, and it'd be helpful to have Bibles open if you can. All right, let me give you a bit of an overview of the passage. So if you sort of slide your eyes just over this passage here, you'll see there's about seven or eight paragraphs, and here's what's going on. Jesus, it's kind of like one-third, two-thirds, okay? The first third is Jesus is giving his two final bits of teaching on discipleship, okay? So the first third, two final bits of teaching on discipleship, and they are, don't judge others, and when you pray, expect God to answer. That's sort of like verses one to eleven. And then Jesus summarizes the whole sermon from there right back to the beginning of it with what we call the golden rule, verse 12. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. So again, there's two final teachings, a summary, and then the next two-thirds of our reading, that's warnings. Christ finishes the Sermon on the Mount with a series of warnings. All right, that's the overview. We are actually going to try and cover the whole thing, except for the pearls before swine thing, because I honestly just don't know. But don't do it. It's really bad. So we're going to actually cover everything except that, which is ridiculous, I know. Well, let's have a crack, okay? So get comfortable.

Here we go. I've been away a long time. I've got a lot to say. Okay, verses one to seven. Judgment. Judge not that you be not judged. This is probably the best known and most quoted passage of Scripture for people who don't normally quote Scripture. People love it. People love this verse because judging is the great sin of our age, and sort of the post-modern reasoning, I guess, is we have no right to judge other people because there's no all-encompassing truth. And yet, and yet, you know, spend five minutes reading the comments section, you know, on a social media page. People are so judgmental today. So I think we live at a very odd and inconsistent time. Anyway, back to the passage. So what is Jesus saying here? Is Christ saying you can never judge? Is Christ saying you can never criticize? You can never call somebody out? I don't think Christ is saying that because

Jesus did judge people. He called the Pharisees a brood of vipers. And you read the epistles. You see the writers of the epistles say some quite harsh things about people. So what does it mean? What's going on here? I think what it means is this. It's a warning against being hypercritical, a warning against being hypercritical, because there are people who, it's like a pathology. They hope, they hope to find fault in others, and they're happy to find fault in others, and they're happy to tell them about it. And why would somebody be happy to do that? Because it makes them feel better about themselves. These people harm community. And Jesus tells a story. He goes, this is how ridiculous it is when you do that. It's like, imagine a guy, it's in a workshop, and this guy's got this huge log in his eye, and he's telling another guy about a little piece of dust in his eye. I mean, it's supposed to be this kind of ludicrous, funny picture, right? But the point is, is we tend to think our faults are quite small in comparison to others. And then the story goes on. It says, pull the log out, deal with your own problems. Let's be real about ourselves so that we can graciously deal with other people's issues. Because otherwise, it's just hypocrisy, and hypocrisy is a community killer.

[4 : 2 6] So remember the context there. Jesus is speaking to his 12 disciples, and he's building a church with these 12 friends of his. And he's teaching them how to be his followers, and he's teaching all this great stuff. But he's concerned. He's warning them. If one of you folks in this

community becomes overly hypercritical, you can take my teachings, and you can turn them into a weapon. You can weaponize the Bible, and it can ruin the thing we're trying to build here. It can ruin community.

It can ruin a church. It can destroy marriage. It can ruin friendships, being hypercritical. So Jesus' penultimate lesson in the Sermon on the Mount, the second and last lesson, is this. Check your attitude, man. Check your attitude about your judgmentalism.

Okay. Last teaching now, verses 7 to 11. It's wonderful stuff. Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you'll find. Knock, and it will be opened. Everyone who asks, receives. Which one of you, if a son asks for bread, will give him a stone, etc.? It's right there. It's great stuff. It's about prayer.

Now, we know what this doesn't mean. It doesn't mean we can ask for whatever we want, and God has to give it to us. We know that, right? It can't mean that.

Jesus asked for his own burden to be taken from him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the answer was no. But it's very interesting to me that Jesus' invitation is so open-ended here. His invitation to pray is so open-ended. There's no qualifications.

[6 : 03] There's no... Jesus doesn't say, ask, and it will be given to you. But of course, don't ask for stupid things. Don't ask for little things. You can't ask for a girlfriend or a boyfriend. You can't ask for a kappa.

There's no qualification here. Jesus doesn't say that. He just says, pray, and you'll receive good things. I've been so pleased reading this this week.

It's been so refreshing. There's this quite unsettling line towards the end there, where it's, if you who are evil give good gifts to your children, how much more is your father going to give to you?

And I think that's the key to understanding what the passage is about. It basically means this. Even the best parents are bad in comparison with the heavenly father. So the big point, and what Jesus is trying to get at, is he's trying to say this.

This is the big point. How do you view God when you pray? Do you think he's stingy? Now I know that some of you will still be caught up in this idea that Jesus seems to be suggesting a bit of prosperity gospel stuff here.

[7 : 13] It seems to be suggesting that I can ask for anything and I'll get it. Doesn't Jesus know that he can be horribly misunderstood? Of course he knows this. But he doesn't seem very concerned about that.

Because his major concern is not people will misunderstand this. His major concern is how do you view the father? He's worried that we'll misunderstand who the father is.

That we miss the idea that God, our heavenly father, loves to hear us pray. And loves us when we ask him. And loves us when we talk to him.

Christ's concern is, he thinks we misunderstand how much God wants to give us. What good things. And Jesus says, he says, seek and ask and knock.

It's like Christ is saying, explore the generosity of your heavenly father. He's inviting us to do that by praying and asking. And it's such a good word for us because often our worries and our anxieties never turn into prayers because we doubt the generosity of God.

[8 : 27] And I expect that a place like St. John's, and I'm guilty of this, at a place like St. John's, that we are so concerned with orthodoxy that we are, that we're more concerned about praying right and praying about the right things that we kind of suck all the life out of our prayer life.

You know, we're so concerned that we're doing it properly and rightly that we turn God into this uptight headmaster looking upon us quite sternly whilst we pray.

And Jesus says, no, folks, you have a heavenly father. A father, a heavenly father. So he's not like our earthly fathers. He's perfect. A heavenly father who loves to give you good things and he is infinitely generous.

That's what Christ is trying to tell us. And he's saying, put that into your mind when you come to him. That's what it's saying, I think. Moving on. So that's the last thing I think Jesus says in terms of his teaching specifically on discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount.

And then he summarizes it with a golden rule which we don't have time to get into. So we're going to keep moving. So the Sermon on Discipleship ends. It's the first third.

[9 : 51] And in the last sort of two thirds of this chapter seven, we move on to the warnings that include the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon starts with blessings, ends with warnings, which is interesting.

And the warnings are very sobering. Here we're presented with two paths, with two trees, with two foundations. And the wrong path leads us to destruction.

The bad tree is cut down and burned and the house built on sand. Well, let's listen to the final words of the Sermon on the Mount. The very final words of the Sermon on the Mount, verse 27, the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against the house and it fell and great was the fall.

In these pictures, Jesus is talking about hell. And so the end of the Sermon on the Mount is very sobering. And this is a tough topic to talk about.

C.S. Lewis on hell, here's what he says. He says, there is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and especially of our Lord's own words.

[11 : 04] And it always has been held in Christendom and it has the support of reason. So let's get on with it then, shall we? Let's look at these paths and trees and foundations.

So begin with the two gates, two paths, two gates, two paths. So imagine, right? Imagine there's like a big, wide open gate. You're looking at it, in your mind's eyes. A big, wide open gate and it leads to this big, broad highway and there's all these cars zooming down the highway.

Everyone seems pretty happy. And imagine just to the left of it over this side, you don't notice it at first but there's a little gate and you kind of have to squeeze through to get into it.

You kind of have to bend down a bit to get through it. And on the other side of it, there's this sort of rambling path and it's difficult to walk on. And there's just a few sort of eccentrics bumping along this path.

This is sort of like the image that Jesus paints. And the great shock is that as he keeps telling the story, he says, the narrow path isn't actually a dead end. That's the path that leads to life.

[12 : 03] And the easy and wide path, the end of that is hell. The end of that is destruction. And it's a helpful picture to us for a number of reasons.

One of them is this. It helps us understand why the Christian journey, I think, is so difficult at times. Because it emphasizes the outsideness of following Jesus, the loneliness of it sometimes.

The fatigue that comes with feeling like you're constantly walking against the flow of culture. Let's dig into it some more. One of the things that has to be said about it is it's deeply offensive.

It's culturally very, very offensive. Jesus is saying, there's not lots of paths to God. There is one.

And there's another path. And that path leads away from God. And Christ says, everyone is on one of those two paths.

[13 : 02] Everyone is going in one direction or the other direction. Everyone has spiritual commitments, whether they talk about them like that or not. Everyone has spiritual commitments.

We all have them. And those commitments are taking us somewhere. And Christ here, he's warning us. And it's a call to self-examination. Because if you look at 21 to 23, there are people going through the wide gate and they think it's the narrow gate.

There are people on the wide path thinking they're on the narrow path. And on the last day, people will say to Jesus, Lord, Lord. And on that last day, there will be people sort of acknowledging some sort of orthodoxy there.

And they'll say, it says verse 22, Lord, Lord. It's in the original language. It's when you repeat the word, it's like you're adding emotion to it. So it's like, Lord, Lord. This is exuberant.

Lord, Lord. And they bring to Jesus all the good things they've done. Look at the impressive things we did in your name. And Jesus says these devastating words, I never knew you.

[14 : 09] Depart from me. I never knew you. Do you notice it's not, I don't know you. It's I never knew you. How does this happen? How is it possible for people to be on this big wide path and think they're on the narrow path?

Well, part of the reason this happens is through the work of false prophets. Verse 15, Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

You know, in New Zealand, we have lots of sheep. And we don't have wolves, but we have dogs. And when farmers see dogs they don't know on the farm, they'll shoot them immediately.

And, you know, it could be a Labrador. We just, you know, we shoot any dog they see on a farm because a dog, a wild dog, will tear apart a lamb. And think about what a wolf would do to sheep.

The picture is of devastation, spiritual devastation. So these wolves, these false prophets, they're on the wide path and they're saying to everyone on the wide path, this is fantastic.

[15:16] This is great. We're doing well here. You're on the right path. Nothing to worry about. Jeremiah 23 is very helpful to us here.

Jeremiah 23 contrasts two types of prophets and it ties nicely into what Jesus is saying here. I'll read a snippet to you. Jeremiah 23, 16 and 17. Thus says the Lord of hosts, do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes.

They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, it shall be well with you. And to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, no disaster shall come upon you.

See, do you see what the false prophets are saying? The gist of their argument is this. It shall be well with you. No disaster shall come upon you. It's your okay. I'm okay. It's all going to work out in the end. Love wins.

Be nice to each other in the meantime. And it's what we want. We want to hear this, don't we? We want to hear this. And it keeps us on the wide path. They're the words that keep people comfortable as they head along towards destruction.

[16:27] False prophets look like sheep, the passage says. That's one of the difficult things is they can... False prophets can be, you know, your next door neighbor, relatives.

It can be a priest as well. False prophet could be a bishop. False prophet could be a podcast. And, like, hear me on this. Like, generally, it could be a podcast.

You know, the sort of the Christian podcast that quietly questions orthodoxy. Which is a very sort of sexy thing to do nowadays. Because I think we live in this cultural climate which is very suspicious of institutional anything.

So anything that sort of positions itself as being opposed to the institutional mainstream is seen as sort of quite a cool thing. Peter Gay, who's a Yale historian, wrote a book called *The Lure of Heresy*.

And I think it's a very interesting title because he's pointing out the overwhelming longing we have to subvert. And Jesus wants us to recognize false prophets and reject their ideas despite how attractive these ideas might be.

[17:40] Ideas like there is no judgment. God doesn't get angry. There are many ways to God. Christ warns us against these because he's the fruit. The fruit of those messages is destruction.

Again, it's a warning from Jesus. Check your heart. Who are you listening to? So, summary so far. Almost done here. Two paths. There's a narrow path.

There's a wide path. There are people on this wide path who think they're on the narrow one in part because of false prophets. And the result will be Jesus saying to those people, I never knew you. quickly. The last picture Jesus gives us. So, we choose between two paths. We must choose between two foundations.

Verses 24 to 27. So, these are two builders. They build two houses. They're both exactly the same except for the foundation. And a storm comes and hits both the houses.

[18:39] And the house on rock is saved and the house on sand is destroyed. And Jesus explains the picture by saying, the house built on rock is like, is like a life built on me.

Because you notice the passage says, built on the rock. Definite article here. All of our lives are built on something, right? We build them on something. Something we believe is true.

And Jesus is saying, believe that my words are the truest and most stable thing in the world and believe them so much you want to base your life on them. So, if you simply hear but do not do, that's a sandy foundation which would be fine if no storm ever came.

See, when the weather is good and life is easy, the houses stay standing. And it's, I mean, it's so true, right? Every philosophy in the world works when life is easy.

Every philosophy, every religion in the world just go, this is great when life is easy. But a storm is coming, Jesus says, and it's the judgment of God. And only one path or one foundation will keep you from destruction.

[19:46] And that's going to be the foundation of Christ. Christ warns us again, check your heart. What are you basing your life on? A storm's coming. Your house will stand, your house will fall, depending on what you do with Jesus.

As I've said, Sermon on the Mount begins with blessings and it ends by talking about judgment. It ends very, very soberly. And what Christ is doing before us, I'm going to finish here, it's, he presents us with two ways to live.

The way of life, a way of death. Choose well, Christ says. Choose the solid foundation. Choose the narrow way. Choose the harder way.
Choose, choose the gospel adventure. Amen.