

THREE CHOICES FOR THE FUTURE
Christ's Keys for Successful Living
Matthew 7:13-29
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This is the ninth and last from our series in the Lord's teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 7:13-29. Our focus is upon three choices for the future.

The Sermon on the Mount reveals the kind of kingdom the Lord wants to put within us. Too often when we think of the word "kingdom" we think of something external. Something political. Something geographical. Jesus however says the kingdom of God is within you. The kingdom is where the king rules, where he reigns. The Sermon on the Mount therefore reflects the lifestyle that the king wants to put with us – his will, his reign, he wants to implant.

To determine whether or not the kingdom is moving into us we may overview the whole Sermon on the Mount through a series of questions. What kind of character will you have? The beatitudes seek to answer that. What will be your influence? Jesus says let it be salt and light. How will you succeed with your relationships? Jesus gives us a whole pattern for an inner righteousness that is greater than an external righteousness. Will you be a person of spiritual discipline? The Lord points us to a pattern of right giving and right praying and right fasting. How will you handle stress and anxiety? Is your outlook on life discerning or judgmental?

All of these are the issues that relate to the kingdom in this Sermon on the Mount. Our answer to these questions determines to what extent the kingdom is moving in us. There are many persons who have come to Jesus Christ and who have come into his kingdom but the kingdom has not really come in a great way into them. It's possible to be in the kingdom but the kingdom to not yet dwell richly and deeply in us. So the Lord gives us this teaching so his kingdom might move into us. Obviously our salvation does not depend upon us moving into the kingdom as much as the kingdom moving into us through God's grace and through his love.

As Jesus closes this sermon like a good preacher he is concerned to bring people to a decision. It's not enough to simply have shared the information of the kingdom. He now goes for the altar call. For the response. He does this through telling some stories, which present three choices for the future. It is after all through the use of stories we are most emotionally stirred and that our volition is awakened to make some kind of a commitment. So the Lord, the master preacher, closes in a way that calls us to make a decision over what we will do with his teaching.

He uses three illustrations. Three choices.

The first illustration has to do with the two travelers. It is found in verses 13-14. *"Enter through the narrow gate for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life. And only a few find it."* Here the Lord talks to us about the two travelers on the road to life. One takes the wide gate leading to the wide road. The other takes the narrow gate leading to the narrow road. One finds destruction and the other finds life.

I might add that the destruction is not simply to be thought of in terms of hell fire. The destruction also stands for the person who ignores the Lord's teaching is destroyed psychologically and spiritually because to stray from his teaching is to stray from wholeness. It

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is very clear that the narrow gate that Jesus refers to is himself and his teaching. John 10:9 Jesus declares *“I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.”* And he again says in John 14:6 *“I am the way. The truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.”* Jesus' teaching is a very narrow teaching. He says, You will never know God, you will never know salvation, you will never know eternal life unless you come through him. Many people disagree with that teaching. Many divide up on Christ at that point. But those are his words. I am the gate.

How tragic it is to have never entered life through Jesus. It is Jesus himself who said, *“Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it.”*

The gate is narrow. Some people think that because the gate is narrow it's all dullsville. You come to Christ through such a narrow gate it must be dullsville. I would remind you that the gate at Disneyland is also narrow. But there is a wonderful kingdom of fun inside once you get past the turnstile. The gate is narrow for two reasons. It's narrow because there is no entrance except through Jesus. And it's narrow because you must come one by one. You must make that decision yourself. It's not a matter of your family. It's not matter of your friends. It's not a matter of the people you hang out with. It is individual, personal. You go through it one at a time.

The gate is narrow. The road is also narrow. While the gate describes entrance into the Christian life the word “road” describes the walk of Christ's disciple. The word “narrow” literally means hard. Or hemmed in. It is a term used to describe a road, which ascends up a mountain gorge. We're thinking of a non-paved road in ancient times when those roads were hand dug. As the road ascends up the mountain it gets narrower and narrower as it comes near the top. It's a straight road. It's a narrow road. But the beauty of the view when you've taken the pains to climb the top! That's what the Lord is saying about his road. It is the way of disciple. The way of the Sermon on the Mount is not the way of an undisciplined life. It is a straight road but oh, the view as you step into Christ's kingdom. The toil of the climb is nothing compared to the grandeur of the vista when we are at the top.

Through the Sermon on the Mount Jesus lays down difficult terms. The pathway of a disciple. He says few will choose to live with such discipline. Yet we know that all great attainments are only accomplished by the disciplined. The end of the narrow road is life. Jesus, by the way, at the beginning, states both the cost and the reward. Satan gives a false cost and promises a false reward. That's why he's called the deceiver. But the Lord tells you the cost at the beginning and he tells you the reward at the end. He asks you, have you entered the narrow gate? Are you traveling the narrow road? The way of commitment, the way of discipline in his kingdom?

The second choice that the Lord provides us in story form is the story of the two trees. Verses 15-23 an extended teaching that relates trees to false prophets and false lifestyles. Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. *“Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles. Likewise every good tree bears good fruit. But a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. But only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, lord! Did we*

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not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers.'"

Here the Lord is specifically warning us to discern between true and false prophets. Discern in ourselves the difference between a true and false lifestyle. A prophet is a person who brings a message from God. A false prophet therefore brings a message other than from God. Either from himself, from some other person, or from Satan. How do we determine a false prophet from a true prophet? That's what the Lord is concerned because there are many people going to come after him teaching. Do we determine it by external appearance? The Lord says no. Spiritual fervency? No. How do we determine it? We determine it because the true prophet is on the narrow road of discipline, commitment and obedience to God. Where the false prophet is on the wide road of what seems pleasing to himself. Jesus states that externally the false prophet may appear to be a sheep but inwardly he is a ravenous wolf. He therefore warns us to look out for leaders who appear to be godly but all the while are making demands upon us to enhance their own lifestyle. Shepherds feed the sheep and wolves eat them.

A false prophet may manifest spiritual fervency. "Lord, Lord," falls easily from the false prophet's lips. They know how to employ religious language to use the right coaxing tone of voice to sound very authentic and spiritual. False prophets, Jesus said, may even exhibit great spiritual power. They may not only preach or prophesy but cast out demons and do miracles. People who claim to be spirit filled can be false prophets. People who do mighty acts in his name can be false prophets. If that's what he's saying, how do we know. How do we tell?

He says about these false charismatic prophets that they are evil doers. The last word in verse 23, the word "evil doer" doesn't quite do justice to the concept of what the Lord is teaching. Literally in the Greek it means "lawless." The same word used to describe the antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. These are people who are lawless. How would they be lawless? How can this be? How can a person be gifted with a miracle ministry and be a person of lawlessness?

It's rather easy. Such a person begins to feel that their special gifts entitle them to be exempt from the lifestyle, the morality and the character that are in ordinary believes. They're used of God so they're something special. They're above the law. They don't have to report to anyone. What gifts they have would bring in the dollars, attract the crowds, allow them to live an opulent and even an ungodly lifestyle. They forsake the law of Christ. Therefore the Lord says they are lawless. They fleece widows that they might live in palaces. They lay hands on the sick but forsake the law of marriage to chuck their first wife to marry a young woman more pleasing to themselves. They go to a foreign country asking people to raise their hands ostensibly to receive a book and then send the photograph home and tell you in their slick paper magazines that thousands have come to Christ at the altar call time. False prophets.

Jesus tells us that we are to be perceptive between the two. And not to be caught up in the kingdom of God simply on the basis on the works that a person is doing. But to look at the character, the lifestyle, the discipline, the openness, the honesty and the vulnerability. I don't mean to paint with a brush every single person who has a ministry that is involved with miracles or who has fund raising or direct mail campaigns or the like. But there is enough happening in the body of Christ today that one wants to put clothespin on his nose and keep himself from the stink that results from some of what is going on that is ostensibly passed off to a gullible Christian public.

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The story of the two trees is Jesus' way of telling us that a genuine disciple, a genuine prophet will at in a way consistent with gospel lifestyle. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. Jesus is telling us that he is far more concerned about our own lives with what we are becoming than what we are doing. He is warning us not to judge our spirituality by the gifts we possess but by the character and the fruit we grow.

That's as hard for me as for anyone because the Lord has gifted me with the teaching gift. Very easily I could assume and you could assume that I'm spiritual because I have the gift of teaching. But the Lord chucks that whole thing as a judgment aside and says, What about the character?

I've found that people can stray from the Lord and still keep their gifts. Have you discovered that? Even miracle gifts, teaching gifts, people can inwardly stray from the Lord and still have the gift. So the Lord is telling us in very stern words here that we are to have a lifestyle that comes consistently into his kingdom and to share our belief and behavior by his words. We're to take his word seriously that we might be good trees bearing good fruit. You can see how heavy the message of Jesus gets as he brings it to a close. He is not an idealist unaware person with his head in the clouds assuming that everybody's going to hear him and fall over and from then after keep his teaching. He is aware of the dangers even within his body.

The third choice for the future that Jesus gives to us not only the choice of which traveler we would be or which tree we would be but he gives us a choice of two builders. *“Therefore anyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house on the rock. The rain came down. The streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house. Yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash.”* When Jesus had finished these things the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teacher of the law.”

These two builders differed from one another in their beginning and in their ending. Someone has said that the story of the two travelers, the two trees, and the two builders reveal the areas of life where we are tested as a disciple. In the first story, the story of the two travelers, our obedience is tested. Will we enter the narrow gate? In the second story, the story of the two trees, we're tested by deception. Will we commit ourselves unreservedly to keeping his word? Will we recognize the good fruit and seek it in ourselves and in others. And in the third story we are tested by adversity.

Indeed this last story in the Sermon on the Mount is a pointed promise that each of the Lord's disciples will face the same difficulties that face the populace as a whole. The disciple is not exempt from the kinds of storms and struggles that face the non-Christian, the person outside the kingdom.

It's been said, the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is not that the non-Christian has problems and the Christian does not. The Christian also faces sickness, financial reverses, death, and yes, auto accidents. The real difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is that the Christian has Christ with him in the midst of his problems.

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Jesus notes in his story that there are a great many similarities that appear between these two builders. Both appear to have the same desire to build a house. People have the same desire for the good life. Both lived in the same general location. The same weather condition prevailed. Both houses appeared similar. At an initial glance you couldn't tell that there was a difference between them from the outside. Both houses experienced the same storm – the rain came down from above, the floods came up from beneath, and the winds blew against it. So it was tested three dimensionally. The critical difference is that one house withstood the storm? Why did it stand the storm? Because the builder had taken the time to build upon rock. He had taken time to look at his foundation.

Now we connect this story to the whole sermon. It relates to the whole sermon. Jesus is saying if you will take what I'm telling you and you put it in your life and let the kingdom move into you then you will build upon rock. But if you ignore what I am saying, if you build your life without it you will build upon sand. When the storm hits you, you too will collapse. He's now speaking not only of reverses that occur over the course of a lifetime but he's speaking of a final great storm when our house caves in to the onslaught of death. He is saying even in that moment you will find that you will stand if you take me, if you enter through the narrow gate, if you walk the narrow road. You will stand. You will stand every test. You will come through triumphantly.

When Jesus finished this sermon the crowds were amazed. Some sermons only produce a yawn. At least this one produced amazement. Most preachers would have been glad that everybody was amazed. But Jesus had his feet more on the ground. It's almost as though amazement isn't the word that was wanted here. It's one thing to be amazed. It's another thing to obey. I think Matthew and the Lord both would have been much more content had they been able to say, and the crowds went out and did what he taught. Not only were amazed but obeyed.

We are to let the word of the Lord of course amaze us but more importantly than amazing us it is designed to bring us into change. Let this word of the Lord dwell in us richly.

Our Father, we come now the closing moment of this message and of this worship service. Each of us have an opportunity to look at the road we are on, to look back and see if we've entered the narrow gate. To look at the tree and the fruit that our life is bearing and determine whether or not we are rooted and fixed in you. To look at the foundation, our house of life is being built upon. To make sure that it's built upon your person and your word. Cause our hearts, Lord, to cleave to you so that what we do is built upon rock. That in every dangerous and trying day we may have for ourselves the sure foundation of your life. For those in this meeting today going through an intense time of shaking in their life when it seems like everything that can be shaken is being shaken. May they look to you today, Lord, not in fear but with confidence that you are the rock and our lives will hold together if they are built upon you. For those persons in here, Lord, that have not yet committed themselves to you may this be a day when they will enter through the narrow gate and place their life upon the solid rock of you. For there is no salvation in anyone else given unto men among heaven whereby we must be saved. We depend and rely upon you. Thank you, Lord, for this word of yours through this Sermon on the Mount which teaches us how your kingdom moves into our lives. We pray anew, Thy kingdom come, in Jesus name. Amen.