

Matthew 7:13-22

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[0 : 00] Tonight we're looking at Matthew chapter 7 verses 13 through 20. I think it'll be up, it may be up on the screen, but it is on page 812 if you're looking in one of the pew Bibles.

We're looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this summer. We are wrapping it up over the next couple weeks. It's starting to come to its conclusion. And this is really the beginning of the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

What we're looking at tonight. And then next week we'll look at the rest of the conclusion. And then the following week we'll finish by looking at the reaction of the crowds.

So, Luke, sorry, Matthew. Matthew chapter 7, starting at verse 13. These are Jesus' words to his disciples and to the crowds. Enter by the narrow gate.

For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction. And those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life.

[1 : 08] And those who find it are few. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing. But inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.

Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit. But the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit. Nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thus, you will recognize them by their fruits. A long time ago, the poet wrote, Two roads diverged here in a wood.

I took the one less traveled by. And it has made all the difference. Many times in life, you come to a crossroads. And there are only two ways to go.

[2 : 08] You can propose. Or you can break up. You can take the job offer. Or you can reject it. You can sign on the dotted line and buy the car.

Or you can pass on the offer. You can choose to pack up and move. Or you can choose to stay here in New Haven. And you can't do both.

You can only do one or the other. Now, many of us do all that we can to avoid these kinds of either-or decisions. My generation, some people call us the millennials, whatever you want to call us, were notorious for postponing commitment.

Wanting to keep all our options perpetually open. At least wanting to keep the door open to future course corrections if we decide we want to change and move a different way.

Not get locked into something that we can't get out of. Now, in some areas of life, there can be good reasons for this. And the technology available to us today allows us to consider some options that were just simply not possible 50 or 100 years ago.

[3 : 20] Like chatting on Skype or calling into work from halfway across the country. But in the passage we're looking at tonight, Jesus challenges our avoidance of commitment.

He says, spiritually speaking, no one is truly neutral. No one is just uncommitted. You can't have it both ways at once.

Jesus says there are ultimately two ways to live. You can live in the kingdom of Jesus, as he's described it in the Sermon on the Mount. Or you can live in the kingdoms of this fallen world.

And you can't be loyal to both kingdoms at the same time. You know, in the ancient world, there was no such thing as dual citizenship. Because if you were loyal to one kingdom, that meant you could not be completely loyal to another kingdom at the same time.

And if you wanted to become a citizen of a new kingdom, you had to leave behind your old citizenship. Jesus gives several contrasts in this passage.

[4 : 29] The narrow gate that few people enter versus the wide gate that many enter. The easy way that leads to destruction versus the hard way that leads to life. The healthy tree that bears good fruit versus the diseased or sick tree that bears bad fruit.

The false prophet, a wolf in sheep's clothing versus the true prophet, a sheep who follows the good shepherd. And all of these are either or contrasts.

Now, as we've seen this summer, if you've been coming here, the Sermon on the Mount is a description of life in Jesus' kingdom of grace. Jesus came into this world to call out a people, to belong to God, and to form them into a kingdom unlike anything that this world has ever seen or known.

And the Sermon on the Mount describes what life looks like when Jesus has called us and brought us into God's kingdom by his grace, by his mercy, by his love that has drawn us in.

And the Sermon on the Mount describes the life that we're meant to live. It's a life characterized by humility. Jesus starts by saying, blessed are the poor in spirit. It's the first thing he says.

[5 : 48] The people who recognize that we have nothing before God, that we're desperately needy, and that only God in his mercy can save us and rescue us.

It's a life characterized by humility. It's a life characterized by being different from the world, being salt and light in the midst of a decaying and corrupt world.

And Jesus says, probably the world will misunderstand you and dislike you and maybe even persecute you. But Jesus says, even when that happens, you are called to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.

Because that's the kind of behavior that reflects my kingdom. So it's a life characterized by humility, by distinctiveness from the world, by intimate trust in God the Father.

We see this especially in chapter 6 of Matthew, the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. And it's, as we saw last week, a life characterized by careful discernment, but not self-righteous judgment.

[6 : 57] Now, many people have responded to the Sermon on the Mount by admiring the ethical ideal that is presented here. You know, many people, even people throughout the world, not simply Christians, but many other people have said, the Sermon on the Mount is the most beautiful piece of ethical teaching ever.

Gandhi greatly admired it and was deeply moved by it. But Jesus said, you know, the response I'm looking for is not just to admire my teaching from a distance, sort of like looking at a beautiful sunset.

You say, wow, isn't that nice? And you sort of sit and bask in it and enjoy it for a little while. And then you go on with your life and you feel a little more peaceful. Right?

But Jesus says, no, I'm not calling you to admire it from a distance. I'm calling you to enter in and to become a citizen of my kingdom and leave behind your former loyalties and become loyal to me above everything else.

And in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which we're starting to look at tonight, Jesus presses the point home. He insists on a decision, a response. He says, I'm not just giving this to you to be like a beautiful sunset that you can look at and walk away and feel a little more peaceful and then sort of goes away after a couple days.

[8 : 19] But I'm calling you to a whole new life, a whole new kingdom. So he says two things tonight. First, he says, enter by the narrow gate. Verse 13 and 14.

If you go to New York City and you want to ride in the subway, you have to enter through a turnstile at almost every station. And only one person at a time can fit.

Right? And I don't know if you've ever tried to, once I was in New York and I was coming back from flying somewhere else and I had a big suitcase. And I was trying to get this suitcase through the turnstile of the New York City subway and it got caught.

It was trouble. I had to figure out how to maneuver it around. But the point is, you can only go one at a time through the gate into the subway.

It's the same thing if you go to a Yankees game. I'm even using a Yankees example. I'm a Red Sox fan, but I'll give you the Yankees example, okay? Even if you go to Yankee Stadium, you can't just blend into the crowd and sort of slide in.

[9 : 26] You have to hand in your ticket to the guard, the ticket person, right? Whatever you call them. I don't know what you call them. Anyway, it's the same thing you go on a plane, right?

You've got to go through security. And there's lots of things that they will not let you bring through security. Jesus says, the way to enter the kingdom of God is through a narrow gate. You can't enter anonymously. You can't just slide in as part of the crowd and have nobody see you. You can't just sort of slip in and be hidden and just make it in somehow like that. Jesus says, you don't get in automatically. You don't get in by walking into a church building. You don't get in by being born into a Christian family. You enter through personally trusting in Jesus. Jesus is the gatekeeper. He's the gate, actually. You enter by going through Him. It's the only way in. You enter by realizing that one day every one of us will face God's judgment. [10:34] And what we need more than anything else is to be right with God. And the way that that can happen is by trusting Jesus and by accepting what He's done.

And when you enter the kingdom of God by trusting Jesus, you must leave some other things behind. They won't fit with you into the kingdom of God. They don't belong in the kingdom of God. Jesus talks about some of these things. He says, entering the narrow gate means leaving behind other people's opinions and our attachments to what other people think of us. It means leaving behind our attachment to worldly possessions. Jesus talked to a rich young man later in the Gospels.

And Jesus said, there's one thing that you're missing. Sell what you have and follow me. And the man walked away very sad. And we never hear of him again.

[11:38] Because he was more attached to his possessions than to Jesus. This week I was talking with someone from Eritrea, which is a country in eastern Africa.

And he's someone who's considering becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and identifying himself as a Christian. And he said, I know Christians back in my country who were physically tortured. They were put in metal storage containers in the middle of the desert when it was 100 degrees. He knows that becoming a Christian is a very serious matter, even a dangerous matter.

He knows that it's not something to be taken lightly, to identify himself as a follower of Christ. You know, sometimes I think in the United States or in parts of the world where Christians aren't going through intense physical persecution, we can forget this.

But Jesus reminds us his way is a hard way. Whether that means facing physical persecution from an oppressive government, or whether it means living in the midst of worldly wealth and privilege and not becoming entangled and drawn into it, or living as salt and light in a nominally Christian culture where lots of people are talking the talk, but not many people are walking the walk.

[13:04] Jesus said, whatever situation you find yourself in, following me is a hard way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way, referring to other things Jesus has taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

He says, to testify to the truth as it is in Jesus, and at the same time to love the enemies of that truth with the infinite love of Jesus Christ is indeed a narrow way.

To believe the promise of Jesus that his followers will inherit the earth and at the same time preferring to be wronged than to do wrong ourselves is indeed a narrow way.

Or to see the weakness and the wrong in other people and at the same time to refrain from judging them and writing them off is indeed a narrow way. The way is unutterably hard and at every moment we are in danger of straying from it.

As we've studied the Sermon on the Mount this summer, I've been struck by how challenging Jesus' demands are. It's hard what he calls us to.

[14:13] It's extremely hard. And Jesus doesn't try to hide that fact. You know, sometimes my tendency is to sort of downplay that and to emphasize encouraging, kind, nice, soft things.

And Jesus says, no, actually, it's important that you know that the way I am calling you to walk is a hard way. But he also says it's a way that is worth it.

He says it's a way that leads to life. To eternal life. And he says the other way it leads to destruction. So Dietrich Bonhoeffer goes on to say this.

He says if we walking the narrow way, if we behold Jesus Christ, if we look to Jesus Christ going on before us step by step, we will not go astray.

He says if we worry about all the dangers that beset us, if we gaze at the road instead of at him who goes before, we are already straying from the path.

[15:21] For Jesus is himself the way. He and he alone is our journey's end. And when we know that, we are able to proceed along the narrow way, through the gate of the cross and on to eternal life.

He's saying the way is hard. But Jesus Christ has gone before us. And Jesus has walked this hard way. And he walked it all the way to the cross.

He lived a life of faithful trust and obedience to God all the way to the end. He walked a harder way. He blazed the trail where there was no trail before.

And all that we do is walk behind him. And Bonhoeffer says just look to him. Because he's the way. And he's eternal life.

He's the destination that we're going for. And the one that makes it all worth it. So that's the first thing Jesus says. Enter by the narrow gate. Second thing, he says beware of false prophets.

[16:29] Verse 15 through 20. Now the basic problem with false prophets false teachers or false leaders is that they don't tell you about the narrow gate and they don't walk in the hard way.

Jesus says they come in sheep's clothing. In other words, they appear and claim to be Christian teachers following Jesus, the good shepherd. But in reality, he says, on the inside, they're ravenous wolves.

They're not serving Christ and advancing his kingdom, but ultimately, they're serving their own interests and building a different kingdom. And Jesus says, be careful. False prophets are dangerous because they're deceptive.

So he says, first, they don't tell you about the narrow gate. The Old Testament talks quite a bit about false prophets, especially if you read the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was dealing with a lot of false prophets in his day. And in his day, the people of Jerusalem had walked away from God. They were committed to idols.

[17:38] They were perpetuating injustice in their society. They were disobeying God's commands. And the false prophets in that day basically said, everything's just going to be all right.

Don't worry. Peace, peace. Nothing bad will happen to you. God will protect you. And Jeremiah said, that's a false comfort.

The false prophets are saying, peace, peace. But there isn't any peace. They're trying to sweep reality under the rug.

He says, look, you're following idols. You're mistreating each other. You're oppressing the poor. You're disobeying God's commands. You're ignoring his word.

It's not okay. Everything's not going to be okay for you. And all those nice sounding words won't help you when God's judgment comes to visit you one day.

[18:43] And they'll disappear really fast. And it happened. People were taken away into exile in Babylon. Their city was conquered and destroyed.

And then after they were taken to Babylon, there were some more false prophets. And those other false prophets said, oh, you know what? This isn't going to last very long. God's going to bring you home soon. He's going to fix it all and life will be easy for you again and you can go home.

And Jeremiah said, oh no, that's not what God's doing here. You're going to be here for 70 years. It's going to be a long time. It's going to be a long road because God has a lot to teach you.

But God also has good plans for you even while you're in exile. You see, the problem with false prophets is not just that they sometimes tell things that are outright lies.

It's that they don't tell the whole truth. A false prophet might only talk about God's love and never about God's holiness or God's righteous judgment.

[19:46] Or they might be always comforting and reassuring. But always vague and never clear about anything. But by never mentioning some parts of God's truth, they distort the whole picture.

They give false comforts and false hopes that aren't rooted in God's character and God's will. And the New Testament is also full of warnings against false prophets. Paul said in Acts 20, he said, after I leave, there will be fierce wolves who will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

People will arise speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. He says, therefore, be alert. Beware. Don't be deceived. False prophets don't tell you about the narrow gate.

They say, you can go on doing whatever you want to do and everything will be all right. And Jesus says, beware because that teaching will only harm you in the end.

Second, Jesus says, these false prophets don't walk the hard way. He says twice, verse 16 and verse 20, he says, you'll recognize them by their fruits. You might say, what does that mean?

[20:59] What are the fruits that we should look for? Well, there are three, at least. First, character. Galatians chapter 5 talks about the fruit of the Spirit.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. That's the character of Jesus Christ himself.

And it's the mark of a true believer and a faithful Christian teacher. Jesus says, false prophets might look good on the outside, but on the inside, they're divisive, they're angry and bitter, they're selfish. They might show favoritism, they might abuse the message of forgiveness into license. They might make themselves the center instead of making Jesus the center.

So, their character is the first aspect. Second, their words. Jesus says, every healthy tree bears good fruit, every, the diseased tree bears bad fruit. And later on in Matthew chapter 12, Jesus uses the same image of a tree and its fruit to talk about our heart and our words.

[22 : 18] He said, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. And so, a part of how we can tell, a part of how we can beware of false prophets is by listening carefully to people's words.

Looking at their character, listening to their words. Do their words line up with what Jesus says or not? One of the marks of a faithful teacher is their words align with the words of Jesus.

So, character, words, and third influence. Paul said in 2 Timothy, he says, false teaching eats its way like gangrene, like an infection.

He says, it promotes ungodliness, it causes bitter divisions, and upsets people's faith. But true doctrine is healthy teaching. It produces godliness, it promotes unity, and it strengthens the faith of God's people.

In Acts, it says, many times the word of the Lord grew and multiplied. It spread out, and it went deep and bore fruit for God's glory. So, character, teaching, influence.

[23 : 30] Those are three fruits that we can look at, three aspects of the fruit that Jesus is talking about here. So, let me conclude by saying, how do we apply this teaching?

First, Jesus is saying, be discerning. There are some preachers and teachers on TV, on the internet, in churches, writing popular books, who don't measure up to these standards in their character, in their words, and in their influence.

And Jesus says, be careful. They can be deceptive because they have good appearances. They might be a wonderful public speaker.

They might have an attractive personality. They might be handsome or beautiful. But Jesus says, look at their character, look at their words, look at their influence, be discerning.

Don't immediately attach yourself to someone who claims to be a Christian teacher without looking carefully at those things. Jesus says, don't be naive.

[24 : 42] You can't assume that just because somebody says, I'm a Christian and I love Jesus, that they're a true follower of Christ.

He says, be careful. Second, be patient. The danger here, for some of us at least, is that you may be tempted to respond to this passage by becoming extremely suspicious and excessively critical of everyone, probably everyone except yourself.

And you're always looking for a reason to decide that someone is a false teacher or a fake Christian and write them off. Do you find a question O Snoop with her help her and she will get her