

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 7:13-23

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 7:13-23 -

RESPONDING TO THE SERMON'S CALL TO RADICAL LIVING

- Intro: The rest of the Sermon on the Mt does not introduce more commands about how to live. Rather Christ now impresses upon us the danger that we could fail to live out the sermon because: 1) It appears to be restrictive (v13-14); 2) false teachers take us off track (v15-23); and 3) plain foolishness might make us disregard it (v24-27). In other words, the rest of the sermon exhorts us to respond to Christ's call to radical living.

The Narrow and Wide Gates

13 "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Choose the path of radical discipleship.

- This verse is commonly taken out of context. Jesus is speaking to those who already believe in him, his disciples (5:1). He is telling his disciples to enter the narrow gate, and to avoid the wide gate. When we forget this, we tend to misread it to mean that Christians go through the narrow gate, and non-Christians go through the wide gate. No, Jesus is urging *Christians* to choose the narrow gate rather than the wide.
- Once we put our faith in Christ we are wonderfully saved. But then we need to start making godly and wise decisions. Just because we are saved, and "under grace" doesn't mean we will inevitably make the best life decisions.
- These verses speak of two gates (a narrow and wide one), which connect to two roads (a narrow and broad one) and ultimately lead to two

destinations (life or destruction). There are two crowds, depending on which gate is chosen.

- As disciples of Jesus, once we are saved, we have a choice to make. It's a choice that needs to be made every day. It's the choice to either choose the narrow gate of fully devoted discipleship to Jesus, or the wide gate of avoiding fully devoted discipleship to Jesus. The narrow gate is to live a life as a Christian that takes seriously Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The broad gate is to live a life as a Christian that ignores, avoids and rejects Christ's call to radical living in this sermon.
- The one gate is narrow (and therefore it seems that fewer Christians take it) while the other is broad (and therefore it seems that more Christians take it). The call to radical living in the Sermon on the Mount is a consuming call. It calls for whole-hearted devotion to Jesus, and submission to his leadership and wisdom. It cuts across the so-called wisdom of our age. It cuts across the culture of comfort, ease and convenience that we find ourselves in. Jesus urges and challenges us to commit ourselves totally to him and his teaching. We are to make the radical living of the Sermon on the Mount our life's priority and passion. Sadly, many of us will opt for the way of half-hearted discipleship, which is apparently easier than whole-hearted devotion. On this road, instead of consistently centring our lives on Christ, we compartmentalize him. Instead of praying, "I willingly and joyfully surrender my dreams and plans if need be as I follow you, Christ" we pray, "God, here are my plans and dreams: please bless them." We take the easy way. It's a way that requires little focus, discipline, passion, courage and change. On this road we do not need to embrace the high standards and deep transformation of character, perspective and belief called for in the Sermon on the Mount.
- The narrow gate leads to life. As narrow, and apparently restrictive, as Christ's call to radical living is, yet it leads to life. Eaton (pg 185) explains that this means that it leads to "liveliness toward God, joy, energy in serving God, a sense of destiny, a knowledge that the future holds nothing but good". Devastatingly, the "apparently easy" way of half-hearted or hard-hearted discipleship leads to "destruction". This is not a reference to eternal damnation. It's a reference to such things as a life of regret, a life of wasted potential, a life that ultimately leads to pain and loss, a forfeiting of all that God wanted us to achieve and receive, and a loss of reward in this life and the next. It includes discipline and punishment for compromise.
- Christ urges us to "enter the narrow gate". Although it may appear restrictive, it's not restrictive at all. The path of radical, whole-hearted discipleship is the path that leads to joy and power and heavenly reward. The abundant life that Christ promises (John 10:10) is only possible if we give ourselves to the obedient life. There is no real spiritual abundance outside of discipleship obedience.

15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

Watch out for false prophets.

- A Christ-follower is someone who, having put their faith in Christ as the Messiah, now gives themselves to his teachings and authority. It is someone who takes seriously the teachings and perspectives of the Sermon on the Mount. But the enemy will conspire to get us off this path. One major way he does this is by sending false teachers and prophets. These false prophets will, in effect, urge us to take the wide gate, not the narrow gate.
- Christ knew that the spiritual community of disciples (later called “the church”) would exist into the centuries to come. And he knew that it would be in danger of influential people who would try lead the community astray. They would claim to speak for God as prophets and teachers. But, in actual fact, they would not be speaking for God at all.
- They would come “in sheep’s clothing”. This means that Christians would be potentially deceived by appearances. Their charm, warmth of personality, strength of conviction, scholarship, powers, qualifications, their popularity - as attractive as all these are, they do not make a person a true prophet or teacher. Today, we need to exercise discernment. Externals like the ones listed above don’t mean anything.
- But in reality false teachers are “ferocious wolves”. Although they may appear as harmless as a sheep (i.e. a fellow disciple), they aren’t what they seem. They have the potential to inflict serious damage upon our faith, our relationship with Christ, the unity of our spiritual community, more vulnerable Christians, and our salt-and-light-influence in the world. In fact, the early church is a case study in just how much damage can be done by false teachers and prophets, who appearing to be sent by God, in reality turned out to be sent by the devil.
- More now than ever before, the church is in danger of people who present teachings that seem attractive, and may even at first seem compatible with our faith. But, upon closer inspection, their teachings and spiritual claims contradict the essence of our faith. These false prophets may come in the form of a long-standing member or leader in the church, a popular author, a loved rock star who turns into a spiritual guide, the latest teaching to hit the Christian book-stores, the latest Christian leader who moves powerfully in signs and wonders, a Internet-downloaded mp3 doing the rounds, a talk show host, and a friendly and intelligent person in a cult-church (such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses) knocking on our door, and so much more. Appearances are deceiving. And lack of discernment leaves us vulnerable to being devoured.

16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit

is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

You can tell whether a person is really sent by God by the quality of their life, and the content of their teaching.

- Although false prophets may initially deceive us, eventually what they really are will become evident. We will see it by their fruit. From a distance a thorn bush with berries may appear to be a grapevine with grapes, yet soon enough we realise this isn't so. From a distance, the flowers on a thistle may appear to be figs, but upon closer inspection the error becomes clear (v16). In the same way the quality of fruit tells us about the quality of the fruit tree, so the quality of a person's fruit tells us who that person really is.
- But what fruit comes from a person? The fruit of a person is the level of their godliness, and the content of their beliefs / teaching. Unlike Timothy who sought to spiritually lead people by paying careful attention to the quality of his own life and the content of his teaching (see 1 Timothy 4:16), false prophets will fail in these two regards.
- False prophets will ultimately fail to bear the fruit of a radically changed life that Jesus speaks about in the Sermon on the Mount. Without the Holy Spirit vitally at work in their lives, they will fail to bear the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).
- False prophets will undermine the gospel with their teaching. The true gospel centres on the person and work of Jesus. Jesus is the unique Son of God. He died and rose again in order to save us from our sin. He alone is qualified to save us from the guilt and power of our sin. Jesus is alive and calls us to a life of faith, worship, community, obedience and service in the power of the Spirit. False prophets will either undermine these claims, or will take our focus off them and put it on other things, such as personal fulfilment and the acquisition of wealth.
- We are to exercise great discernment in evaluating the lives and doctrine of people who seek to spiritually influence our lives. Twice Jesus tells us that we are to be seeking to recognize who they really are (v16,20). We must walk right past the false prophet as he/she seeks to dissuade us from taking the narrow gate. Though they urge us to take the wide gate with the promise of life, we are to ignore their claim entirely – and seek to help others to do the same.

True and False Disciples

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

These verses do not teach what people commonly think they teach.

- This is a greatly misunderstood text. The misunderstanding of it is that Jesus is warning us, that though we think we are saved, really we might not be – because we fail to do the will of God (v21), because we never really knew Jesus (v23), and because we were full of compromise (i.e. “evildoers”) (v23). When we read it this way, we think Jesus is telling us to look for assurance of our salvation by evaluating our degree of godliness. Although it’s possible to think that we’re saved, when we aren’t, this text doesn’t deal with this theme at all. Let me explain why. There are two great problems with this interpretation.
- *Firstly, Jesus is not speaking about disciples at all, but rather about false prophets.* The entire sermon has been addressed to the disciples. Jesus has been speaking to disciples directly, saying “you” (e.g. 5:13-16) and talking in the imperative (e.g. “enter the narrow gate” which means “*you must enter the narrow gate*”). But in these verses he speaks about “them” (v23) and not “you”. Who is he referring to? The context makes it clear: it’s the false prophets (v15-20). Jesus has not changed the subject matter. He is merely continuing the important subject of false prophets.
- *Secondly, the rest of Scripture reveals that assurance of salvation does not come by evaluating one’s degree of godliness, but rather by evaluating one’s object of faith.* It’s true that we should ask ourselves whether we really are saved. And we should evaluate our works, to see if they are godly or ungodly. But Eaton (pg 194) reminds us that it’s a common heresy to try to detect one’s salvation by looking at one’s works. Just think of the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. He did just this and was wrong. He prayed, fasted, tithed, avoided sin and evil, and yet was not accepted by God! Compare him with the tax collector who, admitting his sinfulness, threw himself upon the mercy of God. He looked to God’s mercy and not his own righteousness – and that’s how he was accepted. Salvation is a matter of throwing ourselves upon Jesus’ mercy. Of course salvation should then result in a progressively (but not a perfectly) changed life. If we look to our life and degree of godliness for assurance of salvation, then we will never know if we really are saved, because we all still struggle to overcome the pull of the sinful nature in some aspects of our lives. I know I am saved not because I am sufficiently godly, but because I have faith in Christ’s sufficiency. Christ is enough for me! His death and resurrection on my behalf is my salvation. I throw myself upon his mercy. I believe. And that is how I know I am saved. In faith I look to Christ’s mercy, not my own degree of godliness, for salvation, and for assurance of salvation. Sadly, if I embrace the misinterpretation of these verses I end up looking to the wrong place (i.e. my imperfect godliness rather than Christ’s perfect faithfulness) for assurance.

False prophets will be sent to a Christ-less eternity.

- Jesus is warning his disciples about the danger of being led astray by false prophets from the narrow road to Jesus and faith in the gospel (v15-20). Now he tells us more about false prophets in these verses.

- *They may be spiritually fervent people.* This is seen in the repetition “Lord, Lord” (v21).
- *They may have a respect for Jesus, but they have not put their faith in him as their Lord and Saviour.* The word “Lord” doesn’t always mean “God” but can also be taken to mean “Sir”. This seems to be the use here.
- *They may have supernatural powers.* They may prophesy, drive out demons in Jesus’ name and do miracles (v22). Judas is an example of this. He never really trusted in Jesus. He was an intruder. Yet he seemed to share in the disciple’s supernatural gifting (see Luke 10:17 for example). Matthew 24:24, Acts 19:13 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 are more examples of false prophets operating in supernatural power. It is perplexing how false prophets move in such power. Eaton (pg 193) writes, “It is quite clear that a person does not need to have to be saved in order to speak for God. Balaam’s donkey should be proof of that! God may use an unbeliever. The devil can produce imitations. And some people seem to have certain unusual powers as part of ordinary human nature. Certainly, one should not make great deductions about anyone’s authenticity just because of any apparent powers he or she may have.”
- *But ultimately false prophets will experience Jesus’ eternal judgment.* Ultimately they failed to know Jesus as he really is (v23). They therefore failed to experience his transforming grace (v21,23). They will be plainly and publicly (before the multitudes standing before the throne of Judgment) be sent to a Christ-less eternity. “Depart from me,” Jesus will say. On earth, they may have deliberately led people astray. Or perhaps they may have genuinely been self-deceived. Having a sense that they have arrived spiritually, they fail to trust in Jesus for their salvation. But the truth will be seen on that day.
- Interestingly, Jesus himself is the Judge. Many people say that the Sermon on the Mount proves that Jesus was merely a moral teacher and not the Son of God, but they fail to see the many references (such as 5:17 and 7:21-23) that show he was so much more.

Reference is made to the following sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.

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