

Lighthouse: Beware the Wide Gate and the False Prophet

Matthew 7:13-20

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[light candle – we will come back to that.]

Preference is one of the luxuries we enjoy in a place like Canada. For the most part we can have everything we want just the way we want it, and none of us can impose our preference on each other. So if I told you the only flavor of ice-cream worth eating is Tiger ice-cream, or if I said anyone who likes their steaks done anything other than rare is wrong you would tell me I was out to lunch.

But while you would have a pretty good case in situations like those, this same line of reasoning doesn't work with math. If you think 2 plus 2 is anything other than 4 everyone will tell you your opinions don't add up. And that's because math isn't about preference, it is about facts.

So look at the list I've put up on the screen, and with the person beside you decide whether each line is fact or opinion.

Fact or Opinion?

Playstation is better than xbox

Pregnant women should not drink alcohol

Violent video games are bad for young children

Global warming is melting polar ice

Jesus is the only way to God

[Discussion]

Please turn with me to Matthew chapter 7. We will be picking up in verse 13.

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If you are just joining us, we are nearing the end of a series through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In these three chapters, Matthew 5, 6 and 7, Jesus tells us what it means to be transformed by His grace and follow Him.

Would someone who has their Bible open read Matthew 7:13 and 14 for me?

[Read Matthew 7:13-14]

Now Matthew 7 is the conclusion of Jesus' sermon, and so He is summing up what He has already said.

So Jesus starts by saying: "don't be judgmental, but at the same time don't throw out all your judgment." After you've judged where the log is in your own eye and taken it out then turn around and try to help your friends escape the grip of sin that is keeping them from winning at life.

But be careful here, you need to judge who wants your help and who doesn't. If you don't you will end up throwing pigs at pearls 😊

And then Jesus says "You've got a good Father who wants to give you, not what you ask for, but the good things He knows you need. So pray expecting to be conformed into the image of Christ. That's the best thing that can happen to you. That is how you win at life.

And then turn the generosity you've received from your good Father out to those around you. Do onto others what you would have them do to you whether they do it or not. That's how Jesus has summed up His sermon so far.

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Now, Jesus turns His attention to three warnings. These are warnings He thinks His disciples and people like us need to hear. We are going to cover the first two today and the last one next week.

The first warning is of the wide gate that we just read about in verses 13 and 14.

Jesus says don't go through that one. It ends badly. But here is the crazy thing to get your head around: Jesus gives this warning to His disciples because He thinks we won't do this automatically. Jesus thinks people like us are going to choose the wrong gate by default.

And here we get one of those truth claims from Jesus that sounds narrow-minded or bigoted in our contemporary culture.

Jesus says "Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Contrasting this He says "wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction." Jesus says this isn't just His opinion, it's a fact.

And that means while there are multiple faith options – you can be Christian or Muslim or Jewish; you can be Atheist or Agnostic; you can be Buddhist or Hindu or New Age – yet Jesus says "there aren't many gates, there are only two." You either enter through the narrow gate or you enter through the wide gate. There are no other alternatives.

Now there are two levels to this warning. The first has to do with placing your trust in Jesus for salvation. When His disciples asked how they could get to where He was going Jesus told them:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6)

Jesus believed that if you want to win at life, this will only happen if you live your life in line with God, and He is the only path that will take you there. That's a statement of fact. He is either right, or He is wrong.

Now there are roughly 2.1 billion people on earth who claim to be Christians. That means that roughly 5 billion people, or 2/3 of the entire population, don't. And so Jesus' truth claim here is that most of humanity is not headed towards the Father and eternal life. Most of humanity is headed through the wide gate to destruction and separation from God.

Now Jesus isn't happy about this. The Bible tells us God doesn't want anyone to perish. When people questioned Peter about why Jesus was taking so long to return Peter responded:

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. (2 Peter 3:9 NLT)

But friends, in spite of what God wants, He allows His desire here to be thwarted. God doesn't force us to do His will. And Jesus says in spite of how much God loves us, the reality is most resist His love to our own demise.

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At this point we need to address a concern that I hear often from Christians and non-Christians alike. And the question is: how could a loving God who is full of mercy and grace send people, good people, to a place of eternal torment simply because they didn't trust in Jesus. (For bad people like Devin Kelley down in Texas we all agree he deserves punishment). We are just concerned about the rest of us good people. It doesn't seem fair!¹

Here is how the Bible responds. The Bible says don't worry, no good people are ever separated from the Father. No good people go to Hell. That's the good news, but the bad news is the reason this is true is that there are no good people.

Two verses before this Jesus calls all human parents who take care of their kids evil. Only God is good. And the Bible says this over and over again. So the Prophet Jeremiah tell us:

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? (Jeremiah 17:9 NLT)

From Adam and Eve to Revelation, people are described not as good, and just stumbling into the occasional bad thing, but as treasonous sinners in rebellion against God. We are beings who don't want to submit to the fact that God is God, and instead want to be the gods of our own little universes. And the Bible calls that rebellion sin. And the bigger and more important the person you sin against the more grievous the consequences.

¹ See Romans 9:6-33 for a text on God's justice in electing to save some and ordaining to send others to hell.

Here is what I mean. A lie is a lie, but if you were standing in the line up at McDonalds and there was a really nice car parked out in the parking lot. And in an attempt to impress, you asked the person at the register “how do you like my car?” And they responded “That’s not your car, that’s my car.” “Your lie would be found out, you might feel a bit sheepish, but other than that you wouldn’t have any consequences – you would get your burger, walk out and probably never see that person again.

But as the person you lie to becomes more important the consequences of the lie also increase. If you lie to your boyfriend or girlfriend or husband or wife about what you did last Saturday, but they find out anyway, there is going to be some very hurt feelings and possibly a breach in your relationship – if you do this often enough you are going to break up.

But if you lie to your country, and you are found out, you are charged with the serious offence of perjury or treason. Crimes like this can lead to imprisonment or even death.

So a lie is a lie, but the consequences depend on who you lied to.

Turn to the person beside you and ask them “Why does lying to a person of less importance lead to less consequences than lying to a person of more importance?”

[Discussion]

The next line in this argument is that since God is the infinite authority in the universe treason committed against Him is deserving of infinite consequences.

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But at this point people respond: isn’t God supposed to be a God of love. Can’t He just forgive?

Last Sunday at 11:30am Devin Kelley entered First Baptist Church down in Sutherland Springs, Texas while the service was going. He started shooting. He walked up and down the aisle executing people with his assault rifle – old people, pregnant women, kids (the youngest being 17 months. Later Kelley killed himself.

Now imagine a scenario where Kelley didn’t die but was arrested and found himself in court. And then imagine he “fortunately” found himself before a “loving” judge who decided he would forgive instead of impose consequences. What would happen? Everyone protest that crimes have penalties, love must not over rule justice.

That would be crazy, but what is even crazier is to think that God could be less just than we are. While God is loving, He also can not allow sin to go unpunished. If He did, He would not be good.

Ok, perhaps it's fair for God to punish terrible sinners, but what about the crimes of my grandmother which were nothing like Devin Kelley's. Isn't eternal separation from God overkill for people like that?

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This objection comes from a misunderstanding not of how bad our crimes are, but of who God is. We like to imagine God as a smiling grandfather who just accepts everything that happens around him because he has lost touch with reality. But the Bible describes God as sovereign and holy. That means He hasn't lost touch and He is the definition of everything that is righteous and good. And it also means that He is totally different from us. To depict this Hebrews contrasts God with the rest of creation saying:

Our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29)

(paper to candle) Now this candle is not what I would call a consuming fire, but let your imagination to run wild. What happens when paper comes in contact with fire? (paper to candle) The paper gets destroyed, it gets burnt up. And the reason it gets consumed is that fire and paper are different. Their natures are opposed one to the other.

And this is what it means for God to be holy. The standard of holiness is so hot that the best of us, like Spencer or Kaitlynn or Mother Theresa; and the worst of us, like Devin Kelley, are really the same when compared to God. All of us are sinners who fall short of the glory of God. And because of this we all find ourselves standing like dry paper before open flame.²

So how do we fix this?... Jesus gives us an answer.

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The only way people like us can be around a holy God is for us to become like Him. We have to take on His nature or else we will be consumed by Him. This is why Peter tells us:

Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15-16)

Now the good news in this is that Jesus wants you to win at life here on earth and for eternity. And He can make it happen. While we are all treasonous sinners who have lived in rebellion against a holy God, in His mercy and grace God has made a single way for convicts like us to become holy like Him. And the Bible says if we follow His way we can escape being consumed by His holiness and punished for our rebellion.

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So how do we receive this undeserved gift? It's not by trying to impress God, that's impossible. The Bible tells us:

² Romans 3:23; 6:23

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In another place Paul says God sent His sinless Son Jesus to become sin for you; to take care of not the “little” sins you have committed, but the desperately wicked and rebellious heart that lies at your core. God sent Jesus to do this for you so that you could become the righteous of God – so that we could be holy.³

But in Matthew 7 Jesus says the reality is most people do not want to become what God is. The desperately wicked human heart is offended at the idea that it is not worthy. And just like Adam and Eve took a shot at equality with God on their own terms, Jesus says most people don’t want to accept God’s terms for how to remedy this problem. Jesus says “beware the wide gate that leads to destruction.”

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And that is the first level of this warning – a level that warns us how to remedy the problem God’s holiness poses to us sinners. Then Jesus gives us a second warning. Look at verse 15.

[Read Matthew 7:15]

If in the first warning, the wide gate, Jesus urges us to separate ourselves from the worldly majority, but here Jesus warns that there are those in church, here at Lighthouse, who look impressive but are actually false Christians. There are sleeper agents in our midst.⁴

And Jesus tells us that the difficult thing about these undercover enemies is that they look just like the rest of us – they look like sheep.

Now throughout the Gospels Jesus refers to those who obediently follow Him as sheep, and He contrasts them with goats who know the right answers but don’t do the right actions – the Pharisees were goats.⁵ But here He talks about false prophets and describes them as ferocious wolves.

A prophet here is anyone who proports to be leading you to Christ. So a pastor, a home group leader, or a friend who is a little further on in their spiritual journey than you.

And the reality is that both goats and wolves can wear sheep’s clothing – they can look like the rest of us. But sheep, goats and wolves are not equal.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁴ Brunner, D. “The Christbook: Matthew 1-12” (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub Co), 2004. pg 352.

⁵ Matthew 25:31-46

Turn to the person beside you and ask them: “Based on Jesus’ illustration how would you compare and contrast sheep, goats and wolves?”

[Discussion]

So how are we to know who is a sheep and who is a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Jesus says we need to look not at appearances but affects, not at the skin but at the fruit. Look at verses 16 and following.

[Read Matthew 7:16-20]

Now sheep aren’t known for their cunning intellect – don’t be offended, but Jesus says not only are none of us good, none of us are very smart either. And depending on how far you push the illustration we smell bad too. And yet Jesus says sheep can figure out who the wolves are by looking at what they produce.

So have you ever seen an apple tree have a bad day and produce cherries by accident? No, grafting aside, every tree reproduces its own kind – there is no way to “fake” fruit. And Jesus says even sheep can figure this out. So how do we tell a wolf from a prophet?

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There are at least two ways a person’s fruit can be tested. First you have the “gate” test. So does everything this person is teaching you point to Christ; His glory and the expanse of His Kingdom? Or does the focus of teaching point to something else? Even good things like social justice or missional outreach must be secondary to a focus on Christ and His Kingdom because good prophets lead sheep through the small gate. Movement towards any other destination, no matter how good it is, is evidence a wolf is present.

A second test for sheep-skin wearing wolves is the “road” test. Sheep must both enter through the small gate and walk the narrow road. And so good prophets are those who encourage the sheep to take the high road of obedience to Christ’s commands. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

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One of the first times the early church encountered sheep-skin wearing wolves came with the Marcions in the second century. These people taught the love of God but not the justice of God. They taught that God accepted everyone and never judged. And the fruit of this heresy led to unprincipled and immoral living. It led to the disobedience of God’s commands.

And if you look at history, the more things change the more they stay the same. So this is the exact argument that people are attacking Christianity with today when they question how God could punish sinners. They have created God in their own image who loves and turns a blind eye to sin.

But Jesus says good prophets, good sheep, good disciples are good, not because we are a bit better than the sinners around us, but because we have undeservedly received God's grace. And then, because we are being conformed into His image, we give ourselves to following His law and giving grace to the people around us. It is this fruit that becomes the evidence we have been saved.

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So what kind of fruit are you producing? What kind of fruit do you see produced around you here in our community? Is it fruit that points to the small gate of Christ's salvation and walks the narrow road of obedient discipleship? Or do you find yourself writing off what Jesus says to do your own thing?

Friends it turns out fruit, like truth is more like math than preference; it's based on facts that naturally show themselves in our lives, not beliefs we hold in our heads. Jesus saves sinners, but when we've really been saved we give ourselves to looking like Him with all our strength. We bear good fruit. We pursue obedience, and we treat the people around us with the free grace Jesus has given us. Real Christians are on a journey to looking like Christ.

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We are going to move into our responsive worship time here again. Would you stand with me? Cat and Kaitlynn if you could come that would be great. And Spencer and Nikki if you could take your spots by the back doors.

Take a few seconds of silence and reflect on whether you've been living your life as though following the commands of Christ are matters of opinion and preference instead of truth. If this has been you then you are missing out on the real life that Jesus offers those who live their lives in line with His word. And so I want to encourage you to go and get someone to pray for you. Maybe you want to ask the person beside you to pray for you, or maybe you want to go and have one of the people in the back pray for you. But don't leave here without getting this right with Jesus.

Allow Jesus to start conforming you into His image in this area of your life.

After you've done this then go check out the stations. And after a few minutes we will move into communion and more worship.