

***Basic Training: Gate Crashing***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Jeremiah 7:1-11; Philippians 1:9-11; Matthew 7:13-29***

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening is from Matthew 7:13-29. Let's listen to the Word of the Lord. "[Jesus taught,] 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." When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Jackson and I went canoeing Tuesday on his class field trip in Ann Arbor. It was the perfect day, a lot of fun. But we were surprised how tricky it was to decide what path to take. The river's really low, so it was easy to hit the rocks. Our canoe never got stuck for more than a few seconds. But some kids didn't see them, they'd get stuck, and they'd have to wade in, get out of the rocks, and get pointed the right way. At other points, tree limbs blocked the path. Try all you wanted, you couldn't get where you needed to be if you went that way.

Our adventure reminded me of this passage. Jesus has taught us through the Sermon on the Mount about life in the Kingdom of God. His closing statements are the most important of all because they establish that He is the way into God's Kingdom. He is the narrow path, He is the gatekeeper, and He is the one foundation we have. Just like choosing the wrong path on the river, if you choose a path other than Jesus, you won't get where you want to go. This passage shapes everything else we've learned together from our study of Matthew's gospel.

The Sermon on the Mount is practical. Jesus starts with the Beatitudes that show the shape of the Christian life, and then He moves into the nitty-gritty of what it looks like to be His follower. We've learned how to pray, how to give, and how to live. His teachings about the Ten Commandments spoke about our hearts and thoughts and behaviors in a down-to-earth way. Jesus concludes with spiritual words, but they're even more practical than what's come before because they inform us that relationship with Jesus is the lynchpin to entering God's Kingdom.

Everything here is presented as two choices – go the narrow path or the wide path. Be a sheep or be a wolf. Do your own thing or do the will of the Father in heaven. Build on the sand or build on the rock. This is stark. Life or death – you choose.

Jesus doesn't explain the narrow and wide gates, only that one leads to life and the other leads to destruction. So what are they? They are the paths to eternity. Jesus ends the sermon where He begins; He's a good teacher, so He comes full circle. Entering the narrow gate is following the path of the Beatitudes – acknowledging our utter helplessness before God, grieving over our sin, and turning our lives over to God to be changed, then following in His paths even when they go against our human way of thinking.

Entering the wide gate is following the path of self-reliance...believing that we can earn our way to heaven, that God grades on a curve and that we are good enough to be let in, that we somehow can fulfill Jesus' commands on our own. The narrow way has been found by millions, even billions, of people throughout the centuries. But even today, far more people believe that they are good people and don't need a Savior than those who know their sinfulness and cling to Jesus for salvation. That's a choice we must make. If we choose not to decide for Christ, we have made the choice to rely on ourselves – and Jesus tells us where that path ends.

Then Jesus says, don't be a wolf – instead, watch out for them! Wolves are false prophets. We think of prophets as mystical Old Testament people, but a prophet is simply someone who speaks a revelation from God to His people. Prophets are God's instrument; God does the speaking, using the prophet. A true prophet is someone who speaks what genuinely comes from God. A false prophet doesn't.

False prophets distort God's Word so that you'll follow them rather than the real truth of the Gospel. In the ancient church, there were false prophets who said there was hidden wisdom of God you couldn't get from the disciples. That wisdom was that the body was worthless and the spirit was good. Those teachers either said you couldn't enjoy anything – like eating or drinking, because it was bodily – or that you could indulge in whatever passions and pleasures you wanted because the body didn't matter.

Throughout history, false prophets have taught that Jesus wasn't the unique Son of God, that there are other ways to heaven, that we have to work for salvation. Some of the false prophets we see in cults like the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Others we see in the edges of the Christian camp that say God's main purpose is to give you good things in this life if you have enough faith and give enough to the church. All of them try to get faithful Christians sidetracked, believing something that's not true.

Don't fall for it! Watch for the end result of their teaching. Many Mormons are extremely nice because they believe they have to be, and behind the façade they are desperately worried they won't be considered good enough for the afterlife. Many Christians doubt their faith because some televangelists say if you live in poverty, it's your own fault because you haven't "exercised enough faith." Those are lies! It's bad fruit. It's fear, not freedom and joy and hope. Don't get lured onto that path, we're warned. It's not how many members those churches have; it's whether or not they show the real fruit of the Spirit of love, joy, and peace.

Jesus goes on. Not everybody who calls Jesus “Lord” on judgment day enters the Kingdom, only those who do the Father’s will. To me, this is the most shocking part of today’s passage. For the first time in Matthew, we learn Jesus is going to be our Judge. His listeners can no longer accept Him as just a human teacher. He says He will have the role that only God can fulfill. Either He’s crazy, or He’s God in the flesh come to be with us. Otherwise, He’d have no right to judge us. No wonder the crowds are astonished – He is making Himself equal to God.

But in that judgment, Jesus knows the hearts of everyone, and the second shocker is that some who know the right words and do amazing things will still not make it in. Prophesying in Jesus’ name won’t get you in. Casting demons out in Jesus’ name won’t get you in. Performing miracles in Jesus’ name won’t get you in. If anybody has reason to believe that works can get you into the Kingdom of heaven, it’s them! There’s nothing to make us believe they weren’t involved in real prophecy and real exorcisms and real miracles. Yet Jesus says no.

Why? Jesus says, “I never knew you.”

This makes us rethink what it means to be good people and to do good deeds. We think if you've been given the power to do miracles or prophesy, you must be in, right? But God uses plenty of people who are not godly. He works through King Saul. King Saul prophesied! Yet he continually disobeyed and went insane about David, the future king. God uses wicked neighbors of Israel to bring His people back to Himself. But that doesn't make those neighbors godly. They didn't know God.

Think about it this way. I could steal Arnold Schwarzenegger's Hummer. Huge car, powerful, right? I might drive it around town and get noticed. I might give him credit; I might say, “Look at Arnie's Hummer! Isn't it great?” And when the police pick me up and throw me in the slammer and Arnie comes by, what's going to be my defense? “Hey Arnold, I told everybody the car was yours and gave you credit for your taste in cars, and I even went to the car wash and had it detailed for you”? He's going to say, “Throw the book at him – I don't know him.”

Why would people go to such lengths to look like Christians? For the same reasons people throughout history have done wicked things. Power. Control. Fame. Greed. Godly pastors are tempted to compromise the gospel in order to keep people coming, so that people will love them. Godly pastors are tempted to use their position to their advantage. Those who aren't godly, who aren't principled, don't have those qualms. They use the name of God as a tool for their own evil.

But good intentions don’t fix the problem either. You can't do truly good deeds if you don't know Jesus, even if you claim His name. A friend of mine from high school wrote to me a while back. He told me he tried living as a Christian for a while and it didn’t work out. Well, of course it didn’t work out! You can’t live as a Christian without Christ! I was sad that he didn't understand that a relationship with Christ is necessary to be a Christian, but I was glad that he saw that living by Christian principles is futile if you just follow Jesus as a good teacher or guru.

So doing the miraculous, doing good deeds, won't get you into the Kingdom. But neither will knowing *about* Jesus. In a parallel teaching in Luke 13:26, the condemned are stunned. They reply, "But we ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets!" Still not enough. Even the Pharisees invited Jesus into their homes! That's not an admission ticket.

Knowing about Jesus is good. In our tradition, we believe the Bible is God's self-revelation to us, the only source of absolute truth about God. We can study it backward and forwards. Most Jewish boys in Jesus' day memorized the first five books of the Bible; those who were talented enough to become rabbis began to memorize the rest. Scholars over the centuries have mastered Greek and Hebrew and can run circles around us debating the text. But knowing about God doesn't save you either. Jesus called the Pharisees sons of hell and blind guides, and they knew the Old Testament better than you or I do. Knowing about God isn't enough. You can still be wicked and know about God. You can still be wicked after spending an hour at church and an hour in Bible study every week.

Friends, this is the lynchpin – does Jesus know us? Jesus knows His own. Jesus knows those who follow Him, who do what He did, who live with the desire to imitate Him, to become more like Him. We do it poorly, slowly, painfully, but we do it through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered to be more like Him when we turn to Him in faith, recognizing our sin and inability to be good people, grieving over our separation from God because of our rebellion. When the apostle Peter calls us to believe, he doesn't call us to believe *in* God – in His existence. Everybody listening to Him believed *in* God. Everybody in the Roman Empire believed in some god. Salvation comes from *believing* Jesus – in trusting that what He said was true and showing that trust in faithful obedience to Him.

Does Jesus know you? Does He call you "friend?" Does He call you daughter? Does He call you son? You shouldn't go throughout your life wondering. Turn to Him in prayer, confess your sins, ask for His forgiveness, and begin to walk in a new life with Him. Jesus is standing at the door of your heart and knocking. Answer the door and He will come in; He will know You; He will save you; He will bring you joy and peace; He will change you.

It's OK to rededicate your life to Him. Perhaps you've grown apart from Jesus; maybe you've fallen into sin or you've simply gotten lazy in your spiritual life. But it's not too late to turn back to Him. Believe the good news that Jesus comes as the healer of broken hearts and the mender of shattered souls. If you do, leave here rejoicing! Whatever you do, don't leave here tonight until you know that Jesus knows you.

Finally, Jesus compares His teachings to the foundation of a house. Follow His words and it's like you've built your home on concrete. Ignore them and it's building a house of cards. Once again, it all comes back to Him. And that's why the crowds are so amazed. He teaches with authority. The rabbis argued and debated and quoted one another endlessly, but their arguments were lost on the average person. Jesus didn't hem or haw or hedge His bets. Jesus puts it all out there for the crowds to hear and absorb. His teaching always points back to the Father, and it always points to Himself as God's Son.

It's an either/or. I believe most people would like to build their spiritual lives on Jesus plus something else. People want to pick and choose their spirituality – Jesus plus other wise people throughout the centuries. When I was working at Hospice of the Bluegrass, I met another chaplain in training who called himself a Catholic Buddhist. That guy was really confused. He couldn't see that they were two systems that were by nature in conflict. Many others decide that they like Jesus' teachings about being loving and kind, but not what He said about marriage, divorce, and serving the poor.

Some folks don't want Jesus plus some other spirituality; instead, they want Jesus plus earthly security. God calls for His people to support His church with a tithe – at least 10% of their income. The average American Christian today gives 2.5% – the average during the Great Depression was 3.3%! Tithers make up only 10-25% of any congregation, but their gifts make up between 50% and 80% of the church's funding. Studies show that tithers are evenly distributed across the wealth spectrum – the same percentage of the poor and the rich tithe. On the whole, many Christians don't give because they like Jesus, but they trust their money more.

But it's an either/or. Here's God's math: Jesus plus something else equals nothing. Build your house on that and it will all turn out to be sand – you might think you have Jesus, but His rock-solid foundation isn't there. But Jesus plus nothing else equals everything. That goes against what we're taught as kids, right? “Don't put all your eggs in one basket.” We're told to reduce our risks, to put our money in a thousand stocks rather than just one. We want to hedge just in case we're wrong. But it doesn't work like that with God. As we sing on a regular basis, “In Christ *alone* my hope is found.” If our hope is in Him alone, He will never fail us. He will know us and love us through all space and time, throughout all eternity. He will be our rock.

Jesus leaves us with two blunt choices. Do your own thing, follow your own path, play around with the Kingdom of God but never commit to it, try to be good and assume you'll be fine, and you will be sorely disappointed when the house of cards folds. You will regret it for all eternity. We cannot crash the gate to heaven. But follow Him on the narrow path, avoiding the wolves, obeying God as the Spirit empowers us, and we will see God. Not only will we see Him, we will know and be known.

That's the kicker. In a universe so vast that we cannot count all the stars with the most powerful telescope, where we cannot count the grains of sand on a single beach, in a world with trillions of creatures and a galaxy beyond our ability to remotely comprehend, God made us and desires to know us. He is perfectly loving, caring, kind, and gracious. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the reason for being, the reason we exist, powerful beyond measure, and He invites us to His table, to build our homes on Him.

Friends, if we are serious about God, He will consume our lives and our thoughts; our hearts and minds and actions will be focused around Him every day in every way. And there is nothing better. Don't be adrift on the river not knowing which way to paddle your boat, and don't get stuck in the rocks of this world's temptation to build on something other than Jesus. May we follow after Christ and know the love of being known by Him each and every day forevermore. Amen.