

Understanding The Two Claims and Practices
Matthew 7:21-23
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The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five extensive messages delivered by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, covering chapters 5-7. The sermon corrects the teaching of the religious leaders (chapter 5) and the practice of the religious leaders (chapter 6). The first half of chapter 7 guides our ministry to others and the second half of the chapter involves the most important aspect of life, our eternal destiny.

In Matthew 7:13-27, we see a repetition of contrasts. Each contrast regards the eternal destinies of mankind. Specifically, there is a progression that moves from the path to life to the characteristics of those on the path to life.

- The two gates and paths (Matthew 7:13-14)
- The two trees and fruit (Matthew 7:15-20)
- The two claims and practices (Matthew 7:21-23)
- The two houses and foundations (Matthew 7:24-27)

Matthew 7:13-14 commands us to “*enter by the narrow gate.*” The reason why we must enter through the narrow gate is because it leads to life as opposed to destruction. There are only two eternal destinies and we must go the way of the few unto eternal life rather than the way of the many unto eternal destruction.

Matthew 7:15-20 expands on one reason why there are few on the path to life and many on the path to destruction. False prophets will arise to thwart people entering by the narrow gate. Jesus commanded His disciples to beware of them since they come in sheep’s clothing but are actually dangerous wolves.

Where Matthew 7:15-20 describes the false prophets, Matthew 7:21-23 describes the false followers of Jesus. Whereas the false prophets appear in sheep’s clothing, but their words expose them, the false followers profess to be true followers of Christ but their deeds expose them.

This distinction between the false followers of 7:21-23 and the false prophets of 7:15-20 is one reason this is a separate section. Even though there are no specific descriptions of two opposing practices and claims in 7:21-23, there is clearly the implication of two groups.

Namely those who say to Jesus, “Lord, Lord” and do the will of the Father and those who do not. In the one case there are those who make a false claim of following the Lord and do not obey God, in the second case there are those who make a true claim of following the Lord and do obey God. Therefore, this section regards a differentiation between those who actively profess faith in God and those who actually possess faith in God.

The reality of false profession (7:21)

Jesus introduces the concept of false profession in Matthew 7:21. Some who call Him “Lord, Lord” will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven. The phrase “Lord, Lord” is simply a repeat for emphasis, communicating an intensity of verbal commitment.

While the term “Lord” was commonly used as a term of respect, much like we would use the word “sir” today, in this case it is a term more in line with the biblical use of the term as a Sovereign, one worthy of worship as God. Not everyone who ascribes worship to Jesus and professes Him as God is a true follower because of the phrase *“but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter”* (Matthew 7:21). Words are not the final determination of sincerity of heart. As the old expression says, “actions speak louder than words.”

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter” does not mean that doing the will of God is the means by which a person enters the kingdom of heaven. We have overwhelming evidence from Scripture that entrance in the kingdom of God is on the basis of faith apart from any efforts on their own (e.g. John 3:16; 6:47; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

If doing the will of God does not produce eternal life, then how do we understand Jesus’ words *“he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter?”* The corresponding parallel teaching of the Epistle of James helps us to understand the relationship between faith and works.

“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” (James 2:14-17).

If someone says they have faith but they have no works to validate the reality of their faith they are deluded. Our works give evidence that our faith is real, so the one who does the will of God enters the kingdom of heaven because doing the will of God is evidence of true faith in God. The truth is that apart from faith it is impossible to do the will of God. *“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”* (Hebrews 11:6).

This understanding is the essence of what has become known as “Lordship Salvation.” Specifically, that true saving faith will inevitably produce a changed life in obedience to God. *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are no longer slave to sin. *“No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother”* (1 John 3:9-10).

The reason the belief is difficult for some to grasp is confusion that to tie salvation to works is to necessarily include a prerequisite to faith that results in salvation being the result of faith plus works. This confusion partially stems from the poor communication about salvation by advocates of Lordship Salvation. The harsh tone combined with sloppy rhetoric has been unhelpful.

While Matthew 7:21 is one of many Bible verses that teach that true faith produces good works, it is also evident that *“there is none righteous, not even one”* (Romans 3:10). All true believers in Christ have fallen short of the glory of God, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 3:23-24). No one is able to completely do the will of God.

The evaluation of the faith of others based upon their works is impossible. We find cases of people whose sin would lead people to erroneously conclude the person had no faith. For example, while Jesus said, *“Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 10:32-33). Yet Peter denied Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-75).

We must be careful to draw conclusions based upon any specific failure to do the will of God. God Himself is the judge of the reality of the faith of man and whether their practices are according to His will and are from a sincere heart.

Jesus expanded on this difficulty of evaluating the faith of others in the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. This parable helps us understand the issue of false professions better.

"But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13:26-30).

Clearly there is no expectation that we will be able to easily distinguish between the true followers of Jesus and those who are making a claim to follow Jesus but do not know Him. While the deeds of those with false professions may be observable, to act on these observations may cause us to misidentify the true believers.

This stands in stark contrast to the false prophets where *"you will know them by their fruits"* (Matthew 7:20). The fruit of the false prophets is not only their unrighteous works but also their unrighteous words. Those who are false prophets must be identified and guarded against (Matthew 7:15). Those who are false followers should be allowed to co-exist with the true believers since it is only Christ who can distinguish them in the final judgment.

The degree of the false profession (7:22)

Matthew 7:21 tells us the fact of false professions since *"not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven."* Matthew 7:22 tells us the degree of false professions, since *"many will say to Me."* This "many" corresponds to the "many" who enter through the wide gate that leads to destruction. False professions are not only possible, they are common.

Those who make false claims of faith are not inactive in their involvement in service. There are deeds, but the deeds are not genuine, from a sincere heart or from truth. This is true regardless of how impressive the deeds may be. By depicting the objections as “*Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?*” we see that the false profession continues along with claims of revelation and miraculous works. The necessary conclusion is that there are no works that are so great that they alone are conclusive of one’s eternal destiny. Good works cannot substitute for true genuine saving faith.

Judas was likely one of those who cast out demons and performed miracles in the name of Jesus. “*Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness*” (Matthew 10:1). “*These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons*” (Matthew 10:5-8). The other eleven disciples had no idea Judas was not a true follower of Jesus (Matthew 26:20–25). This shows that God allows those who are not His true followers to perform miracles at certain times for certain purposes.

The statement “on that day” is the Day of Judgment (Malachi 3:17-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; Revelation 16:14). Jesus is the One they will be standing before and claiming they did these works “in Your name.”

The evidence of the false profession (7:23)

The ultimate evidence of unbelief is the practice of lawlessness. Jesus has taught the inner truth about God’s law and those who disregard this teaching become practitioners of lawlessness. Good works do not overcome evil deeds.

While the practice of lawlessness is the description of those who cast away (cf. Matthew 13:50), the declaration of Jesus is “*I never knew you.*” This supports the doctrine of salvation by faith alone apart from works since the lack of a relationship with Jesus is the basis for His words “*Depart from Me.*” The Greek word for knowing is personal knowledge. Jesus knows all people but does not have a personal relationship with all as a part of the family of God.

In Matthew 7:23, Jesus alludes to Psalm 6:8, *“Depart from me, all you who do iniquity, For the LORD has heard the voice of my weeping.”* While Jesus’ words *“Depart from Me”* is evidence of Jesus’ role in the judgment, as will later be described in Matthew 25:31-46, here the disciples would not have been as clear about this since Psalm 6:8 are the words of David, who was acknowledging his deliverance from his enemies rather than the executor of judgment over his enemies. This early teaching of Jesus about His judgment is introduced by *“I will declare to them”* which introduces a proclamation such as a judge would make. Thus this is the beginning of Jesus’ revelation of who He really is.

Jesus takes the role of God in the final judgment in Matthew 7:23. While the basis for their judgment is that Christ never knew them, the description of them is *“you who practice lawlessness.”* Those who depart to judgment are those who have committed themselves to a life of self-service rather than doing the will of God. *“So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matthew 13:49-50).

Conclusion

There are many principles that can be drawn from this text of Scripture. First, we see that sincerity of faith as the essence of our relationship with Christ is evidenced by doing the will of God. Those who fail to practice the will of God show themselves to be deluded. *“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves”* (James 1:22). Jesus made it clear the relationship between love and obedience, *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”* (John 14:15).

We also know that many will claim to have served Christ in His name but are unsaved. This ought not surprise us when even in this lifetime, we find professing believers fall away or commit grievous sin. There are many who profess and serve but who are not true followers of Christ. When such a lack of faith becomes apparent, we ought not be discouraged or dismayed.

Regarding our ministry, getting people involved in doing things does not necessarily equate to spirituality. Conclusions about a person’s spiritual condition based upon what service they perform are impossible. Cults are filled with people who serve sacrificially but are not serving the true God. Also, people can do much activity for the wrong reasons.

When people profess faith in Christ, we accept their profession without opposition. This is the parable of the wheat and the tares. It is the sovereign plan of God that the truth of genuineness of faith is delayed until the judgment. We must not take upon ourselves the role of our Lord in the judgment of the salvation of others for we may wrongly judge those who are sincere in their faith.

Christians have a great appetite for exalting those who serve in public and dramatic ways but overlook the service of those who are humble and less inclined to grab attention. This is more true than ever in the information age. The marketing of Christian service has been perfected by many and it is possible that some are serving their institution rather than serving the Lord. The exaltation of man is one of the sins of the Corinthians that Paul addressed. *“Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 1:31) and *“So then let no one boast in men”* (1 Corinthians 3:21). To exalt man furthers the performance of deeds by self-serving people.

Many will claim allegiance to the Lord on that day and will argue their case on the basis of their works done in Christ’s name. Those seeing value in their works as the reason Christ will accept them are living a very confused existence. Paul provides us with a mature way to reflect upon our good works. *“Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you”* (Philippians 3:13-15). All our works are a response to Christ’s grace and have been prepared beforehand by God that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10). There is no basis for any boasting whatsoever.

For each of us, the issue is a matter of faith. True saving faith will bring conformity to the will of God in various respects. But it is the Lord’s work as the judge to identify those with faith. Our responsibility is to examine ourselves.

“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5).