



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Seven

IV Matthew 5:1-7:29 - The Authoritative Message of the Messiah: Kingdom Life for His Disciples (First Discourse) (continues/concludes)

IV.c Matthew 6:1-7:12 - The development of Kingdom life in the real world (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Seven

The Sermon on the Mount discourse continues and concludes as Jesus moves from personal temptations to interpersonal temptations. He warns against inappropriate judging (vv.1-5), and commands appropriate evaluation (v.6). He then looks at God's guidance as the source of the believer's stability in relationship to others (vv.7-12).

Jesus provides a stark warning that few will enter God's Kingdom (vv.13-14), making observation that one's behaviour reveals one's character (vv.15-20), and cautions that the whole life of a disciple and not just their lips must acknowledge Christ as their sovereign Lord (vv.21-23). These all lead to the climax in his final warning that only those who obey his teaching will endure the final act of judgement (vv.24-27).

IV.c.viii Matthew 7:1-5 - Judging Others

Jesus teaches against a common human trait where people often criticise the shortcomings of others rather than dealing with their own. This is evident in many churches, which Jesus here seeks to eradicate.

¹ 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Matthew 7:1-2

Do not judge forbids pronouncing another person guilty before God, for it is his prerogative alone to judge and no one else should usurp his divine authority: <<*Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you*

despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God>> (Romans 14:10), and: <<Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge>> (James 4:11). This applies not just to judging a person's actions or lack of them, but their character and heart as well.

For those who comply with this instruction, the outcome - so that you may not be judged - does not mean they will not face ultimate judgement; it means they will not be judged according to the judgement they would have passed on others. Those who wish to judge others must first lead a sinless life, thereby never needing God's forgiveness themselves: *<<When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her'>> (John 8:7). However, Jesus does not oppose offering correction, although he does oppose offering correction in the wrong spirit. Appropriate correction and support to others is actually taught as a good thing when undertaken correctly and with the right heart motivation intending a genuinely good outcome for the other person: <<If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector>> (Matthew 18:15-17), and: <<My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads>> (Galatians 6:1-5).*

It seems strange that by this time in this lengthy discourse, which contains some of the most excellent teaching known to mankind, that anyone taking the teaching seriously would even contemplate judging others. Such is the fickle nature of humans, especially Christians, to pick and choose the parts of teaching that suit their purpose, while disregarding the parts that don't fit their requirements.

For with the judgement you make you will be judged. Undue harshness and a judgemental attitude toward others will result in being treated in much the same way by God, i.e. the measure you give will be the measure you get. God is no respecter of people in terms of their earthly status. He will judge all people in accordance with what they have done, said, thought and believed during their life on earth. He is faithful and will judge impartially, so that no one will have any grounds for complaint when the Day arrives.

³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Let

me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.

Matthew 7:3-5

Jesus may have drawn on his background as a carpenter for his metaphor of a log

in your own eye: <<*Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?*>> (Matthew 13:55), for any man not chosen to go to rabbinic school would usually learn his father’s trade, which is confirmed in Jesus’ case by: <<*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*>> And they took offence at him>> (Mark 6:3), which of course was hyperbole, as seen on several occasions in this discourse, including: <<*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell*>> (Matthew 5:29-30).

The speck in your neighbour’s eye. It is often easy to perceive faults in the discipleship or lifestyle choices of others without noticing the shortcomings in one’s own. Jesus calls on his followers to deal with their own issues instead of criticising others. The neighbour’s sin may not be small, for sin is sin in God’s eyes, but a person’s own sin should always be viewed as much greater to them and a priority to come before God in repentance of that sin. It was such short sightedness and hypocrisy that brought harsh criticism from Jesus on the Pharisees: <<*Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains*>> (John 9:40-41).

Then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye. Jesus does not forbid all evaluation or even judgement of others, for ultimately the one who feels grieved and humbled over his own sin can help remove the speck from others. What Jesus does rule out is pride that views oneself as better than others: <<*My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted*>> (Galatians 6:1), as previously noted.

The rationalising away of one’s own guilt and shortcomings, while condemning others, shows a clear double standard and is hypocrisy. Jesus had alluded to this ‘spiritual blindness’ earlier: <<*The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*>> (Matthew 6:22-23), and Paul goes even further: <<*Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, ‘We know that God’s judgement on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.’ Do you*

imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgement of God?>> (Romans 2:1-3).

IV.c.ix Matthew 7:6 - Profaning the Holy

This verse provides a link between vv.1-5 and vv.7-11. Since it is not for the disciple to judge, then they are not to pick and choose who they think they should share the Gospel message with. Equally, they should not try to force it on those who show no inclination to accept it, or who have heard it and continually profane the message as a result: *<<If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town>> (Matthew 10:13-14).*

⁶ ‘Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

Matthew 7:6

Do not give what is holy to dogs refers to sharing the good news of Christ, which is holy, with people who are not worthy to hear it, i.e. those who are of the devil or who oppose the Gospel of Christ in some way.

In the ancient world, dogs lived in squalor and scavenged the streets for food: *<<You shall say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?’ You shall say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood’>> (1 Kings 21:19), <<When they came back and told him, he said, ‘This is the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, “In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel>> (2 Kings 9:36), <<Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. They roam about for food, and growl if they do not get their fill>> (Psalm 59:14-15), <<And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores>> (Luke 16:20-21). Jews considered them unclean and used the term to describe those apart from, or enemies of, Israel’s covenant community: *<<The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his gods>> (1 Samuel 17:43), <<For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shrivelled>> (Psalm 22:16), and: <<Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly>> (Proverbs 26:11). It was also used by the Jews to describe some Gentiles as seems to be the case when Jesus had a conversation with a Syrophœnician woman: *<<He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter’>> (Mark 7:27-29).***

Swine or pigs were rejected by Jews, probably because they too were scavenging animals, and they were unclean according to OT law: <<*The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cloven-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you*>> (Leviticus 11:7).

Pearls symbolise the great value of the message of the Kingdom of Heaven: <<*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it*>> (Matthew 13:45-46). Believers are to be merciful, forgiving and slow to judge (vv.1-5), yet they should wisely discern the true character of people and not indefinitely continue proclaiming the Gospel to those who adamantly reject it, so that they can move on and proclaim the Gospel to others: <<*To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? See, their ears are closed, they cannot listen. The word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it*>> (Jeremiah 6:10), <<*Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them*>> (Luke 9:5), <<*Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles*>> (Acts 13:46), <<*When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'*>> (Acts 18:6), and: <<*After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned*>> (Titus 3:10-11).

What should also be understood from the term do not throw your pearls before swine is that it was an idiom of the times. Therefore, as with all such cultural sayings, it is never easy to fully translate the saying and capture its original meaning.

Turn and maul you. Those who reject the teaching of the Gospel often revile those who bear the message. By their actions they thereby refuse to accept the valuable pearl and will face appropriate judgement when the time comes. It is not because of any rejection or even persecution that such people should not hear the Gospel preached. Jesus himself taught many hardened sinners. He probably has in mind that his disciples are not to entrust the Gospel to those who continually profane it and have a track record of doing so.

IV.c.x Matthew 7:7-11 - Ask, Search, Knock

Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is open to anyone who earnestly seeks God in faith through prayer, for he is a true Father to all of his creation and those who choose to come to him will be graciously received: <<*He went out to meet Asa and said to him, 'Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you abandon him, he will abandon you*>> (2 Chronicles 15:2), <<*And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*>> (Hebrews 11:6).

⁷ 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:7-11

Ask returns to the theme of prayer, which Jesus had shown should honour God above all else: <<*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name*>> (Matthew 6:9). Disciples should come to God in all humility and awareness of their need for his grace and mercy over their lives: <<*If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you*>> (James 1:5).

It will be given to you is a reminder that what is received is a free gift from God. It is not loaned or sold, but given.

Search or seek connects one's prayer with responsible action in pursuing the will of God. It is like looking for a personal item of value that has been lost, yet knowing there is only one place to look: <<*Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes*>> (Daniel 9:3).

You will find shows that all genuine effort will not be in vain but will be rewarded by God, who reveals himself to those who seek him: <<*When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart*>> (Jeremiah 29:13).

Knock suggests perseverance. Disciples are to persist in prayer, confident that their Father will provide whatever is best for them, according to his sovereign, gracious will: <<*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*>> (James 1:17). Jesus graciously knocks on the door waiting to be invited in: <<*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me*>> (Revelation 3:20). How much more so should believers desire to be invited in by him?

The door will be opened for you indicates that no one who comes to God with a genuinely repentant heart, acknowledging his sovereignty over their life and determined to serve him only will be accepted into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Ask, search, knock. It is not about asking and then waiting for God to show the way. The three terms when linked together imply the need for action on the part of the believer. God speaks in many ways and those who wish to hear him must be prepared to search the Scriptures or enter into new places in order to find out what it is he is saying to them specifically.

For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. These are strong assertions that call for bold faith in prayer and action. Few people see their prayers answered completely and all the time, but Jesus' teaching here clearly indicates that disciples should come before God with the expectation that he will do whatever they ask. The key principle though is to ensure that the heart is aligned with that of Christ with regard to that which is being asked for. The Lord's brother cites Elijah, the man of God, as one who knew how to come before God with the faith required, asking for the right things and seeing dramatic responses from God as a consequence of his prayer: *<<Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest>>* (James 5:16-18).

It should always be remembered that if prayers do not appear to be answered it does not mean that the person requesting God's help is deficient in faith or that what they are asking for is not a worthwhile cause. God is sovereign and he will act according to his own will in the best interest of his eternal Kingdom. This is frequently beyond the comprehension of people, who should not concern themselves with such issues but should continue to pray to God in all faith and hope, seeking first his will for any given situation and then asking for his gracious intervention.

If you then, who are evil. All humans are considered evil: *<<since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>>* (Romans 3:23), and they have an inherent sinful nature, imputed from Adam: *<<For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ>>* (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

Earthly parents have an innate impulse to do what is best for their children, and normally would not give a stone for bread or a snake instead of a fish, which are again examples of Jesus using hyperbole, yet human parents are flawed as a result of sin's corruption in all humanity through the fall of Adam and Eve: *<<Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned – sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come>>* (Romans 5:12-14), and the quality of their parenting does not match God's. This is an example of a 'how much more' argument frequently used in Matthew and Luke: *<<A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!>>* (Matthew 10:24-25), *<<How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath>>* (Matthew 12:12), *<<If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the*

Holy Spirit to those who ask him!>> (Luke 11:13), and: <<Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!>> (Luke 12:24), as well as: <<For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!>> (Hebrews 9:13-14).

How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! God, who gives good gifts to children, may not give everything every child asks, but he will not withhold his gifts from those who desire and seek what is right: *<<Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart>> (Psalm 37:4), and: <<For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly>> (Psalm 84:11).* The Father will give appropriate consideration to each request his children make, watching out for their true needs. However, like any good parent who loves their child, he will not give anything that is inappropriate, unhelpful or which might cause them harm, no matter how persistent the child is in asking for it.

IV.c.xi Matthew 7:12 - The Golden Rule

Jesus provides an excellent summary statement that all people, everywhere, are called to live by, for every person is morally responsible to recognise how they ought to treat every other person.

¹² ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7:12

In everything. Once again, with Jesus there are no half measures. He requires that his followers are fully committed to him in all aspects of their lives: *<<Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple>> (Luke 14:26-27).* However, the reward that he gives to them for doing so is more than generous. In fact, it is a gift beyond value or measure: *<<Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life>> (Mark 10:29-30).*

Do to others. Known as ‘the Golden Rule’, this verse summarises the teaching of the Law and the Prophets. The way in which one wants to be treated should determine the way that one treats others. This should come naturally for believers who love God with all their heart, soul and mind, and who love their neighbour as themselves: *<<He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest*

and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’>> (Matthew 22:37-40). Refer also to comments made on Matthew 5:17.

This is the law of love, the principle by which Jesus epitomises the entire human related aspects of God’s law: <<I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another>> (John 13:34-35); a principle Jesus’ earliest followers never forgot: <<Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law>> (Romans 13:8-10), <<For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’>> (Galatians 5:14), <<Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ>> (Galatians 6:2), <<You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’>> (James 2:8), and: <<But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another>> (2 John 5). What is distinctive about the principle as it appears in Matthew is its relation to the Day of Judgement.

According to tradition, Alexander Severus, Roman Emperor from AD222 to AD235, was so taken with this rule that he had it inscribed in gold lettering on the wall of his private rooms, thus affording it the name ‘the golden rule’.

IV.d Matthew 7:13-29 - Warning! With Jesus or against him?

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount by giving the disciples, the crowd, and the religious leaders four basic warnings: they must choose between two gates and roads (vv.13-14), two kinds of prophets (vv.15-20), two kinds of disciples (vv.21-23), and two foundations (vv.24-27). They are either with Jesus or against him, there is no middle ground, Jesus does not allow for that in his teaching.

IV.d.i Matthew 7:13-14 - The Narrow Gate

The Jews believed salvation was theirs by birthright. Jesus reveals that they are wrong and indeed the majority are unsaved, indicating also that the route to eternal life with God is a hard one to find and even harder to keep to. His teaching clearly indicates that the majority of mankind will ultimately reject the Kingdom life with all its promises that is offered freely to all. Those who are unsaved will include many professing Christians who have failed to afford Jesus complete Lordship over their entire lives.

¹² ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.

¹³ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

The narrow gate. The way to eternal life is narrow in that it is through Jesus alone: <<*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'*>> (John 14:6), and: <<*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved*>> (Acts 4:12). Peter's statement in the latter text that there was salvation in no other name was an implicit invitation to the Sanhedrin to place their faith in Jesus. Peter emphasises this by saying that it is the only name under heaven, that is, throughout the whole earth, by which a person can be saved. Further, there is no other name among mortals, i.e. in all of human society that offers eternal salvation.

The concept of a narrow gate would have been familiar to Jesus' Jewish audience: <<*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity*>> (Deuteronomy 30:15), and: <<*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers*>> (Psalm 1:1).

That there are two gates, wide and narrow, illustrates the stark choice to be made: white or black, good or evil, right or wrong, saint or sinner, godly or ungodly, a way into heaven or a way into hell!

The road is hard, that is, one has to overcome all sorts of temptations in order to stay on the path for it requires that one should consistently walk in the truth of the Gospel message: <<*I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely, how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth*>> (3 John 3-4). Some fail to make the choice through neglect or indifference, while for others it is by personal conviction. Those who do choose it need to make every effort in doing so: <<*Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able*>> (Luke 13:24). It is the most important decision that anyone can ever make as it is the only way that leads to life.

Those who choose the road that is easy, by seeking the approval of man rather than God, seeking out the desires of the flesh or following the ways of the world, rather than to: <<*strive first for the kingdom of God*>> (Matthew 6:33a), will find that the easy way only leads to destruction; ultimately to eternal punishment and separation from God. Those who teach universalism have got it badly wrong!

There are few who find it. This is a sad reality that faces the world and yet it is never too late for anyone to call on Jesus: <<*Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*>> (Joel 2:32a). Those who do so will be given the route map, for the gate is narrow.

IV.d.ii Matthew 7:15-20 - A Tree and Its Fruit

Jesus gives a warning to his disciples and to the church of the false prophets and false teachers that would soon come to disrupt the Kingdom work for a variety of reasons. They would appear to be genuine but their work would have the potential for total disruption if allowed to proceed unchecked. Jesus clearly teaches that

such people can be identified by their fruit, i.e. the outcomes of their own teaching, works and lifestyle choices.

¹⁵ ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets. Maintaining the earlier balance of not judging (vv.1-5), yet not being naively accepting (v.6), Jesus teaches his disciples that they must be wisely discerning when professed prophets come into their midst. There would be false teachers, false disciples, and even false apostles to contend with: <<*For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light*>> (2 Corinthians 11:13-14), and: <<*I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false*>> (Revelation 2:2).

False prophets were a concern in the OT: <<*An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?*>> (Jeremiah 5:30-31), <<*Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading*>> (Lamentations 2:14), <<*Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord God’, when the Lord has not spoken*>> (Ezekiel 22:28), and: <<*Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God*>> (Micah 3:5-7). They continue to be of concern to the church: <<*I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them*>> (Acts 20:29-30), <<*I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments*>> (Colossians 2:4), <<*I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith*>> (1 Timothy 1:3-4), <<*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring*

in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves>> (2 Peter 2:1), and: <<Yet in the same way these dreamers also defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones>> (Jude 8).

Who come to you in sheep's clothing. Such people may initially be difficult to discern or distinguish for their outward appearance would not set them apart from genuine ministers of the faith and their doctrine would no doubt sound plausible and certainly appealing for they tend to use subtlety and guile: *<<Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?'>> (Genesis 3:1).* Jesus could have easily added that such people often appear in 'shepherd's clothing!'

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? The life of the prophet and the results of his influence on others are their fruits that will indicate whether or not their message is consistent with the Kingdom life of righteousness. James writes in a similar vein: *<<Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh>> (James 3:12).*

Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. Those who are faithful to Christ will produce work that is honouring to his name, even though they may get things wrong at times. Those who are not truly Christ's will not bear any good fruit even though it may appear so on the surface at times. Ultimately, the good and the bad will be distinguishable.

Fire. The only thing bad trees are good for is firewood, a striking metaphor of the future judgement for false prophets, or indeed for those who falsely profess Christ. Later on Jesus would give more explicit instructions to his apostles on this issue: *<<Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned>> (John 15:4-6).*

Because of warnings like this and traditions that have come into the church over time, there are many churches who miss out on the benefits of true NT prophecy for many of the Spiritual gifts are not encouraged and practised. This is not a healthy state for any expression of church that would do well to heed the words of Paul: *<<Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said>> (1 Corinthians 14:29), and: <<Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good>> (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).*

IV.d.iii Matthew 7:21-23 - Concerning Self-Deception

Churchgoers today are no more automatically saved than those who ate with Jesus in the past; it is often noted that, attending a church every Sunday no more makes one a Christian than entering a garage makes one a car. It is not those who claim to know Jesus but only those who do the Father's will that have any claim on him:

<<For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother>> (Matthew 12:50). Jesus thus uses biblical language for righteous enmity towards the wicked: <<Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping>> (Psalm 6:8), and: <<Go away from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commandments of my God>> (Psalm 119:115), to banish the unsaved from his presence.

²¹ ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 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 deeds of power in your name?”’

Matthew 7:21-22

The Kingdom community must guard not only against false prophets (vv.15-20) but also false disciples.

Lord, Lord. An oral confession of Jesus as Lord does not always indicate a repentant heart. However, it is appropriate for his disciples to address him by such a title: <<You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am>> (John 13:13). Although it must be noted that it should only be said if it is genuine and as an expression of love: <<If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal>> (1 Corinthians 13:1).

False disciples may exercise power in Jesus’ name but their activities are meaningless because they deceive themselves and other believers, desiring attention for their own spectacular displays.

Many deeds of power or mighty works are not proof of the Father’s will since they can come from sources other than God, including demons and human contrivance: <<Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit said to them in reply, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?’ Then the man with the evil spirit leapt on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded>> (Acts 19:13-16), <<The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned>> (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12), and: <<It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived>> (Revelation 13:13-14).

²³ Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.”

Matthew 7:23

Then will I declare to them. Jesus says that he will one day exercise the prerogative of condemning people to hell, something that only God can do: <<*It is not I who have sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by making war on me. Let the Lord, who is judge, decide today for the Israelites or for the Ammonites*>> (Judges 11:27), and: <<*But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*>> (Luke 12:5). However: <<*The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son*>> (John 5:22), where Jesus’ assertion that the Father has given all judgement to the Son is yet another claim to deity, since judgement is the exclusive prerogative of God. However, the Father has delegated the work of final judgement to God the Son.

Although these condemned prophets appeared to belong to Jesus, they were never truly saved, for Jesus never knew them. Therefore, when final judgement comes, he will say to such as these: go away from me, you evildoers, something that had been prophesied would happen many years before as well: <<*On that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain*>> (Zephaniah 3:11), and Jesus knows who those will be long before the Day of Judgement comes: <<*It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him*>> (John 6:63-64).

IV.d.iv Matthew 7:24-29 - Hearers and Doers

There are many people who read or listen to the teaching of Jesus, although few who actually heed his words. Jesus provides an illustration to contrast the wisdom of those who hear his words and act on them accordingly and the folly of those who fail to heed his teaching.

²⁴ ‘Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!’

Matthew 7:24-27

Everyone shows once again that Jesus’ call was universal. However, his teaching also shows that only a minority will ever accept his offer.

Hears these words of mine and acts on them. This parable brings the Sermon on the Mount to a close as Jesus calls for his audience to decide between himself and the religious establishment, drawing a dividing line between himself and any other foundation for life. There are those who hear the Word and respond accordingly, and those who hear it, only to ignore what it requires of them. Those who do what is right will be eternally blessed: *<<Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, they delight to draw near to God>>* (Isaiah 58:2), *<<But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!>>* (Luke 11:28), and: *<<If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them>>* (John 13:17). The outcome will prove to be sound, for: *<<They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life>>* (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

The evidence of whether one is truly a believer is in whether one acts on these words of Jesus: *<<But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like>>* (James 1:22-24), and: *<<Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works>>* (James 2:20-22). Refer also to the comments made on these particular passages in the commentary on James' epistle that can be found on the website.

A wise man. Disciples who build their lives on the bedrock of Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of Heaven are truly wise, regardless of the shifting cultural or religious fashions. God has already provided the foundation stone on which they can build: *<<therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: 'One who trusts will not panic'>>* (Isaiah 28:16), and: *<<For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ>>* (1 Corinthians 10:4b).

The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew. These analogies could stand for any time of testing in a believer's life, but in the context of this part of the discourse it most likely refers to final judgement.

During the hot summer months, the sand around the Sea of Galilee was hard on the surface. But a wise builder knew that he needed to dig several feet below the surface to the bedrock in order to establish the foundation for his house. The same applies to matters of faith. A true disciple will look beneath the surface to see that the words of Jesus are built on the foundation of the one true God.

On sand. The religious establishment had embraced a mere surface righteousness built on an unstable foundation of religious pretence and their inherited traditions.

Great was its fall! When the Day of Judgement comes that is the time that everyone needs to find out that they have been built on a solid foundation, the rock of Christ. Those who chose not to believe will be in dire straits but what of those who find out their lip service to Christ was a sham and it all comes crashing down around them?

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Matthew 7:28-29

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things indicates the formal discourse, known as the Sermon on the Mount, is concluded. Due to its structure it probably contained much more than Matthew recorded here.

He taught them as one having authority. Later on the religious leaders sent the temple police to arrest Jesus but they failed because of what he said to them: <<*The police answered, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!'*>> (John 7:46).

That the crowds were astounded suggests a variety of emotional reactions to Jesus' words, but not a commitment of faith. While their scribes or Teachers of the Law cite other rabbis, Jesus has inherent divine authority.

What astounded the crowds so much about Jesus' teaching was not his use of proverbs, parables, hyperboles or other standard pedagogic devices of his day; what astounded them was his claim to authority, a theme that climaxes in: <<*And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'*>> (Matthew 28:18). Ultimately, it is his power as much as his words that assert that authority: <<*For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power*>> (1 Corinthians 4:20). Other Jewish teachers regularly cited earlier sages' opinions, and although later teachers sometimes came to regard their tradition as tantamount to God's Word, Jesus' contemporaries would never have claimed that people would be judged according to how they treated their words. Jesus did!