

## **Series Sermon on the Mount**

### **Scripture Matthew 7:13-20**

We are nearing the end of our series on the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon was the beginning of the training program for the twelve Apostles. Jesus was preparing them for their future leadership responsibilities, and, in a broader sense, His teaching also applies to the basic spiritual education of every believer. The lessons are as much for us as for the original listeners.

The theme of the Sermon is life in the kingdom of God. Jesus taught from the standpoint of a kingdom insider. This was the natural consequence of His being sent from heaven by the Father. He was God living on earth as a sinless human. Because of His unique God/Man nature, Jesus was the only individual on earth who could live according to the standards of the kingdom, and He was the only one qualified to explain the purposes and standards of the heavenly Father. This is why He is referred to as the living Word of God.

At the time of His teaching, none of Jesus' listeners had the spiritual ability to fulfill the demands of kingdom life. Jesus knew that they would have to wait until the Holy Spirit would become a part of their lives and He knew that that would not happen until after His death and resurrection. He also knew that it was His responsibility while He was on earth to both demonstrate and explain the ways of the kingdom to His followers. The Sermon on the Mount was His most concentrated and complete description of kingdom ways.

In the passage for today, Jesus began to wrap up His teaching. He put before His listeners the need to make the choice between the way of the kingdom and the way of the world. Jesus indicated that this choice was crucial because it involved a person's eternal destiny. He made it clear that it was not just enough to hear His words; rather, His words required action.

### **Read Matthew 7:13-14**

Jesus began this part of His teaching like He began other portions of the Sermon on the Mount — first a command, followed with an explanation. The command was "enter through the narrow gate."

According to Jesus, the two gates led to two distinctively different pathways, which in turn led to two opposite outcomes. He described the entrance into the kingdom of God as a narrow, tight gate. This gate opened on to a narrow way which was difficult to traverse, but which would have a glorious outcome — eternal life in the kingdom. In contrast to that, the wider, more appealing gate was easier to get through, and it led to a way that was easy to travel and less fraught with dangers. Unfortunately, the destination of this broad road would be destruction.

Two gates, two pathways, two outcomes, and two sets of travelers. Obviously, Jesus was concerned about those who are not on the correct roadway. The lesson is clear: failure to enter the narrow gate means that the individual remains on the road that leads to destruction.

In the Greek language, there are two words used to describe the “narrow” way, and both words are used in these verses. The word in verse 13 (“*stene*”) means “narrow” and “small,” and the word in verse 14 (“*tethlimmene*”) has reference to “persecution.” Thus the text informs us that the entry way for kingdom people is “small” and that the road to life will involve persecution and opposition.

“Narrowness” and “persecution” are major themes in this teaching. In chapter 5 Jesus announced that people who were persecuted and accused falsely because of righteousness could rejoice because they would have a great reward in heaven (*Matthew 5:10-12*). Later in the chapter He stated that kingdom people were to “love their enemies and pray for those who persecute” (*Matthew 5:44*). Later in this Gospel account, Matthew wrote more about the difficulties that kingdom people would face, including the well known verse in which Jesus said that He was sending His disciples out “like sheep among wolves” (*Matthew 10:16*). The entire Sermon on the Mount is a description of a narrow specific way of life. Kingdom people can expect to have challenges in their earthly lives but have a positive outlook in regard to eternity.

Jesus' description of the narrow and broad ways would have made sense to His hearers because Jewish, Greek, and Roman writers and teachers often employed such imagery in their explanations of life. The Jews might even have thought of passages from the Old Testament which gave instructions about the journey through life. For example, Psalm 1, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.” The Psalm ends with the statement, “For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (*Psalm 1:1, 6*).

The Israelites in Jesus' time were typically very religious. They observed the religious holidays and generally tried to obey their many religious laws. Yet these people were so far removed from a correct understanding of the ways of God that they were shocked by Jesus' description of the characteristics of the kingdom person. And when Jesus stated that their "righteousness had to surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in order to enter the kingdom of heaven," His words were too radical for them to believe.

Jesus wanted His fellow countrymen to understand that their religious practices had to change. Otherwise, they would be among the "many" who were on the road to destruction. The goal of His teaching was to redirect their thinking and to get them to get off the broad road and to seek the narrow gate which would lead to life.

Jesus has the same goal for people today. Many individuals in our communities are regularly engaged in religious activities, just like the Jews of Jesus' time. And just like the Jews of 2000 years ago, very few present day people are "laying up for themselves treasures in heaven," and are on the kingdom road. Too many individuals in our culture have limited or no concern about eternal matters and their relationship to God. Their hearts and thoughts are filled with their own desires and needs. By default, all these people are on the broad way that leads to destruction.

"Entering through the narrow gate" is a metaphor. It means to accept the teachings of Jesus — teachings which require us to love and obey one master, the sovereign God who reigns over everything in heaven and earth. The teachings require us to focus on, as the highest priority of our lives, "the kingdom of God and his righteousness." They require us to have a desire for purity which is so intense that we are willing to cut away any part of our lives that will cause us to sin. As Jesus dramatically said, "it is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." The words of Jesus are just as shocking and radical to people today as they were 2000 years ago.

Few people today have that degree of passion for God and His kingdom, yet kingdom people must have such a passion if they are to make progress on the narrow difficult road that Jesus has explained.

Now we turn to the next paragraph in these concluding statements of Jesus. Verses 15 through 20 are a warning. Jesus knew that His teaching was in conflict with the beliefs and practices of the religious leaders. He had previously pointed out how twisted and incorrect the teachings of the religious leaders had become. He did not want His listeners to become confused and sidetracked by the many voices of their earthly leaders. He knew that His listeners would never enter the small gate unless they rejected leaders who were teaching them incorrectly. This warning in verses 15 through 20 was given to help kingdom people stay on the narrow road.

### **Read Matthew 7:15-20**

Not all prophets are authentic. False prophets can speak appropriate words, show religious piety, and behave in ways that make them difficult to distinguish from true prophets. In spite of the difficulties, it is very important that kingdom people know how to distinguish God's truth from the incorrect ways proclaimed by others; in particular, how to recognize wolves in sheep's clothing.

A prophet is a person who stands before people to proclaim the words of God. True prophets always introduced their pronouncements with phrases such as "Hear the words of the Lord," or "Thus says the Lord." In the Old Testament, God began to send prophets to the Israelites to warn them of impending judgment because of their rebellion and disobedience. As you can imagine, the true prophets of God were not welcomed by the people because their words, which were really God's words, pointed out the sins of the people and what the consequences of the sins would be.

False prophets in the Scriptures were those who had not received any messages from God. False prophets constantly preached "peace" to people when, in reality, the storm clouds of God's judgment were gathering. There are several passages in the Old Testament which express the special hatred that God has for false prophets. For example, in the book of Ezekiel, God said, "Woe to the wicked prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! Your prophets, O Israel, are like jackels among ruins (*a jackel is like a wolf!*). ... Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, 'The LORD declares,' when the LORD has not sent them. ... Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says, 'Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you'" (*Ezekiel 13:1-9 excerpts*).

Jesus said that false religious teachers “come in sheep’s clothing.” In other words, they are disguised in ways that allow them to easily blend into religious activities. The first impressions that people have of them are not alarming. Their presentations can be very positive and appealing. Yet, underneath, false teachers are spiritually destructive. They are themselves on the wrong road, and they are responsible for drawing others to be with them. Jesus described them as “ferocious wolves”, set to devour true believers.

Throughout the New Testament there are many references to the problem of false teaching. The Apostle Paul was among those who wrote about this topic when he shared his insights with Timothy. He wrote, “The goal of our (that is, Paul’s and Timothy’s) instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (*1 Timothy 1:5-7*).

Jesus told His listeners that they could recognize false teachers “by their fruit.” The fruit of the godly instructor was “love from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and a sincere faith.” True teachers are people who care deeply about their listeners, want them to find God, learn His truth, be transformed by His grace, and grow in their relationship with Him. The goal of the true teacher is to produce people who are in love with God, whose lives are pure and holy, and who are being transformed by God’s grace.

False teachers are typically more concerned about building up their reputations, expanding their influence, and sometimes, increasing their material possessions. Because the focus of their lives is too much on themselves, they do not have a love that springs from a pure heart.

Jesus did not want kingdom people to judge by external appearances. Rather, He wanted teachers to be evaluated by the fruit they produce. As He stated in verses 16 through 18, the proof of the character of a tree or bush is in the fruit it produces. Good trees produce good fruit, and rotten trees, bad fruit. In the same way, the most dependable way to assess the quality of religious leaders comes from the recognition of the fruit they produce. A person transformed by and consistently dependent on the power of God's Spirit will live according to the traits of God's character because of God's empowerment. If the life of God is flowing through a person, he will bear good spiritual fruit and the observer can have confidence that he is an authentic kingdom person.

Jesus was, of course, thinking about the false prophetic voices of the Jewish religious leaders when He gave the warning. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made sharp distinctions between the teachings of Judaism and the original meanings of the Old Testament Law. I hope you remember the contrasts we studied in Matthew 5:21-47. Jesus introduced each of the examples in those verses with the words, "You have heard that it was said," referring to the incorrect interpretation of the religious leaders. He then introduced the correct original meanings intended by God with the words, "But I say to you." Jesus wanted everyone to know that the righteousness of kingdom people must surpass that of false teachers and prophets if they expect to enter the kingdom of heaven.

False prophets tear down the faith of believers and promote divisiveness, bitterness (*see I Timothy 6:3-5*), and various kinds of ungodliness (*see II Tim 1-9*). Discernment and recognition of the teachings of false prophets is needed in the Church today.

Jesus wanted His followers, those who had entered the narrow gate and were on the narrow road, to continue on faithfully, and to shine with God's glory in this dark world among people who were on the road to destruction. Jesus does not want any of us to get sidetracked on our spiritual journeys. Our world is filled with temptations and pressures. We are daily bombarded with "messages," and very few of the messages we hear and see are from God. Jesus wants us to discern what is good for our spiritual growth and what isn't.

Advice from kindergarten Sunday School:

O be careful little ears what you hear!  
O be careful little ears what you hear!  
For the Father up above  
Is looking down with love;  
O be careful little ears what you hear!

O be careful little eyes what you see!

O be careful little hands what you do!

O be careful little feet where you go!