

“Upon Closer Inspection” Matthew 7:13-23
Wednesday 9/4/19 – Jeff Lyle

Life for all of us is a summary of our choices and the results which come from those choices. We cannot control everything, but we can and must be proactively engaged in deciding what we will do without lives. The Christian life is no different in that all Jesus-followers make daily choices based on their identity in Christ and the level to which they are committed to follow Him by faith. Some would overly simplify the Christian life with clichés like, "Let go and let God!" Yet, there is a clear principle found in the bible that Christians must be prayerful, patient, discerning and wise when deciding how to live their lives. Ultimately, our lives are a reflection of what we think about Jesus, and that is not going to be revealed in excellence if we are casual. Many things in the believer's life requires closer inspection. In this message, Jesus calls for our careful consideration in four distinct areas when choosing our own paths during this life. A quick glance will not lead us down the right pathway. We need to pay close attention to who we are, what we believe, who we are following and where we are heading.

I. Two Pathways to Consider (13-14)

A. Jesus releases an invitation to life (13a) – “Enter by the narrow gate...”

B. Jesus describes the pathway to destruction (13b) – “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.”

C. Jesus details the pathway of eternal life (14) – “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

As He nears the very end of His longest recorded sermon, Jesus begins to make firm statements about two eternal destinations. Though wildly unpopular today, the teaching of Scripture is that there are only two eternal destinations: Heaven with God or Hell apart from Him. Jesus is now calling His audience (and us) to closely inspect our own eternal destinations. He calls us all by way of a commanding invitation to follow Him through the narrow gate onto the path of life. He uses language that indicate that it is a tight fit, signifying that we cannot bring everything with us if we choose to follow Him. The gate is simply too narrow for us to enter it with our pride, our self-reliance, our rebellion or our sins. We have to approach the narrow gate in a full surrender to the King of kings. Contrary to modern teaching, Jesus says that the way of those who follow Him is hard. Receiving eternal life is easy - it is accomplished only through our faith in Jesus' work on the cross. Following Him as we work out our salvation, however, is described by Jesus as being hard. It requires a dying to our own selves. We deny our flesh. We refuse the priorities and philosophies of this world system. We engage in warfare with Satan and his demons. We live, as He taught earlier, in a poverty of spirit that manifests in spiritual hunger after righteousness. We live as those who are meek. We love and pray for our enemies.

We pick up our own cross daily and follow Jesus wherever He leads us. This is no easy task! We are constrained as we enter through the narrow gate and we are pressed as we learn to live as Jesus lived. Jesus said that only a few find this pathway to eternal life. Most people are lost, lived lost and die lost. Compared to the masses that enter Hell for eternity, only a few enter

into glory. Mark it down: most people we see each day have not yet found the narrow gate and hard path of eternal life. Most of them never will.

Conversely, Jesus teaches that the gate to destruction is wide and accommodating. Anybody can walk through it and nothing is required of them. They simply need to remain as they are, independent of Jesus and living according to their own desires. Jesus says that that kind of life is easy compared to the life of the believer. Hell does not fight the unsaved person on the pathway to destruction. They can bring their pride, their selfishness, their lusts, their arrogance, and all of their sins. This pathway receives them as they are and allows them to walk upon it with no expectation of ever changing. Jesus says that many people find this path. They don't even have to look for it because it is the one that they are placed upon in the very nature. Those who never come to Jesus by faith never come off the path to destruction. Not all people along this path are overt sinners. No, many who enter this gate and walk this path are moral and religious as we will shortly see.

II. Two Leaders to Consider (15)

A. Their existence - "Beware of false prophets..."

B. Their deception - "...who come to you in sheep's clothing..."

C. Their appetite - "...but inwardly are ravenous wolves." They view the sheep as consumables

Now, Jesus reveals how so many people might actually end up on the path to destruction. His focus is not on those people who are overtly sinful, living in the world and for the world. Most of the people in his original audience would not have fit that description. They were pious, culturally religious people who were living in varying degrees of desire for the Jewish Messiah to come. The Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes represented the religious leaders of that day, and some of them were also listening to Jesus' message on the hillside. These men had been perpetuating a presentation of Judaism that was no longer committed to the Law of God. They had added so many manmade traditions and rules that the average Jew could have little hope of ever living at a level that would please God. The Law of God had been distorted and very few were experiencing the love and liberty that God wanted for them. Jesus gives all the people a warning and calls them to take a closer inspection upon those who were preaching to them and leading them. While His statements do not necessarily refer to all the religious leaders (or ONLY the religious leaders), the people still needed to practice discernment about who was leading them. False prophets were mentioned by Jesus. These would have been men who claimed to speak on behalf of God. God did not send these men, nor would He endorse them. Jesus says that they will look like authentic sheep in God's flock - they would say the right things at times, they would know the proper doctrines, they would seem harmless and helpful to the people. Yet, Jesus warns, these false prophets were intentionally deceptive. Their entire agenda was to devour the true flock of God like a ravenous wolf would tear into a lamb. The wolves viewed the sheep as being consumable - they would devour their money, their bodies, their faith and, if successful through their deceitful ways, even the very souls of those who followed them. Jesus is telling the people to closely inspect their leaders.

III. Two Trees to Consider (16b-20)

A. Jesus gives us a principle (16-17) - “You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.”

B. Jesus gives us a proclamation (18) - “A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”

Proverbs 20:11 – “Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright.”

C. Jesus gives us a promise (19) - “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

D. Jesus gives us perception (20) - “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

Repeatedly in verses 16-20, Jesus is telling His audience to not only listen to what comes out of leaders' mouths, but to take the time to witness how they live. He compares them to trees producing fruit. A tree that is healthy will not perpetually bring forth rotten fruit. Only sick and dying trees produce consistently bad fruit, or no fruit at all. Those kinds of trees will be examined by the gardener for a while and then the gardener will determine that the whole tree is bad. The tree will then be cut down, uprooted and burned. Jesus also says dogmatically that every healthy tree will bring forth good fruit. He is speaking of a leader (and all other believers) whose life matches what they say that they believe. If there is a good root (salvation), there will be healthy, consistent fruit (works). It is a kingdom impossibility, according to Jesus, to be truly planted and rooted in Him but not bring forth a lifestyle that evidences that you have been made new. No fruit or bad fruit = no root. When a person declares that they represent Jesus Christ, then their lives will evidence that reality upon closer inspection.

IV. Two Trusts to Consider (21-23)

A. Counterfeit faith often includes a casual confession (21a) - ““Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven...”

B. Counterfeit faith dismisses obedience to God (21b) - “...but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.”

C. Counterfeit faith characterizes many involved in God's work (22) - “On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’”

D. Counterfeit faith is absent of relationship with Christ (23a) - “And then will I declare to them, I never knew you...”

E. Counterfeit faith results in eternal separation from God (23) - “...depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’...”

Ultimately, this may be the most frightening passage in all of the New Testament. Jesus declares here that, in the final judgment, there will be scores of religious people who knew His name, preached His word, performed exorcisms, and did other impressive works...yet had never been saved. He says that He never knew these people. This simply means that He had no relationship with them. Everything they did in His name was counterfeit upon closer inspection. Ultimately, the mark that Jesus says is the evidence that they did not have relationship with Him is found in the fact that they did not do the will of the Father (vs. 21), and that they engaged in lawless (sinful) deeds on a regular basis (vs. 23). For all of us, there should be a moment where we decide here to examine ourselves to see if we are truly in relationship with Jesus (2 Cor. 13:5). Jesus said that many will be shocked on that day of judgment after their death. They will learn that their casual Christianity and religious works were unworthy of salvation. Their hearts were never fully surrendered. They didn't truly know Jesus. They did many things for God, but they did not do the things that God willed for them because they never met Him to learn His voice. While we do not want Christians to live in fearful doubt of their salvation, we do want to exhort one another not to be flippant or casual. We should not doubt our salvation...but we should all consider it with closer inspection.