

STAYING ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

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Scripture: Matthew 7:13-23

We have been looking at chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's gospel. The first week, we actually looked at the end of ch. 7; at the two builders and the equation between them. And drew from it the fact that to be on solid ground – when the winds blow, when the rains come, when the floods rise, for our house to be stable, we need to be doers. In other words, we don't just have to hear the words of Jesus, but we need to do what He said.

Last week we looked at the three chapters known as the Sermon on the Mount. We looked at the Beatitudes as a kind of introduction, then we looked at the conclusion which was the builders, and then the whole midsection which was the meat of the Sermon on the Mount. We asked ourselves the question: If indeed we are to be doers of the word, then how do we approach the Sermon on the Mount, that we don't just read it or hear it, but we actually put it into our lives. We looked at 6 or 7 places that we said needs to impact our lifestyle.

- Character (5:3-12) The beatitudes need to inform our character. We need to imbibe those principles so that, as our behavior comes out, whether visible or invisible, we respond in a godly manner.
- Influence (5:13-16) We are the salt and the light, and therefore, we need to be able to impact communities in such a way that we add flavor and light to areas.
- Righteousness (5:17-48) These were the antithesis verses: You have heard it said.... But I say to you. And Jesus is basically saying, "Don't let the judgment of your behavior be on what others think about you, but on what you know in your heart. Therefore, it has been said, 'Don't commit murder,' but I say to you 'Don't even get angry because that is the same.'"
- Piety (6:1-18) – fasting and prayer and alms-giving
- Ambition (6:19-34) Looking at wealth, and how, if our focus is on wealth, then it leads to worry. Jesus was saying: First things first. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things that you're worrying about will get added unto you.
- Relationships (7:1-23) – with God and then with humanity.
- Conclusion/Consequences (7:21-27) Jesus is saying to some, "I never knew you" ending in shattered lives for those people.

Two questions emerged from both our Sundays:

- Are we "Doers" of the words of Jesus or just "Hearers"?
- Are we part of the "Crowd" or are we His "Disciples"?

Matthew 7:13-23

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' and then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

Hard words! It seems to me, as I look at these verses in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, that they are a microcosm of the macro sermon on the mount. In the Sermon on the Mount, we have the beatitudes as an introduction, or a foundation on which Jesus lays out a lifestyle for us that goes through chs. 5, 6 & 7. And then a conclusion where He very strongly says, "Don't just listen as a crowd that listens and walks away, but as disciples who listen and follow Me."

Here, Jesus is saying something very important. He is saying that there are two gates – the narrow gate and a way that is broad. The way that is broad leads to destruction and many are drawn towards that road. But the gate that is small and the way that is narrow leads to life, and few are those who find it. The broad way seems to attract many people, but leads to destruction. A narrow way that doesn't seem to find too many people, yet it is the way that leads to life.

Then we see the false prophets tucked in the middle, and following that, we see the false prophets tucked in the middle. We see what happens to those who pursue the life that was contrary to the sayings and teachings of Jesus. He says that these people who will come and say, "But I did things in Your name," will have to hear Him say, "Depart from Me. I never knew you." It made me think, that as we look at these two bookends, that these verses in the middle are very, very important. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruit.

So, I want us to spend a little time and unpack these verses 15-20, and pay a little attention to what Jesus is saying – from saying that there's a broad way and a narrow way, and then ending by saying that He will turn to some people and say, "Depart from Me. In the middle, He says are people that act like sheep but are not sheep.

So let's unpack these verses. What can we find about them? Four things that I want to lay before you.

1. There are some people who will try to identify as sheep.

How? They will come in sheep's clothing. They will try to look like you, do the things you do, attend the things that you attend. In other words, try and be exactly like you.

Why do they come disguised? To avoid detection by the shepherd, and to gain the friendship and trust of the sheep. They come disguised trying to act like one of the flock so that they can blend in and not gain the attention of the shepherd, as well as to be able to build friendships with the rest of the sheep.

What is their agenda? To move you away from the narrow gate.

How? By diluting the hard sayings of Jesus. The sermon on the Mount has some very hard sayings, and so does the rest of the bible. So often, we try to make the words of the bible fit our lifestyle rather than our lifestyle fitting the words of the bible. We try and tone it down, fill it with love and grace and all of those things so that it doesn't really hit us too hard. We can continue then to live the kind of life we are living opposed to the things of the bible, but ones that we can be comfortable with because we have rationalized or diluted the words down.

2. The agenda of ravenous wolves.

Create doubt like Satan did. Did God really say that? or like Absalom did to King David – sat at the gate and undermined the authority and rule of David. Wolves in the garb of sheep are there only to try and dissuade you and move you away from that narrow path of discipleship that God has called you and me to walk on.

Their intent is to destroy the sheep. “Inwardly beware of false prophets. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” That is the end for these false prophets, and they would like to take you and me as well, to join them. Satan’s agenda is to thwart the purposes of God in our lives, to draw us away, to confuse us, to make us sin, seek the things that are more alluring but will take us down the broad path of destruction.

The wolves' agenda is to move us away from the narrow gate to destroy us in the end. Paul says in Acts 20, “I know that, after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert.”

3. How to identify the wolves?

Jesus lets us know very clearly. He says, “You will know them by their fruit, or lack thereof.” So, we need to ask the question if we are trying to identify people like that who will be trying everything they can to get us off the path that we have chosen, which is to follow Jesus. As we look at them, do we see the evidences of the Sermon on the Mount in their lives in terms of character, and lifestyle, and influence, and righteousness, and piety, giving, and prayer and fasting? Do we see all of these in them? Or can we identify the fruit of the Spirit in their lives? Do we see love, joy, and peace, and patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control? Do we see this fruit of the Spirit evident in their lives? Or do you see them espouse truth and honor, right and pure, lovely things of good repute? Do you see them think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise, as we see in Philippians 4:6?

Do you see these traits in these people? because Jesus says, “You will know them by their fruit.” And this is good fruit. Do you see it, or do you not see it? Instead, do you see fruit like sexual immorality or impure minds, sensuality, worship of false gods, witchcraft, hatred, quarrelling, jealousy, bad temper, rivalry, strife, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like that? are those the fruit that are visible in the people who are trying to input into your life?

“I solemnly assure you,” Paul says to the Galatians, “as I did before, that those who indulge in such things will never inherit God’s kingdom.” Echoing the same thing that Jesus is saying. But Jesus says that you will know these people by their fruit. Strife, contentions, divisions. Rather than building up people, they break down.

4. What is going to be their end?

Their end will be to be cut down and put into the fire. I make no apologies for the hardness of these words, for they are the words of our Lord. but I say that we must be careful that we don’t get drawn into this group of people because their end is destruction. They will be cut down and put into the fire. Their end will be to hear these words, “Depart from Me. I never knew you.”

The interesting thing is that what Jesus said, came true in the very first century itself. When we read the writings of Paul to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he tells them to take heed for “even among you would men arise who will mislead from within the flock.

Then to the church at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 11, he refers to false teachers present among them, appearing as ministers of righteousness even as Satan appears as an angel of light.

Then he speaks to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:1-3, warning of the apostasy that would come.

In 2 Timothy – describing the character and tactics of those who would mislead others.
The words of Jesus get fleshed out by Paul as he's saying: It's there! It's right there. Be very careful.
Peter talks about the rise of false teachers in 2 Peter 2.
John starts talking about testing the spirits in 1 John.
Jude, writing of some who had already come. Already there were false prophets.

And it continues, beloved, even today. We talk of peace being at such a premium. Truth is also at such a premium. It is so difficult to discern what is true and what is not. In fact, everything seems so relative. It's the way I look at it; it's the way you look at it. That's your belief; this is mine. There's an absence of absolutes in our world today. I am reminded of Dr. Sam Kamalesan. He would pound the pulpit and say, "The absolute absolute is Jesus. In Him, you can find the absolutes that you need in this world, when everything around us seems to be relative. We talk about situations that determine whether something is true or false, or black or white. Situational ethics. He is the ultimate absolute."

It's when relativity of the world invades and dilutes the biblical absolutes we hold dear to as disciples of Jesus, that the narrow way begins to lead to the broad way and then on to destruction. When we begin to forsake the absolutes that we have in word of God, and begin to listen to other voices that tell us that it doesn't need to be so hard, it doesn't need to be so harsh, you can compromise here, you can give in to your principles here, that the narrow road slowly widens into that broad road that leads to destruction.

As your pastor, I worry about the many voices and arguments that abound undercutting Him, undermining the veracity of God's Word. I am concerned when I look across and see people who are working their way through the congregation, talking to people, taking down telephone numbers. Weeks go by and they never come and meet me. I worry that there may be people who infiltrate into the congregation just to take us into the broad way of destruction. I always say to people: Come and tell me that you know so-and-so came and said that they were having a little group, and why don't you come and join? Ask the question: Have you run it by my pastor?

The reason that these words of Jesus are so hard and demanding is that there is no other way to walk than to abide by those ways. For if we get pulled in by people who talk of lowering the standards, of compromise, that God is a God of grace and mercy and love, and forget that God is a God of justice, then we are in danger. So, we need to be watchful, to constantly check our associations, whether our values are getting corroded by the world, whether our principles are getting compromised and whether we are still resolutely and tenaciously following after the Master whose disciples we are. You and I are disciples of the Most High God, disciples of Jesus, called to walk on the narrow path that leads to life.

So, I would add a third question to the two I had put up earlier:
Are we on the narrow road that leads to life, or the broad road that leads to destruction?
Beloved, let's keep our eyes focused on Jesus, the Shepherd of our soul.

Shall we pray together?

Lord Jesus, we want to follow after You, Lord. we don't want to get caught in compromises. We don't want to find ourselves on the broad road and we certainly don't want to hear You say, "Depart from Me." Lord, help us to follow after You in truth. give us discernment to be able to shun those who may come to take us away from that path that is right behind You, and help us Lord, to be faithful to Your words, doers of Your word, not part of the crowd but disciples on the narrow road behind You so that, at the end Lord, we would instead hear You say, "Good and faithful servant, welcome!" In Your name, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.