

Therefore

Jesus preached a long sermon on a high place near the Sea of Galilee fairly close to the beginning of His ministry - not long after He had called His first disciples to be with Him. In this sermon He described the Kingdom of Heaven and the kind of person who would be welcomed into it. We have long since called His description of these Kingdom people the "Beatitudes" and they tell us that the person who is in sync with the Kingdom is humble, poor in spirit, merciful, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, grieving over sin, a peacemaker who endures persecution for God's sake. And then Jesus tells those who are wanting to follow Him in Kingdom living that they are the salt and light of the world.

In the next sections of the Sermon, Jesus shows how the values of the Kingdom are radically different from what people have come to accept as normal religion. Bottom line: the values of the Kingdom focus in on what's going on inside us, rather than just the externals that are obvious to others. Jesus has more to say about the religion of externals in chapter 6 as He calls His followers to reject the supposed benefits of letting others know how good you are and choose instead to do your good deeds in secret. In the middle of this section, He teaches prayer. Then He continues on the radical nature of the Kingdom in His teaching on storing up treasure in heaven, learning to trust God rather than putting energy into worry and refusing to act as people's judge, while at the same time exercising discernment about where people are at in relation to the message we are bringing.

Last week we looked at a passage where Jesus revealed more about the character of His Father, and our Father, in teaching the people of the Kingdom to keep asking, keep seeking and keep knocking. The point was that God is a generous God, one who loves to give good gifts to His children, a Father who loves to bless.

And then we came to the beginning of the end, the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount in which we learn about the kinds of choices that we need to make and the consequences of making them. The first lesson was a picture of two roads - one wide and easy to navigate, the other narrow and more difficult. The easy road, says Jesus, leads to destruction, while the narrow path leads to life. Of course, He asks us to choose the narrow road.

That's where we ended last week. This week we're going to look at the final three applications that Jesus makes from this Sermon, three things that He wants us to be alert to and making good choices about. Let's read the text, starting with Matthew 7:15-20:

Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep, but are really wolves that will tear you apart. You can detect them by the way they act, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit. You don't pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles. A healthy tree produces good fruit and an unhealthy tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped

down and thrown into the fire. Yes, the way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit that is produced.

This second guiding principle for life in the Kingdom tells us to be watchful, alert, aware that people with selfish, ungodly motives will attempt to lead us astray. They may seem like quite nice people, and they might even sound as if they are godly folk, but the fruit of their words and actions won't be good. And Jesus says that, just like you can tell whether a tree is good or not by its fruit, so you can tell if these people are leaders you should follow or not by the fruit of their lives. Does the pattern of their lives bring unity and peace or division and strife? Does their teaching lead people to devotion to God or to contentious arguments with other believers? Does their claim to represent the ministry of Jesus look like the ministry of Jesus that you read in the gospels? Jesus says that we can tell the nature of this "prophet" by the way they act and you get the strong impression that He wants us to recognize these things early, before they reveal themselves as wolves that will tear us apart. Before the real heavy damage is done to the body of Christ, we should be able to recognize the motives and the potential of these people and refuse to give them a platform. "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep, but are really wolves that will tear you apart."

Why does Jesus include this warning at the end of the Sermon on the Mount? Because His listeners would face false teachers, crazy doctrines taught by people who were convincing, were respected even, and were able to create a following for themselves and their teachings within the church. The church has always been infiltrated by false teaching and the results have often been disastrous. Christians tend to be loving and trusting people and that opens us to being taken advantage of - Jesus warns us to keep alert, to be sharp and aware of this danger. And He makes it very clear that these false teachers, false prophets, are recognizable.

There's no point to the warning if there would never be any danger of it happening, or if there was no way of being prepared to deal with it when it came. But Jesus knew the danger would be real - and it was very real, even in the first decades of the life of the Christian church, and He also knew that we could be on the lookout for telltale signs. "Don't just listen to the fine words," He is saying in these verses, "but be looking for the signs of new life in the person who is speaking." And those are still the things we need to look for today - is there the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, etc.?

The next warning goes like this:

Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord', but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey My Father in heaven. On judgment day many will tell Me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in Your name and cast out demons in Your name and performed many miracles in Your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

This is not far removed from the previous warning. People learn how to say the right things in the context of a religious gathering. They can quickly pick up the externals of religious-sounding language and the behaviours that are commonly accepted in a religious community - but, Jesus tells us that the Father is looking at more than just the externals that are evident to everyone - He's looking for obedience.

Obedience is the theme that unites these final four sections of the Sermon on the Mount. In the first century two movements arose that threatened the centrality of the gospel to the Jesus movement. One faction within the church was the strongly legalistic Jewish faction, and they pushed hard for all Gentiles to first become Jews, the men being circumcised as a sign of their conversion, and THEN they could be followers of Jesus. Paul, Peter and others battled strongly against this teaching, which would have forever changed the essence of the Christian faith. The second group caught wind of a popular mythology of the day, called gnosticism, and tried very hard to fit the teachings about Jesus within this gnostic framework. The reason the gnostic 'gospels', such as the Gospel of Thomas, or the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, don't sound very much like the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is because Jesus' teaching doesn't fit at all within that gnostic framework, and it was never able to gain major ground within the church - but it did pull away some from the faith so that they trusted in the so-called 'secret knowledge' of gnosticism instead of the good news of God's grace in Jesus.

It may be that Jesus was thinking of these two groups that would cause so much trouble to the apostles in the later decades of the first century. The Jews appeared very godly, very 'zealous for the law' as Paul described them, but they weren't submitted to the Gospel message that Jesus had taught His followers. The gnostics may have had great mystical experiences and even seen things they would have described as 'miracles', but they were not committed to the message that Jesus had brought, but were making a different message and attempting to convince people that this was the true message from God. "Lord, Lord, we prophesied in Your name and cast out demons in Your name"... "I never knew you".

We need, desperately, the humility to accept the fact that God is God and we are not, that He sets the conditions for a life that honours Him and it's not up to us to decide what those conditions should be. Here Jesus says that the Father has an expectation that people will come to Him on His terms. Those terms would include - admitting that we have sinned and fallen short of His standards, admitting that we are unable to live holy and perfect lives and that we need His forgiveness, accepting that the gift of His Son on the cross of Calvary is the only acceptable way to gain that forgiveness and asking Jesus to be the Lord of our lives, receiving His Spirit and trusting Him to direct us and to provide for our needs. This passage indicates that there are some people who will carry out the forms of religion, who will appear to be followers of Jesus, but whose hearts remain cold towards Him, whose pride refused to acknowledge their need for His forgiveness, who are determined to be their own lord and saviour.

The last section to sum up the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is found in verses 24-27:

Anyone who listens to My teaching and obeys Me is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse, because it is built on rock. But anyone who hears My teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will fall with a mighty crash.

When was the last time you stood close by a person whose life was coming crashing down around them? And you knew that they were responsible for a large part of what was happening. Sure, there was some bad timing, some unfortunate circumstances beyond the person's control, but they had brought a lot of the bad stuff on themselves by the poor choices they had made. And when you stood with them, did you say, "Most of this is your own fault", or did you say, "Wow, I just feel bad - you've had so many tough blows"? Well, don't you feel too bad - it's probably not the time and place to confront them with the errors of their ways. The more important thing is to help them see the way forward and that's what Jesus is doing at the end of His sermon.

"You have two choices," He says to those who were listening. "You can listen to what I'm saying, believe it and obey My words, or you can ignore it, and carry on the same as you've always done. I'm not forcing you to choose one way or the other; I'm just telling you that what you choose has consequences." Oh, didn't we hate that speech as children - we didn't want to be told about consequences; we just wanted to do what we wanted to do! That tells you something about the rebellion that's native to our hearts. But here's Jesus, teaching the people of Galilee about consequences and laying out their choices with crystal clarity: "If you want to be able to stand in the face of all the calamities of life and to come out on the other side with hope and purpose and even joy, then build your life on My teachings. If you choose not to trust Me and My words, and ignore the message I bring to you, then when life comes crashing down, it will take you down with it."

The first is the way of wisdom and the second is the path of fools. Build your life wisely, on something that is solid and true, and you won't get wiped out.

So, to summarize, here are the four applications that Jesus gives to all who would listen to Him, all who had heard the Sermon on the Mount and were intrigued by the message He brought to them:

1. There's a wide, easy way to go with a big wide gate at the end ... and there's a narrow, difficult path with a small gate at the end. Choose the narrow one because it leads to life.
2. There will be voices that come among you and which challenge the truth of what you have been taught. They present a real danger to you and so I exhort you to examine the fruit of the lives of these teachers. If the fruit is not good, then that tree needs to be removed.

3. Don't think you can fool God by saying right-sounding religious words, because He knows your heart and He knows whether or not we obey Him. There will be many people who have loosely associated themselves with Jesus, but not really taken Him seriously, and He will say to them, "I never knew you. Go away."
4. You will build your life on some kind of foundation. If you build your life on My words, you will have something that will weather all the storms that life brings. If you ignore My words, you're like the person who builds a house on a sandy beach. Rain and wind and floods will reveal the weakness of the foundation and the things you hoped for in life will be washed away.

In each of these four cases, Jesus says that how we respond to what God says is true will be decisive for us. Rejecting the teaching that comes from Jesus is a rejection of truth and leads to an unstable and inadequate foundation for life. Accepting, believing and obeying the teaching of Jesus provides us with a solid foundation for life, an ability to discern untruth, the capacity to find that narrow road that leads to life and a rich and rewarding relationship with God through His Holy Spirit.

Now, let's look at some applications for our own lives:

1. Our choices are, obviously, very important and even the little decisions that we make on a daily basis can help steer the course of our lives in one direction or another. So, here's a way to be more mindful of what we are choosing. Look at the images that Jesus uses in this block of teaching and ask yourself, "Does this option take me closer to the path that leads to life, or the highway that leads to destruction?" "If I make this choice, am I likely to produce fruit in my life that is pleasing to God or that will cripple my effectiveness in His Kingdom?" "Am I building on a solid foundation, building in a way that will help me withstand the storms of life that will, inevitably, come at me, or am I building on a weak foundation that won't give me the support I will need when crisis comes?" By asking yourself those simple questions, you can save yourself a lot of grief, both in the near term, and farther down the road.
2. The second application is to read and reread the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, a complete message, one where all the parts belong together. When we read Jesus' message that way, what do we learn from these final verses? What is He saying to us about prayer, about judging others, about committing adultery in our hearts or about letting our light shine. There is so much in this sermon, but it comes down to a simple truth: God has told us how to live life the way He intended - but we have to choose it. He has told us what honours Him, what brings joy and blessing, what the new life in the Father's Kingdom is all about - what's our buy-in? To what degree are we committing ourselves to following Jesus' teaching? Again, the consequences of obedience are laid out for us, as are the consequences of ignoring what Jesus has to say. Choose well.
3. Finally, be alert to voices that rise up in the church saying things that sound wise from a human perspective, but which contradict the teaching of Jesus. We won't be perfect in our understanding of all the doctrines of our faith, but it's important that we get the core ones right, that we cling to the good news of God's salvation through faith in the finished work of Jesus the Messiah. It's important that we hear

and obey His command to love one another, to forgive all who have wronged us, to pursue the things that lead to greater faith and obedience to God's commands. And it's important that we don't fall for "new ideas" that don't jive with the heart of God or the heart of the Gospel.