

“Hard Choices”
Matthew 7:13-27
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Please open your Bible to the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew chapter 5 – I want you to briefly review it with me.

The sermon begins with what we call the Beatitudes – the blessings.

And Jesus begins by telling the crowd how available he is to those who recognize their need of him.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I really don't believe this Beatitude or the rest were written to challenge Christians to a greater or deeper religious commitment.

I don't think they were written to show a non-Christian what he or she needed to do to become Christian.

They were written to those who already know they can't do it on their own, those who already know they need God!

Jesus says, “CONGRATULATIONS” – GOD HAS COME TO YOU!

He has come to you in the person of Jesus.

He offers not a code of conduct, not a religion,
but himself.

But understand, Jesus says, this relationship means something.

This relationship is not casual but deeply committed.

This relationship does result in a life differently lived than before.

Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them... (v20) For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

I want you to know, Jesus says, that this new relationship doesn't result in mere outward conformity to a moral code.

You say you don't murder, commit adultery, break your promises, or act unkindly toward those who are kind to you.

But I tell you

- to reconcile with your enemies,
- be pure in your thoughts about the opposite sex,
- live in total commitment to your spouse,
- live in complete honesty in your dealings with others,
- and love those who hate you.

This requires an inward change not just an outward conformity and that is what Jesus came to do – bring us into relationship with himself and change us.

Building on that same theme of an inward change, Jesus says that those who are part of the Kingdom, those who are rightly related to him, aren't hypocrites.

Matthew 6:1 "Be careful not to do your `acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them.

Then in verses 2, 5 and 16, using the religious practices of giving, praying and fasting as examples, Jesus calls for a genuineness that gives anonymously, prays privately and fasts inconspicuously.

Christianity is not about

- how different we are than others,
- or even what others think of our dedication to religion,
- **but is about our relationship with Jesus.**

In the next section of his sermon Jesus says,

Matthew 6:19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... (v20) But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... and (v24) "No one can serve two masters."

Jesus says that **what** you give your life to and **who** you give your life to make all the difference in this world and the world to come.

Only **one** can be truly lord of your life – you or Jesus.

Then to allay our natural fears, Jesus says he **is trustworthy** to follow.

Matthew 6:25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear... (v32-33) Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well... (v7:11) If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

He does not call us to uncertainty, insecurity and insufficiency but in following him we may trust him to meet our needs and more, much more – life forever.

Jesus has laid out the offer of **himself** to them and to us.

To live in relationship with Jesus means that all other relationships will change.

In his sermon Jesus calls us to a radically different life.

By his powerful presence in our lives we can:

- 5:21& 43 love instead of hate,
- 5:24 be forgiving instead of vengeful,
- 5:28 loving instead of lustful,
- 5:32 committed instead of conditional,
- 5:34 completely honest instead of conveniently deceitful,
- 6:20 investing instead of hoarding,
- 6:25 trusting instead of fearful,
- 7:1 accepting instead of judgmental,
- A Christ-follower instead of self-serving.

But he has made it clear that to receive him is not just to add these good attributes to ones otherwise full life but to receive him means an active life-changing relationship – changing from the inside out.

And in 6:24 he has made it perfectly clear that he will not, cannot be, one of many masters in our lives – he cannot be merely an option.

And so he comes to his conclusion.

It is decision time!

Which life do you want?

The one the world offers or the one he offers?

In his conclusion Jesus pulls no punches.

His words are hard-hitting and unconditional.

There's no half-way, partial commitment, one foot in the world and the other in kingdom of God.

We are either Christ-followers or we are world-followers – and the difference is obvious.

And he clearly lays out the ultimate results of the choice – death or life.

He does this with four word-pictures - two gates, two trees, two doers and two houses.

Stand with me and hear the words of Jesus!

Matthew 7:13-27

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

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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

perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

These are very disturbing words because they challenge how some of us may define Christianity, even our own Christianity.

This past week this text pushed me into the uncomfortable place of evaluating my own Christianity – even to the point of asking myself if I am truly a Christian.

I think this text will put you in the same uncomfortable place.

I say "uncomfortable" but not discouraging.

Because the result Jesus seeks is that we would choose him – that we would come to him for mercy and grace.

As I said earlier, the four word pictures that Jesus uses to challenge us to decision are two gates, two trees, two doers and two houses.

What you will see with each successive picture is that Jesus tightens the focus or narrows the scope of who he is addressing.

- With the two **gates** he is talking about all humanity – Christians compared to non-Christians.
- With the two **trees** he is talking about Christians – But it is Nominal Christians, meaning Christian in name only, compared to those who truly are Christians.
- With the two **doers** he is talking about practicing Christians – but with a distinction between those who merely conform to Christian custom and those who are obediently following Jesus.
- With the two **houses** Jesus is giving a conclusion to the conclusion – the difference between genuine and false

Christianity is not in the appearance but in the foundation – a relationship with Jesus that results in obedience.

I. Let's go back to the first word picture – the two gates.

Matthew 7:13-14 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

The first things you notice are that in this word-picture Jesus describes two gates, two roads, two destinations and two crowds.

If we think of other passages where Jesus uses gates and roads or ways it will become apparent that the gate and road are describing the same thing – more on that later.

The gate or road **to destruction** is wide or broad.

“Broad” can mean spacious or roomy.

Through this gate and on this road there is plenty of room for different opinions.

There is plenty of room for different lifestyles.

There is tolerance, permissiveness, no boundaries in thought or conduct.

Through this gate and on this road we need leave nothing behind.

We can take our prejudices, our anger, our pride, our self-righteousness, our lust, and any other attitude we choose.

In his autobiography C. S. Lewis spoke of how at 13 he began to broaden his mind from the restrictions of his childhood religion. He wrote, “I was soon changing ‘I believe’ to ‘I feel’. And oh, the relief it...From the (tyrannical) noon (heat) of (God’s) revelation I passed into the cool evening twilight of Higher Thought, where there was nothing to be obeyed, and nothing to be believed except what was either comforting or exciting.” (C.S.Lewis Surprised by Joy 63)

That's the religion of many people – a religion of their own making, a god of their own creation, and one that conforms to their assumptions.

- If there **are** terrible sin they are what **others** do.
- And if there is a god, he exists to support me.
Notice the wide gate/broad road is the choice of the many – it is the religion, the philosophy, the life of the masses.

But also notice it is the road to destruction.

Don Carson wrote, “The pages of the Bible strain metaphor and exhaust the resources of language in describing the holy delights of the new heaven and the new earth still to come; but they scarcely do less in outlining the horrors and terrors of hell. The latter is variously described as the place of outer darkness, the place where the worm will not die, the place of exclusion and rejection, the place of burning and torment, the place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. I am not trying to give hell’s coordinates, nor place it on a map. Just as I find myself unable to describe the new heaven and earth except in the metaphors of Scripture, so I cannot describe hell except in the metaphors of Scripture. **But those metaphors are staggering.**” (Carson 134)

But notice the narrow gate, the narrow road.

“Narrow” is from the verb that means experiencing trouble or difficulty.

The gate is narrow, constricted, and not easily found.

To enter the kingdom of God, to become a Christian is hard!

Wait a minute, I thought becoming a Christian was easy.

I thought the whole point of grace was that we don’t have to do anything – God has done it all.

It is true that God has done it all, it is true that it is all of grace.

But it is equally true that it is hard.

We want to become Christians on our terms instead of God’s terms.

You see, to go through this gate to the kingdom of God requires that we leave everything else behind.

We have to abandon our sin, our selfish ambition, our independence, and our rights.

We have to let go of ourselves to take hold of Jesus.

And that's hard because nearly everything in us says "hang on to what you can see, trust yourself, get what you can while the getting is good."

In Matthew 19 it is recorded that a wealthy man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus said to him,

"...go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth."

When the disciples heard this they asked in astonishment, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

To abandon what we naturally cling to in order to lay hold of Jesus is the hardest thing we will ever do but with God all things are possible.

What does it mean then to enter the narrow gate?

It is not just agreeing to **not** do certain things or **to** do others. The gate, the road is a person.

In Jesus' word-picture **he** is the narrow gate.

John 10:7 "Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep."

John 14:6 "Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

To enter the gate is to trust Jesus.

To enter the gate is to take hold of him.

To enter the gate is to follow him.

We don't just decide to be more conservative in our lifestyle (to drink less, or go to church more often) and call that the gate or the road of Christianity.

The narrow gate or road is much more dynamic than that – it is following Jesus – it is day by day, it is fluid, flexible, ever-changing, dynamic.

It is not a list of dos and don'ts, it is relationship and active daily following.

He is the gate, **he** is the road and **he** is the life.

To enter means to live in a follower relationship with Jesus.

The kingdom is about the **King** not just about doing a list of things.

This is a call to accept the **King**, to receive **him** as saving/Lord, to resolve to follow **him**.

And Jesus calls us to that, "Enter through the narrow gate."

Some of you in this room need to take the action Jesus lays before you.

Abandon everything else including yourself and take hold of him.

II. The second word-picture of the two trees is not about the difference between the many and the few but the difference between some of the few and others of the few.

It is the difference between Christian in name only and truly Christian.

Matthew 7:15-20 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

The specific illustration Jesus gives is about those who claim to be Christian teachers.

But I am convinced that in the context this applies **not only** to those who claim to be teachers **but to all** who **claim** to be Christian but aren't.

And the point of the passage is that you can eventually tell the difference between false Christians and true Christ-followers.

And the difference will be seen in what they produce.

A thornbush bears thorns and a fig tree bears figs.

A genuine Christian bears good fruit – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

A fake Christian bears bad fruit - “immorality, impurity... hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy... and the like”

This is hard because when we look at ourselves we see a mixture of the good and bad.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.”

If, even after years of claiming to be a Christian, our lives are characterized by bad fruit, we have reason to wonder.

If we do not see the fruit of the Spirit, the likeness of Jesus, beginning to appear, there is reason to wonder about the genuineness of our faith.

Please don't be unbiblically hard on yourself.

The issue is not perfection but direction.

It is not that you must be instantly perfect in Christlikeness but it is that the direction of your life is Christlikeness.

Jesus says that to be a follower of his makes a difference in our lives.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has laid out a kingdom ethic – he has described the changed heart of one who has entered the kingdom – to be related to Jesus changes us.

Nominal Christianity is no Christianity at all.

If you are Christian in name only, enter the narrow gate today.

III. In the third word-picture, Jesus narrows the focus even more.

In the word-picture of the **two gates** Jesus contrasted Christians with non-Christians.

In the word-picture of the **two trees** Jesus contrasted true Christians with false Christians - Christians in name only.

Now in this word-picture of the two doers, Jesus marks the difference between the apparently Christian and the true Christian.

One of the people described here **looks like the real thing** but isn't. He or she even does outstanding ministry in Jesus' name but they aren't in the kingdom.

This is the most disturbing part of Jesus' conclusion.

Listen to him again.

Matthew 7:21-23 ""Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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 perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

This is disturbingly close to home.

They (we?) profess Christ ("Lord, Lord") and they (we?) display spiritual gifts (prophecy, exorcism and miracles) but they (we?) don't do the will of God.

We have the right doctrine, we even enthusiastically engage in ministry but our private lives don't reflect a relationship with Jesus.

Jesus said in Luke 6:46 ""Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

John Stott wrote, "We who claim to be Christians in our day have made a profession of faith in Jesus privately in conversion and publicly in baptism and/or confirmation. We appear to honor Jesus by

referring to him as ‘the Lord’ or ‘our Lord’. We recite the Apostles’ Creed in church, and sing hymns expressive of our devotion to Christ. We even exercise a variety of ministries in his name. But he is not impressed by our pious and orthodox words. He still asks for evidence of our sincerity in good works of obedience.” (Stott 208)

Another man said, “It is easy to look like an evangelical Christian without being one.”

- First learn the language: “born-again”, “Jesus” instead of just God or the “man upstairs”, “saved”, etc.
- Second learn certain customs: modesty in dress; disdain for bad habits such as smoking, drinking to excess, foul language, etc.; regular church attendance, especially Sunday School or Bible Study; pray at meal time, make respectable financial contributions to the church; and a few other things and you can pass for a good Christian quite easily.
- Third have the right heritage: come from a Christian family, have a clergyman or missionary relative, or come from a conservative evangelical church and it will be assumed you are a believer. (Kent Hughes 253)

When we stand before God in the end we will not be asked if we prayed a prayer asking Jesus into our hearts or if we were baptized or confirmed, or even if we did outstanding things for God.

The test will be whether Jesus knows us.

Standing before God will those who sang on worship teams, taught Sunday School, gave great amounts of money to the church and even led others to Christ and Jesus will say, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”

The test is not how well I’ve done but whether I am truly related to Jesus.

Have I entered the narrow gate, do I cling to Jesus alone, am I following him **as evidenced by my obedience to him in the simple everyday relationships of life.**

God has not called us to spectacular signs and wonders, to great accomplishments, but to the simplicity of moral obedience.

And this is not law keeping and it is not cold duty
It is active, willing responsiveness to Jesus.

It is not a prescribed path to walk but a person to follow.

Fredrick Bruner wrote:

“It is possible to work for Jesus and yet not work under him. We can be intoxicated by the power of Christ’s person and yet be indifferent or even hostile to keeping his hard commands where they pinch us. It is possible to be powerful for Jesus and yet not allow Jesus to be powerful in us.... It is strangely possible to serve and even to glorify Christ and yet in actual life not to obey him. The fact that ‘many’ will present their (Christ-naming spiritual-success) credentials at the judgment and that even then they will not be admitted should be genuinely frightening to all of us.... Where a (Christ-naming spiritually successful person) wins others to Christ, but cherishes hatred for one’s rivals or unrepented lust for other women or men, that (Christ-naming and spiritual success) count for nothing at all. In each case Jesus wants reality...He wants to be Lord of both their message and their morality.” (Bruner 287)

Jesus is asking us to look within.

Do our lives reflect the ethics of the King?

Remember from earlier in the Sermon on the Mount?

To follow Jesus means:

- Not a spirit of anger and retaliation but forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Not lustful attitudes and actions but faithfulness to one’s spouse.
- Not a duplicity and evasiveness but a forthrightness and simplicity where what you say is what you mean.
- Not revenge but true mercy toward those who offend or even harm us.
- Not self-serving in our giving, praying and fasting but genuine.
- Not seeking our own kingdom but God’s kingdom.
- Concern for God’s name, his kingdom and his will more than our own.
- Trusting God in this life for this life rather than trusting mainly in ourselves.
- Accepting, forgiving, and engaging instead of judging and rejecting.

- Living in an “asking and receiving” relationship with our Father in heaven.

Jesus said that is what Kingdom living looks like, that is what following him is about.

IV. In the last word-picture Jesus describes two houses.

And they look no different from the outside.

The only difference is in their foundations.

Matthew 7:24-27 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

One is built on a relationship with Jesus – the rock.

And that relationship results not only in hearing but also putting into practice the words of Jesus.

Is your Christianity more of convenience than conviction?

Do you call yourself a Christian but you are not a Christ-follower?

Have you wanted the gift of heaven without the Giver?

Is Christianity for you more a doctrine to be held than a relationship to be lived?

What do you do?

Plead for God's mercy to break through your cold, self-centered heart!

No amount of resolve to work harder will make the difference.

We need God's gracious intervention to melt our indifference, break up the ground of resistance, and give us a desire for Jesus.

I'm not asking you to do anything but beg for God's mercy.

You can't fix it, God must!

That is something of what it means to be "poor in spirit" – helpless and even hopeless apart from God's intervention.