

Knowing God — Matthew 7:21-23

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Prayer

About a month ago, my daughter Jenni and I were assembling some new outdoor furniture. Nothing too complicated but complex enough to require instructions to know which sized bolt to use where and when to include a washer or a locking nut. After doing a couple, Jenni left to run an errand, and I figured I could easily do the remaining one solo. I grabbed the bolts and the Allen wrench and the frame parts and got to work. Not until 2/3 of the way through the assembly did I realize I was missing 4 longer bolts and had 4 shorter bolts with no clear purpose. At that moment, it became clear that following my memory of the directions was not the same as actually following the directions. And it left me with a choice, either keep going and make the best of a bad situation or reverse course, disassemble whatever I had did wrong and start again, this time paying much closer attention to the instructions provided.

I share this story for a few reasons. First, there is a partially written sermon here on my iPad that I intended to use to walk us through the closing verses of the Sermon on the Mount. A couple of weeks ago after reading a devotional by Paul Tripp, I became convinced by the Holy Spirit that this sermon was headed down the wrong path. Not that the sermon was wrong or bad, but my goal was wrong. My heart was wrong. The Spirit convicted me that I was living out some of the behaviors Jesus sharply criticizes in his sermon. So, just like my furniture assembly project, I had two choices. Plow ahead, make the best of a less-than-ideal sermon or start over, letting the Spirit more closely guide both my words and my heart.

Another reason for sharing my furniture story is because that sort of redirect is what Jesus is trying to convey at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. In our primary text he is stressing the heart underlying our pursuit of him. But he also uses the imagery of the two paths, and the two trees and the two foundations. He is calling us to take a closer look at our spiritual lives. In fact, this is one of the over arching themes of the entire Sermon on the Mount: is our heart really in our pursuit of Jesus? Or are we just playing a game?

The final reason that I want to have my experience in front of us all is because we each face the seductive power of works. Many in this room serve. We are grateful for that service both

to Christ and to us. But why do you serve? Really. Honestly. Deep in your soul. Many of you give financially. Thank you for your generosity to give back to God what is already his and to support his work. But why do you give? Really. Honestly. Deep in your soul.

I am convinced that even though we talk a lot about grace, we are driven by works more than we want to admit. This was at the heart of my conviction to restart my sermon. My focus was on the pursuit of Christ rather than on the Christ whom you and I should be pursuing.

To that end, our text does an amazing job of awakening us to this struggle. We all face it in one way or another. Please look at it with me again: **Matthew 7:21-23** “**Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’**”

This is a hard passage of scripture. It is not my intent to answer every nuance or question this passage may raise. However, in the flow of the Sermon on the Mount, here is what Jesus is trying to make abundantly clear: our works, however good and plentiful they are, can never save us. Let me say that again so that it sinks in from our ears to our brain and from our heads to our hearts. Our works, however good and plentiful they are, can never save us.

For a church as immersed in God’s word as LEFC is, I understand this may seem like a very basic statement. I realize 95% or more in this room would agree with me intellectually. But my conviction from God’s word, plus my own personal experience and my discussions with more than a few of you is that works righteousness is always pulling at us. It is like the slow erosion of the bluffs around us. Each day, imperceptibly the wind and the rain, the sun and frost eat away at them. They are slowly becoming something different than they were at the beginning. The same is true for us if we are not continually called back to the grace of God and the mercy of Christ.

Look with me at Jesus’ critique of the Ephesian church: **Revelation 2:2-4** “**I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**”

What was the issue in this church? Were they slackers? Had they jumped deeply into heresy? Had they abandoned their faith? No, none of these things. Instead, they had lost the heartbeat of why they served and why they endured and why they had stayed pure. Dare I say it: their pursuit of God became more important than God himself.

Consider what Jesus is saying in Matthew. There will be people, presumably at the judgement seat, expecting to get into heaven with a spiritual resume that would knock your socks off. Prophecy? Miracles? Mighty works? Who among us wouldn't want even one of those to be our experience? But what is the verdict of the sovereign Judge of the universe? Depart from me.

Depart from me? Isn't serving Jesus the point of our salvation? Aren't we called to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we've received? Weren't we created for good works that God has prepared that we might walk in them? Depart from me? Why?

Listen carefully to Jesus' response to this question very carefully: "Depart from me for I never knew you" I never knew you. I never knew you. Let that sink in. As Jesus is summing up his own sermon, he wants his disciples and those around them as well to know that the kingdom of God is not like anything here on earth. Jesus is flipping everything on its head. Reversing course. Upside down.

Every religion, every society, every industry, every sports team, every anything on this earth has at least one core element the same. Do and you're in. Think about it. Why was Jesus so critical of the Pharisees? Mt 23 is a scathing indictment of their practices, but here is just one verse. **Matthew 23:4 "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger."** Do and you're in.

So, if doing is not the answer, what is? Candidly it is so simple, its hard. It is knowing and loving and trusting Jesus. Full stop. Jesus said it most succinctly in **John 6:29 "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."** And in **Mark 8:36 "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"**

Hopefully, we can all agree that the good news that Jesus offers us is simple. But here is why I also say it is hard. We are all people of the "yes, but". I will give you a simple example. Recently, Sally and I were looking to switch cell phone providers. Most were priced about the same as the carrier we had, so no switch was made. Then we found one that was significantly lower. What was our (or at least my) first reaction? "Yes, but what about their coverage area?" I was looking for the hole, the flaw, the catch. We do this all the time. Including with Jesus and his promises.

During Christmas break in 1983, I was in Florida with the UW-L swim team at a training camp. One of my teammates shared the gospel with me and invited me to an FCA event. I did not respond to that gospel invitation. Neither did I go to the FCA event. Why? Because what was placed in front of me was too easy and too simple. And if we are honest with ourselves, that is where many of us live right now. We are stuck because we are trying to add to what Christ has already accomplished. We are in danger of becoming like the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14.

So, what is the path forward? It really comes down to this: We must flip our understanding of things from what the world would teach us. We must begin living in God's upside-down kingdom. And as the spiritual giant Yoda has said: "We must unlearn what we have learned." We need to disassemble our furniture and start over.

Fortunately for us, Jesus gives us some short parables here at the end of the Sermon on the Mount to visualize this. As with most parables, they are illustrative and not specific action points. And that is a good thing. Here's why. If the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to show that we need to refocus our hearts on God and have our obedience not be a robotic following of a set of rules but rather a grace-driven desire to love Christ through our obedience, then the last thing we need is 10 steps to holy living.

Instead, Jesus wisely paints three pictures for us. The first is in **Matthew 7:13-14** "**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, and those who find it are few.**" Jesus' point? He is the only way to life: the narrow gate. And following him in this world will not be easy: the hard path. Even a cursory reading of the Sermon on the Mount shows this to be true. Blessed are the poor and the meek and the persecuted. Put away anger and lust and the desire to crush your enemy and to claim your rights, seek heavenly treasures not earthly ones, do not worry about daily necessities and do not judge those around you until you have put significantly more scrutiny on your own life. A walk in the park, right?

But before we all become super discouraged consider the alternative. While the narrow gate and hard path lead to life, there is an easy road with none of the obstacles and challenges we face as believers. Spend your time and money however you want. Do what ever makes you feel good. Build your own kingdom and create your own reward. Who wouldn't sign up for that? Oh, so many do! And the result? Destruction! But don't take my word for it. Hear the word of the Preacher from **Ecclesiastes 1:14** **I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.** In other words, I can spend my life chasing and achieving everything and, in the end, I will have nothing.

There is one more encouragement here. The same Jesus who is emphatic that the road to life is narrow and hard also said this. **Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”**

Recently someone asked me how can the road be both hard and easy at the same time? By the way, that is a great question because it looks to synthesize the Bible and presumes there are no contradictions. The answer is that it really can be both at the same time. Take an example from Sally and my life. We have two children who have slid into a nominal sort of belief, who don't go to church, who are not really pursuing Christ and who are resistant to spiritual conversations. This is hard on both of us. We are praying and pleading with God to bring them back into a strong relationship with him. We agonize over what to say and how to say it with the hope that the Spirit will use us to ignite the spark of faith in their lives. This is hard faith.

But we trust God. We pray knowing God loves them and will do what is best for them. We speak knowing no words are wasted as they are offered in faith and flow from the infallible word of God. And we rest in the reality that Christ knows each of his sheep and no one can snatch them out of his hand. This makes trusting and following easy.

But entering through the narrow gate and walking the hard path is not the only picture Jesus gives. He also states in **Matthew 7:17-18 “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.”**

Even though Jesus' immediate warning is for his followers to be looking for false prophets, these verses also apply to us. In Luke's version of a very similar sermon, Jesus says this **Luke 6:45 “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”**

So, what is Jesus saying? It's very much in alignment with **Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.** We are called by God, crafted by his hand to do the works he has set before us. More than that. Jesus states we will be known by our fruit. **Matthew 7:20 “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”**

If you are tracking Jesus' thinking here, you will see he is balancing us on a tight rope. In the later half of Mt 5 and the beginning of Mt 6 he raises the bar both on our conduct and our obedience. And here as he sums up his message with his call to bear the fruit we are

created to bear. But the warning we started with remains. We cannot let our works out strip the one we are working for. Paul would say: expend your life for the gospel and for all whom God is calling to follow Jesus. He would say build with gold and silver and precious stones. He would say be ready to be poured out as a drink offering. But he would also say, To live is Christ and to die is gain and all that we have is rubbish and refuse compared to knowing Christ and being found in him.

There is one more picture Jesus paints for us and it is how he ends this majestic Sermon. I want to read it in its entirety. **Matthew 7:24-27 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”**

If you grew up in the church or if you’ve been around for a while, you have probably read this passage and are familiar with its imagery. But that familiarity can cause us to not hear what Jesus is actually saying. Or worse yet presume he is saying something entirely different.

First here is what Jesus is not saying: “I am your sure foundation therefore go out and do what seems best to you as long as I am the rock on which you build.” Do you see the subtle error in that statement? Jesus is not simply a launch pad into a life that we determine. How many times do we pray, “Jesus here’s what I need”? Or we make a decision, big or small and we ask Jesus to bless it. But how often are we like Moses **Exodus 33:15 “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.”**

But Jesus does have a strong point to make. If we could look back at the entire Sermon on the Mount, we would see the daunting task in front of us. We cannot do this alone. We cannot even begin it alone. That is why Jesus calls us to prayer and desperate dependence. Mt 5:6, Mt 6:9-13, Mt 6:33, Mt 7:7-8. But that is not all Jesus calls us to. He calls us to hear his words and what? Put them into practice. To use his own metaphor, we are to build.

Build what you might ask. That’s a fair question, but Jesus is characteristically ambiguous. Why? Because how I put his words into practice will be different than for most of you. I may be ensnared by pride while you are trapped in anxiety and someone else is wrestling with greed and still another with judgementalism. But I can safely say this: none of us are where we want to be. None of us are where we need to be. We are each on a journey with Jesus.

And here's where this final mini parable hits home. What are you actually building on? Are you building on what you read on-line? Are you building on what an "expert" has told you? Are you building on the sense that your life is ok and not a train wreck like others you may know? Are you building on your conviction that you are right on some moral or political issue? Are you building on your works for God? Or are you building on the only thing that is 100% true 100% of the time? Jesus and his word.

Brothers, sisters, Jesus' call to us is serious. I dare say it is non-negotiable. And to truly follow him may take a reset in our lives. Much like I had to restart my furniture assembly and this sermon, Jesus may be calling us to such a reset and a return to our first love.

Is this a challenge? Absolutely. Will it be hard work? The Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that it is. But please hear this: it is Jesus who goes with us. It is Jesus who works in us. It is Jesus who intercedes for us. It is Jesus who has secured for us an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading and is kept in heaven for us. And it is Jesus who will one day welcome us into his eternal kingdom.

So, receive this encouragement from the author of Hebrews as we close: **Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Prayer