

Matthew 7:13-23
(Deuteronomy 26:16-19; Galatians 5:16-26)
“Choosing the Way of Life”

Introduction

Jesus begins this sermon tenderly, describing his disciples in the most counter-cultural terms possible, not as the rich and powerful, but as the poor in spirit and the meek, the mourners and the merciful. But he ends the sermon with a series of uncompromising warnings that he is offering us nothing less than a choice between life and death. He calls us to choose life, although that choice will involve us in great difficulty and may even lead to persecution and suffering. It is easy once again to read these verses as a cluster of unrelated sayings, but if we keep in mind the opening picture of two different and distinct paths diverging before us, paths that lead to radically different ends, the rest of the verses will make sense.

Jesus is countering the common teaching that all roads eventually lead to the same place. The scandal of the gospel, the scandal of Jesus, is his insistence that he is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him (see John 14:6). If only he presented himself as another teacher, another prophet and spiritual guide presenting one more possible way to be followed for a richer, fuller life, then he would likely be universally acknowledged as a great teacher who contributed much to religious thought and expression. But he would not let us off that easily. He is forever forcing us to receive him as Lord or reject him as an impostor, or as the innocent victim of his overzealous disciples' blasphemous claims.

Let me be honest: I am always troubled at these familiar verses. I say to myself, “Surely Jesus could have found a more gracious way to say all this.” What a foolish notion! Jesus is warning dispositionally religious folk like you and me, and especially professionally religious folk like me, not to mistake the gospel for something else, and not to mistake the true nature of discipleship for something that religious people like us find more attractive.

Look with me at these three pictures that Jesus paints in order to give us a strong warning to hear and heed what he has been saying in this sermon.

Body

- 1. There are two gates leading to two paths: the one looks easy while the other looks hard (7:13-14).**

One gate is narrow and leads to a hard path, the other gate is wide and leads to an easy path. Do you want to take the easy way, to be swept along with the crowd, to follow the path of least resistance? Or do you want to take the path

less traveled, the way of difficulty and adventure. And, most importantly, here's the deal: the wide gate and the easy way lead to death, while the narrow gate and the challenging path lead to life.

What is Jesus talking about? Throughout his ministry, Jesus referred to himself as the door to life and the way to life, and said that no one can have eternal life except through him. The world finds that offensive, narrow, intolerant, and hard. The world prefers the wide and spacious way, filled with choices and side trails. The world believes that any road will get you there in the end. But if you take the wrong trail in the name of freedom, you will never get where you need to go. You're free to head south when traveling from here to New York. But unless you turn around and head north, you will never get to New York.

2. There are two kinds of guides: the one coddles you while the other challenges you (7:15-20).

Within Israel, false prophets were called false guides for saying, "peace, peace," when there was no peace. The true prophet was often despised and rejected for challenging the people's most cherished prejudices and for shaking them out of their complacency. So, here, the false guide will encourage you to take the easy way, while the true guide will challenge you to give your life to the difficult but wonderfully rewarding way that leads to life. You will know them by the lives they live and by whether or not they themselves are pursuing the difficult road to life. What does Jesus have in mind? Exactly what he has said earlier in the sermon:

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19).

3. There are two kinds of travelers: the one thinks he has already arrived, while the other knows he's still on pilgrimage (7:21-23).

What we must not miss here is that the travelers on the easy way describe themselves for-all-the world as deeply mature Christian leaders. Their theology is immaculate: they profess Jesus as Lord; and their religious behavior is powerful: prophecy, exorcisms and miracles. They have accepted Jesus, but Jesus rejects them: "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (7:23). How can this be?

The true pilgrims are those who know that they are on pilgrimage and haven't yet arrived. They realize that they do not have it all together, and are acutely aware of their own failings and shortcomings. They are the people of the beatitudes: the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger

and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. They do not look like the picture of worldly power and success. They are on the heights, negotiating the double-black diamonds of the spirit, even as they try to keep their marriages together, struggle to stay true to those they love and to reconcile with those they know they ought to love.

Conclusion

Jesus is telling us that being his disciple is a deadly serious business. It is not merely a moment in time when we receive the gift of life that he has won for us in his life and death and resurrection victory. It is that life itself, life in Christ and Christ in us, living his life with us and through us. It is not an easy path for indolent people who want a smooth slide into the next life. It is a hard way that calls us to keep learning how to love God and how to love each other, not just when we want to but when we want to run away. He is telling us that at the end of the day we will each stand before him and that he will care far more how about well we have loved than he will care how exquisitely we could teach theological truth or exegete difficult passages of Scripture. He will care far more about how well we have loved the outcast and the neglected than he will care whether we have prophesied or cast out demons or worked miracles. Those seem, in fact, not to matter at all to him. To those who have excelled only at religion, he says, "Depart from me – I never knew you."

But to those who have sought to follow him in faith, who have sought to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, who have not practiced their piety publicly so as to be seen by others, but who have sought him in the secret places of the heart and fully entrusted themselves to him, to those who are seeking to do to others what they would have others do unto them, to such as these he has promised entry to his kingdom.

Do you see the picture Jesus is painting: An easy way, a life of indolence and ease, but in the end meaninglessness, insignificance and death; or a hard and challenging way, leading ever higher – with breath-taking views and the exhilaration of companionship within a band of spiritual high altitude climbers on pilgrimage – leading at last to eternal life with Jesus in the kingdom of light and joy and peace?

Which path are you on this morning: The easy way that leads to death or the challenging way that leads to life? Choose life and one day hear your Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master."