

Narrow Gate and False Prophets

Matthew 7:12-20

Turn to Matthew 7. Jesus said many kind things that we love to hear, and we repeat them to ourselves and to each other. *Good news from God for the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* That's always music to our ears and our souls. *Good news from God for the poor in spirit* – what could be better?

Later in Matthew Jesus will say, *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul.* Those words move us and attract us, and he hopes we will respond that way. Rest for our souls.

But Jesus also gave quite a few warnings about what would happen to people who walked away. Warnings to people who were walking away from the kingdom of heaven, and from the one who offers rest for our souls.

So Jesus began the Sermon with beatitudes, blessings, good news from God for all needy people, and Jesus ended the Sermon with four warnings. We'll do the first two this Sunday, and last two next Sunday.

The warnings scare us, and so we tend to avoid them. They make us feel uneasy, and of course we don't like that. But that's not fair to Jesus just to hang on to the kind words. Think of the warnings as coming from the Father in heaven who loves us.

Picture parents teaching their children to stay away from the highway, where the cars and trucks go by so fast. Imagine parents telling their children not to play near a big waterfall that would sweep them away if they fell in. Warnings are not a bad idea. The world is a spiritually dangerous place, for every one of us. These are warnings from someone who knows the dangers.

Sermon on the Mount Summary - Mt 7:12

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. This line is the last ethical teaching in the Sermon, it is the Lord's Sermon summary. It also sums up the Law and the Prophets. If we want a one line summary of the beatitudes, this is it. If we want a one line summary of how a disciple of Christ lives, this is it.

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you. Let's think about our own households. People in our own households can be very hard to live with. "If I was acting like that, how would I like to be treated?" That's the starting point.

Think about our neighbours, and our work places. Think about enemies, those who work against us. Earlier in the Sermon, Jesus very clearly included our enemies in this, our opponents in all kinds of way. *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.*

This is the center of righteousness in the Sermon. If we hunger and thirst for this righteousness, we will be filled. This is the righteousness that needs to go past the scribes and Pharisees. They had a different kind of righteousness, did not do well at this.

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. What would that look like, when we'd found it? What does finding the kingdom and God's righteousness look like in our lives? *In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.*

I am not preaching this because I like it. I am not good at this, and what's worse, a lot of the time I do not even want to be good at this. I want to do to them as they did to me. I am preaching this because the Lord's Sermon has backed me into a corner on this.

After that one line summary of the whole Sermon, Jesus ended the Sermon by warning us four times. We'll look at the first two warnings today, the narrow gate, and false prophets.

First Warning: The Narrow Gate – Mt 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 narrow is the gate and steep the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

People don't have to look for the wide gate, they just enter. We have to look for the narrow gate. Jesus could have said, "I am so glad most people will find it." But that's not what he said. He said, "only a few find it."

This warning is simple: don't take any of my words lightly, says Jesus. Eternal life and eternal destruction are on the line, says Jesus. So, am I merciful? Do I seek peace with those who oppose me? Do I hunger and thirst after righteousness? It matters, a lot.

No one misses the narrow gate because they are not good enough. No one misses because they are not that generous, because they are just too evil and too sinful to live that life. No one.

Ask, the Lord just said, ask, everyone who asks receives. Everyone who seeks this gate will find it. For everyone who knocks, this gate will be opened. God designed all this for the poor in spirit, remember that. God gives us a lot of help in this.

But following Christ is not an accessory to life to make life easier, like air conditioning or a reliable vehicle. Following Christ, being beatitude disciples, is either the first business of life, or we were not listening.

There is unlimited forgiveness for those who seek this and fail along the way, those who seek this and sin. This really is designed for the poor in spirit. Just don't take it lightly. To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, like Jesus says in Mt 6, is not a tip to being a better than average Christian. It is the only way to eternal life.

In particular, the gate is this: in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you. If the gate was reduced to one line, that would be it. In our normal circles, the people in an ordinary day, ordinary week and month, let's act this way.

The Lord who loves us and died for us knows this is not easy for us. He knows we are poor in spirit, that we sin often and have bad habits. He knows this is a difficult path, and that most people are not on it. He was tempted in all ways, as we are, and he in his temptations he was surrounded by his own weakness. It was a narrow gate and steep path also for him.

He's concerned, my brothers and sisters, that we will take his words too casually. He's concerned about people who have real interest but are sure there must be an easier way to do this. His opening line was, *Enter through the narrow gate.*

Among you, my brothers and sisters, the evidence says you have already heard this call, and you have found the narrow gate. We are all a bit clumsy at this, and sometimes it does not look very good. But Jesus is giving us the lay of the land, like a spiritual map, so that we will know the terrain and what is important. Enter through the narrow gate.

Second Warning - False Prophets – Mt 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 does good fruit, but a bad tree does bad fruit. A good tree cannot do bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot do good fruit. Every tree that does not do good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

The second, third, and fourth warnings are about different kinds of deceiving. This second warning, the false prophets warning, is about deceivers coming into the church. In the third warning, not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," people deceive themselves because they have powerful ministries. And in the fourth warning, the wise and foolish builders, people deceive themselves because they always hear the message, thinking that hearing is enough.

In this second warning, about false prophets, Jesus assumes his followers are a distinct group, a congregation. The Lord does not use the word "church," here, but that's what he's assuming.

So he warns the group about false prophets. False prophets are mentioned often in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Jesus means anyone who claims to speak for God, not just those who say they are prophets, but anyone who enters the group and says they speak for God. Ferocious wolves. These false proclaimers are horribly dangerous, they are disastrous for God's people, they do great damage. So, beware of them. They are not what they seem.

By their fruit you will recognize them. And he ends, thus by their fruit you will recognize them. Jesus is giving us a way to recognize them. By their fruit.

Perhaps you noticed something weird in my translation of these verses. Your Bible says something like "every good tree **bears** good fruit," but I said, "every good tree **does** good fruit." "Bears fruit" is a fine translation. But there is a simple common Greek word translated "do" that gets used a lot of times in the last part of Matthew 7.

The way to recognize a false prophet is not from what they **say**, but from what they **do**. Jesus says this three different ways, he is remarkably repetitive here:

***Do** to others what you would have them **do** to you.
Likewise, every good tree **does** good fruit, but a bad tree **does** bad fruit.
A good tree cannot **do** bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot **do** good fruit.
Every tree that will not **do** good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

The fruit is the beatitudes, the fruit is the whole Sermon on the Mount, they treat others as they would like to be treated. Sometimes it takes a very sharp theological mind to figure what's wrong with the message that false prophets proclaim.

But you don't need a theological mind to see if these people are meek, if they are merciful, if they make peace with their enemies, if they are laying up treasure in heaven.

How do the false prophets treat the ordinary people in their lives, especially with the trouble makers in their lives? How do they act? This test, says Jesus, is completely reliable. It will never steer you wrong. If they are not beatitude disciples, they are false prophets. It takes a while to see this sometimes, but keep your eyes open, this test always works.

In Galatians 5, Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit. That list of nine things that the Holy Spirit produces is much like the beatitudes. What the Spirit produces, and what the beatitudes invite, are very similar. When Jesus speaks of good fruit from good trees, he's not thinking about fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. But if we put the fruit of the Spirit in here, we'd be pretty close.

And our church is now selecting an elder. The qualifications for elders in the New Testament are the same thing again. Elders are not chosen for spiritual gifts, not for their skills or abilities. The requirements of church leaders are godly character. How do they live in the church, how do they live with their families, how do they live with the unbelievers around them?

The leaders of the church show themselves to be beatitude disciples, which is the only kind of disciple Christ has. The leaders of the church are not perfect, not by any stretch, but the fruit of the Spirit is regularly and normally evident in their lives.

That's why Peter can say to the elders in 1 Peter 5 that they should lead by example. And that is exactly what the false proclaimers do not have, says Jesus. They don't pass the beatitude test, they don't pass the fruit of the Spirit test, they don't pass the godly character of elders test. They don't do good fruit, because they are bad trees. They will be thrown into the fire.

So be careful. There are so many voices out there that we swallow up, famous preachers and writers and speakers, and we have no idea how they live, but their message is attractive.

Many of them are beatitude disciples, and plenty of them are not, but dangerous false prophets. Beware of the wonderful voice and the wonderful talking head, when you don't know how the person lives. Beware of the wonderful writer, when you have no idea if they do good or bad fruit.

Our Lord loves us, and these warnings are his way of saying, "don't play near the freeway, and don't play near that waterfall. I've told you the good news," he says to us, "and now I'm telling you what to watch out for, so you stay safe with me." Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for the good news, thank you for your kindness, thank you that you designed this for the poor in spirit. Thank you that everyone who asks for these things receives them, everyone who seeks will find, everyone who knocks will find the door open. Thank you that no one loses out because they are not good enough.

Thank you for being so straight forward, for saying it like it is, Lord, for helping us keep our eyes open. And now, keep being our Shepherd, Lord. We want that narrow gate, and we want that path to life. We want you and we want the kingdom of God. We want to treat others as we'd like to be treated. You have come to us and called us, you invited us, that is so good. We are saying "yes" with all our hearts. Take us by the hand and see us through. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.