

the SERMON on the MOUNT

TEACHINGS FROM MATTHEW 7

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The Sermon on the Mount: Teachings from Matthew 7

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Published by The River Church
8393 E. Holly Rd.
Holly, MI 48442

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First Edition, September 2024

Printed in the United States of America

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CONTENTS

09 **LESSON ONE** • JUDGE NOT? WHAT A FAMOUS SAYING!
17 Devotion 1: Examine Yourself First
19 Devotion 2: Give Some Grace
21 Devotion 3: Seek Forgiveness First
23 Devotion 4: Speck-Removal
27 Devotion 5: Decide Not to Decide
29 Devotion 6: Have You Looked in the Mirror?

33 **LESSON TWO** • DISCERNMENT
41 Devotion 1: Honoring God
45 Devotion 2: Seek Persecution?
47 Devotion 3: Jesus' Love Wins
49 Devotion 4: Seeing is Believing?
51 Devotion 5: Judgemental or Discernment?
55 Devotion 6: My Way or God's Way

59 **LESSON THREE** • ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN
67 Devotion 1: Good Gifts
69 Devotion 2: Staying Warm
71 Devotion 3: The Love of the Father
73 Devotion 4: Learning to Love
75 Devotion 5: The Good Father
79 Devotion 6: Is it Good?

83 **LESSON FOUR** • THE GOLDEN RULE
91 Devotion 1: Be Radical
93 Devotion 2: Crossing Puddles and Oceans
97 Devotion 3: WWJD
99 Devotion 4: Thanking God for His Grace
101 Devotion 5: Loving Others Anyways
103 Devotion 6: Word and Deed

107 **LESSON FIVE** • THE GATE AND THE PATH
115 Devotion 1: Follow God's Map
117 Devotion 2: What are Your Orders?
119 Devotion 3: Exclusive
121 Devotion 4: The Blue Line
123 Devotion 5: The Narrow Road
125 Devotion 6: Which Way?

129 **LESSON SIX** • A TREE AND ITS FRUIT
137 Devotion 1: Beware
139 Devotion 2: A Tree and Its Fruit
141 Devotion 3: Warning: Beware of Wolves
143 Devotion 4: Who Can We Trust?
147 Devotion 5: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing
149 Devotion 6: Should Christians Ever Judge?

153 **LESSON SEVEN** • I NEVER KNEW YOU
161 Devotion 1: A Quarter of an Inch
163 Devotion 2: Answer in the Third Person
165 Devotion 3: Staying Out of Trouble
167 Devotion 4: Everyone Will Face Jesus
169 Devotion 5: What do We Deserve?
171 Devotion 6: My Friend, Mr. President

175 **LESSON EIGHT** • BUILT ON THE ROCK
183 Devotion 1: Firm Foundation
185 Devotion 2: Castles of Sand
187 Devotion 3: I Built My House of Stone
189 Devotion 4: Build Your House on the Rock
191 Devotion 5: Not Just a One-Time Deal
193 Devotion 6: Nugget Couch

197 **LESSON NINE** • AUTHORITY
205 Devotion 1: The Proper Place of Authority
209 Devotion 2: Speaking with Authority
211 Devotion 3: Connected to the Source
213 Devotion 4: Alexander Cartwright
215 Devotion 5: The Babysitter
219 Devotion 6: Fatherly Authority

PREFACE

What does the Bible say about judging others? How can I have discernment? How do I pray with confidence? What is the Golden Rule? How do I enter the narrow gate? What does fruit tell about a tree in our lives? Will Jesus reject anyone?

These are just a few of the questions answered by the Lord Jesus in the seventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel. You may have asked these questions and you may be asking them today.

The words of this chapter fall at the end of the most famous of Jesus' sermons called the "Sermon on the Mount." In this great sermon, the Lord Jesus is speaking to a multitude of normal people. It was people like you and me. They were married, unmarried, raising kids, empty nesters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, employed, unemployed, homemakers, home-owners, homeless, healthy, ill, known, unknown, Jewish, Gentile, male, female, adult, and children. He speaks in common language using common pictures to help common people understand eternal truths.

In *"The Sermon on the Mount: Teachings from Matthew 7"* we will try to place ourselves there, on that grassy hillside in Galilee, among the crowd to not only listen to Him speak but to be changed by His words. Our goal will be to come away from this book the way many came away from the sermon that day - changed forever.

"The Sermon on the Mount: Teachings from Matthew 7" contains nine study guides for group discussion and fifty-four devotions for personal development. The goal of *"The Sermon on the Mount: Teachings from Matthew 7"* is for the reader first to realize their sinful condition and need for a Savior. Once that is settled, we need to live for the Lord. It is not always easy. Jesus addresses some very challenging topics. With Him, you can take on the challenge.



LESSON ONE

JUDGE NOT? WHAT A FAMOUS SAYING!

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND



Our world is filled with sayings that people repeat. Sometimes, the sayings may be right on point, and other times, they may be completely off-point. Many of these sayings are put on plaques or home decorations, and many times, people think these sayings are from Scripture.

1. Are there any sayings that you enjoy?

_____
_____
_____

2. Are there any sayings that are on the walls of your house today? Be honest!

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A quick Google search will reveal to us famous sayings that are not in the Bible. I put the saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” in this category. It sounds spiritual and even motivating. People use this quote to encourage others to help themselves and say that God will help us in whatever we are doing as long as we put the time and effort into it. However, Scripture tells us, ***“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths”*** (Proverbs 3:5-6). So, this saying goes against our dependence on God for help, and our efforts are wasted if He is not in the process.

When I helped with the student group (teenagers) through the church, we would use a tool to help kids get to this point. We would include sayings from the Bible and then sayings from Justin Bieber’s songs and ask the question, “Bieber or the Bible?” It was a lot of fun, but sometimes we were surprised by the answers. One saying is, “Who can make my life complete? It’s all about you.” Most kids would guess the Bible, but it is actually a Bieber song.

3. Can you think of any sayings that sound like a Bible reference, but maybe they are not in the Bible? Please share your answers.

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4. There is another category of sayings that are not actually in the Bible but are actually based upon Scripture. Can you share any of those sayings?

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Well, in our continued study of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus was teaching, we come upon this section of Scripture in Matthew 7:1-5, ***"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."*** I would put this section of Scripture in a category of one of the most misused Bible verses in the entire Bible. Our modern culture wants to take this Scripture and then tell us that we, as Christians, are not supposed to judge others. It is even going so far as to infiltrate the church body itself. They say we cannot tell someone that they are called to live differently. If they are part of the body of Christ, we are called to tell a brother or sister in Christ of their error.

5. Can you think of Bible verses that are actually direct quotes but are grossly misinterpreted or misapplied to situations? Please share. (i.e., judge not!)

_____
_____
_____

6. Are any of these verses particularly painful, like judge not? The less mature Christians have been misled, and the truth of what was being taught is missed. Please share.

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We must remember that when Jesus was teaching here, He had been challenging Israel's religious leaders, who were great at twisting and misleading the Jewish people under the law of Moses. For them, it had become more of the way it looked than what it actually was. In Matthew 6:1, we read, ***"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."*** This is an example of how they were being confronted for being hypocrites. He challenged those who help the needy just to be seen doing good. It was those who called attention to themselves when they prayed. He called out those who tried to make themselves look distressed so that their fasting was perceived as a real sacrifice. They were taking it so far that Israel's worship had become about what it looked like and not what it actually was. One author wrote, "Following that example, the everyday people of Israel learned to perform religious duty for others' approval, and to belittle those who did differently than they preferred. The result was a false religious experience: pride and fear of judgment instead of humility and graciousness to others."

7. Please share experiences where your worship or the rules for the church were about religious duty and approval of others.

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_____
_____

8. Have you ever been unfairly judged? If comfortable, please share.

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So, this section of Scripture does not teach that we, as Christians, cannot judge between right and wrong. John 7:24 teaches, ***"Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."*** This section of Scripture is a reminder that we need to judge with the right judgment and not be hypocritical as the Jewish religious establishment had done. Do not make the mistake of judging by external appearances, but by what it actually is (not what it looks like). In Galatians 1:8-9, we read, ***"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."*** It is clear here that we are to judge a false teacher, someone who is preaching another gospel. Galatians 6:1 reveals, ***"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."*** We are given the command not to be hypocritical, but to call out a transgression and to help our brother or sister, and to do so graciously. However, the warning is for us to be mature and spiritual because this is a delicate task. We are to be Spirit-led, gentle, and humble so that we can avoid being tempted to think too highly of ourselves or be too condemning in this process.

9. What are we to base our judgment upon?

_____
_____
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10. Why do we struggle with judging others?

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NOTES

EXAMINE YOURSELF FIRST

DEVOTION #1 - PATRICK BICKNELL

Have you ever heard someone call Christians judgmental? Have you ever heard someone call us, followers of Christ, hypocritical because we judge others to a standard we do not hold to our own selves?

I have heard this story so many times. I have experienced this with new people who have come to the church, and I can tell you that there is real hurt with people who have gone through this. It makes me sad that not only do people think that Christians are judgmental, but there are people in the church who give validity to these claims by the way they judge other people.

The topic of "judging others" is a hard one for us to navigate because oftentimes, people judge others in the wrong way. They do it in a way that Christ has not commanded us to do. As we continue reading and studying through the Sermon on the Mount, we see Jesus address this topic at the beginning of chapter 7.

The first thing Jesus does is tell us to examine ourselves. He uses the phrase, ***"Judge not, that you be not judged,"*** in verse 1. It is clear to note that although it may seem like Jesus is condemning any form of judgment, He is actually not in this verse. Many people have an interpretation of this verse that aligns with that belief. However, what Jesus is condemning is the hypocritical judgment that so many people do. It is the form of judgment that holds others to a higher standard than they do themselves. Jesus condemns the people who scorn others for the sins they commit while ignoring the sins they have in their lives. We see Him address this when He says

a few verses later in verse 3, ***"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"*** Jesus Himself calls people who act in this way, hypocrites. He then finishes speaking on this topic in verse 5 by saying, ***"First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."*** Jesus reminds us that in order for us to truly help out our brothers and sisters in Christ, we first need to check our own relationship with the Lord. If we are stuck in sin, refusing to repent and not allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, how can we expect to actually help someone else out?

When we judge others in a healthy way, after first examining our own lives and making sure we repent of our own struggles, then we can clearly see how to help our brothers and sisters not only acknowledge their sins, but also help them overcome those struggles.

GIVE SOME GRACE

DEVOTION #2 - JASMYN BICKNELL

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."
Matthew 7:1-5

Over and over in the Bible, the Lord calls us to love. The greatest commandment given is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:36-39). In Romans 12:9-10, we are told, ***"Let love be genuine…Love one another with brotherly affection,"*** because with love comes the fulfillment of every other law and commandment that we are given (Romans 13:8).

When we love our brothers and sisters, we are showing them that no matter what they have done, the Lord has forgiven them. So, we love them just as He does, which means not seeing their sins and brokenness. We tend to jump to our own conclusions about others when we only know parts of their story, the outside view. We assume the worst of them and put a stamp on them that turns us away from furthering a relationship just because of one thing we might have heard or seen them do. Whatever scale we use to compare others with, that scale will also be used for our own judgment.

Imagine you are shopping at the grocery store and hear a mother snap at her child, and you immediately think, “Wow, she is so impatient, he was just asking for a snack. She does not seem very good with kids.” Maybe what you do not know is that the mother has been up with her child since five in the morning after only getting a few hours of sleep, and her child has been a bit extra emotional because he also did not sleep much. So, instead of her being a bad parent, the two are actually just overly tired, and any other day, they get along very well.

Jesus does not judge us based on one mistake we make; He forgives us, and we move on. Likewise, we are called to love as He does, to treat others how He did. This means putting all differences aside, not chalking someone’s personality up to one encounter you have had with them, not dwelling on things of the past, and forgiving wrongs people have done against us. When our hearts are right with the Lord when we put love first, we can then pour it into others, and judging them will no longer be our first response.

SEEK FORGIVENESS FIRST

DEVOTION #3 - STEPHEN BILLINGS

"You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."
Matthew 7:5

Have you ever said to someone, "You shouldn't do that," and then received a response back, "Well, you do that all the time?" Then, go into a quick moment of evaluation before realizing that you are being a hypocrite.

Awkward, right?

In Matthew 7:5, Jesus provides some clear teaching on how to not be a hypocrite. A hypocrite is someone who says they believe or will do one thing, but then does the opposite. It is someone who will talk the talk, but certainly not walk the walk.

Jesus tells us to deal with our own sins first to ensure that we are not being hypocritical when calling out a brother. In this verse, a log in someone's eye could be any unrepented sin from a bad attitude, lack of respect for fellow Christians, or just blatant disobedience to God. Jesus is teaching us that we cannot call out someone else's sin if we also have sin in our own life that we have not yet addressed. Not only would it be hypocritical to call someone else while we have sin we have not corrected, but Jesus says that we cannot even see clearly to take the speck out of our brother's eye. According to Matthew 7:5, we have to come before God with our shortcomings before we can approach others about their shortcomings.

We can take care of these logs in our lives by placing them before God through prayer. The key is asking God to help us see our shortcomings and then seeking forgiveness from Him and from others we may have wronged as needed. In 1 John 1:9, it says, ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** When God forgives us, He provides a fresh start for us every time. He casts our sins as far as the east is from the west.

God can forgive us of our sins because He sent His one and only son, Jesus, who came to earth to live a perfect life. Jesus wiped away all of our sins by dying on the cross and rising again three days later, creating a way for us to be forgiven for all our wrongdoings.

Through the work of Jesus on the cross, we are made new; even the biggest of hypocrites will be forgiven.

SPECK-REMOVAL

DEVOTION #4 - JEANNIE YATES

People love to judge. Just look at how many shows on TV are all about judging. Whether it is judging someone's cooking, dancing, singing, talents, athletic performance, beauty, or even relationships, our culture seems fascinated by the idea of judging others. Our family will often watch the show *"America's Got Talent,"* and the one judge that every contestant wants to impress is Simon Cowell. Simon tends to be the harshest judge and has his own standard by which he determines if a person has what it takes to win. His comments often come with complete disregard for the contestant's feelings. Yet, when it comes to how we live our lives, no one wants a harsh, Simon Cowell-type of judgment telling them that they are in the wrong. In the same way, our culture craves the entertainment of judging others; they also cry out, "You cannot judge me - only God can judge me."

Jesus addresses this kind of judgment in His Sermon on the Mount, saying, ***"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"*** (Matthew 7:1-5, NIV).

These verses are often misused and pulled out of the context of Jesus' teachings. He is not telling us not to judge right from wrong or

not to discern truth from false teachings; however, He is telling us not to judge others by our own standards. There are no justice scales that are built to the "Jeannie Yates standard" by which I can expect others to live. James 4:12 tells us, ***"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy."*** There is only one true standard of judgment, and that belongs to God Himself. We all come up short when ***"measured"*** against God's standard (Romans 3:23).

So, if we are all held to the same standard, then I have no choice but to evaluate my own life. We have to take an honest look at our lives and allow God to show us all of the 2x4s (***"planks"***) that we need to remove. What is keeping us from living rightly? What keeps us from knowing Jesus more? In one of my favorite Psalms, David prays, ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life."*** (Psalm 139:23-24, NLT).

After we have allowed the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and remove the logs that hinder our vision, we will be more equipped to help the believers around us do the same. It is necessary in the body of Christ that we ***"consider how to stir up one another to love and good works"*** (Hebrews 10:24). In his commentary on the book of Matthew, Douglas Sean O'Donnell writes, "Our Lord Jesus is not teaching us not to judge (period), but rather how to make true, wise, and (most importantly) loving judgments. He will teach us the loving art of speck-removal…It is unloving to judge your brother when you have a log in your own eye. But it is also unloving to leave a speck in your brother's eye."

When we fail to consider our sins and seek the forgiveness and redemption of Christ, we open up the door to the hypocrisy that Jesus warns us about. He shows us three important action steps that we can apply instead of getting caught in the judgment zone:

1. Remember that God alone is the judge (not you, not me).
2. Repent and remove your 2x4s.
3. Lovingly help your brothers and sisters with speck-removal.

The Apostle Paul reiterates this in his letter to the Ephesians when he reminds them, ***"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear…Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you"*** (Ephesians 4:29, 31-32, NLT).

DECIDE NOT TO DECIDE

DEVOTION #5 - PASTOR CHUCK LINDSEY

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Matthew 7:1-5 (NKJV)

We all want grace!

Have you ever noticed how gracious we are with ourselves? When I do wrong, I am always so understanding and gracious with myself. For example, when I have had a long day, and I come home impatient, irritable, and unkind, I am quick to assure myself, "It is ok; everything is fine; it is understandable to be a little irritable after a long day." When my wife has to say, "Hey, you have been pretty dumb tonight!" I am again quick to show myself grace and say things like, "Well, I did not mean to get so upset," "It was not my intention," and "I just had a rough day." I am always naturally so gracious, so patient, and very understanding with myself.

Sadly, I am not naturally this way with others. Instead of being gracious and kind, understanding, and patient, I can find myself immediately jumping to "quick conclusions" and "snap judgments." Instead of giving the grace that I give to myself (and want others to give to me), I begin to think the worst, "They are just awful; I

cannot believe they call themselves Christians. Ugh! That is the kind of person they are! Rotten!"

What if I gave others the same grace that I have been given? What if I gave others the grace that I want? What if I gave others the grace that I often give to myself?

I confess to you that as a Pastor, I have had to learn, quite painfully, that my initial judgments are almost always wrong! I learned this the hard way early on by making wrong initial judgments about people, their character, their motives, their hearts, and their thinking. Time and time again, as I heard the story or got more information, I saw just how far off I was. It caused a lot of trouble. It happened so much that I finally made a decision. I made the decision to not make a decision! I decided that I did not know or understand or see clearly. I decided that I would not come to a conclusion until I was able to get as much information as possible to really understand the situation or the person involved. If I cannot gather more information, I (try to) default to grace. I default to, "There has to be more to this story. I am sure there is an explanation." "They must be hurting or in trouble in some way." I try to give the grace that I would want given to me.

The decision here is simple. I have come to the settled conclusion that I am not the Judge who sees all, and therefore, I am not able to judge fairly, righteously, and without partiality. Only the Lord can do that. I am limited in every possible way.

This truth leads me to Him to help me see people the way He does and to show the grace that I would want to be shown to me (the grace He has shown to me) to the people in my life.

Maybe we give up on our quick judgments and instead go to the One who sees all, asking Him to help us see and understand. It is all for His glory and the blessing of others!

HAVE YOU LOOKED IN THE MIRROR?

DEVOTION #6 - JOSH THAYER

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."
Matthew 7:1-5

It is really easy to see traits or behaviors in others and ask ourselves, what in the world are they doing? Often, I believe the traits we dislike in others are the very traits we dislike in ourselves. I can look and see someone going through something I am dealing with myself and be overly critical because I know the hurt and pain it causes personally. Yet, I can also forget that they must be going through the very same hurt and pain. It is easy to look at the ***"speck"*** in their eye and make judgments. When in reality, I should take a look at myself first and then lovingly help and forgive those whom I am judging.

Jesus is communicating in Matthew chapter 7 that we need to examine our own motives and conduct instead of judging others. Jesus' statement ***"judge not"*** is against the kind of hypocritical, judgmental attitude that tears down others in order to make ourselves feel good. It is not against all critical thinking, but it is really a call to be discerning rather than negative.

So, next time you look at someone with critical eyes, perhaps stop and take a look at your own life. Ask yourself the hard questions. Is this something I need to examine in my own life? Am I just trying to tear down this individual to make myself feel better because I do not want to deal with what is going on in my life? These are good questions we should ponder every now and then. At the end of the day, we need to make sure we are loving others and making an effort to build them up, just like Jesus does when He looks at you and me.



LESSON TWO

DISCERNMENT

PASTOR RYAN STORY



Whenever we study the Bible, we have to read it in context. We can end up misinterpreting and misunderstanding what the truth of the Bible is if we just pluck and go. The best way to read in context is to read the verses before and after the Scripture you are studying, understand what book you are reading, and understand where it is in Scripture. The most important thing is finding the Gospel truth that exists inside the verse you are studying. This lesson has to be viewed in context, or we can walk away believing the Bible teaches something that it does not.

1. Can you think of any verse that gets misused because we do not read it in context?

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Before we jump headlong into this lesson, let us review what we went over last week. Matthew 7:1-5 says, ***"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."***

2. How would you summarize Jesus' teaching from Matthew 7:1-5?

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One of the very important words to notice in Christ's teaching is the word ***"brother."*** When Jesus says ***"brother,"*** He is instructing this truth to be applied within the context of those who know Him as Lord. Followers of Christ should not be passive about helping their

brothers and sisters in Christ in their walks with Jesus, but followers of Christ should also take every opportunity to get themselves in the right standing with Christ as often as it presents itself. The overall truth found in Matthew 7:1-5 is that when we, as God's people, see a fellow follower of Christ straying from God's Word, we ought to rightly, lovingly, and gently help restore them while we take an inventory of our walk with Christ and make sure our standing with the Lord is in proper alignment.

3. Would you be willing to share a story of when you had to remove the log from your eye? Did this help your relationship with God and the person whose actions you were judging?

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With all of that context, now we look at this week's lesson.

Matthew 7:6 says, ***"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."***

Jesus does not come off as much of an animal person here. Sadly, I have heard people use this verse to justify acting in a way that made a person who professed Jesus come off as a person who was not much of a people person.

4. What makes Matthew 7:6 hard to understand? Is it possible for Jesus to say anything that is unloving?

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The two things we have to understand to properly put this verse together are what Jesus meant by using animals here and what Jesus meant by pearls.

One thing about Jesus' teachings was that He was teaching as a Hebrew who did the bulk of His teachings in and around the year 30 A.D. When Jesus taught, He was speaking in the context of 30 A.D. So, when Jesus says ***"dogs,"*** his view is not man's best friend. Dogs in Jesus' day were not domesticated. They were despised scavengers who were not known for being companions. ***"Pigs,"*** well, not much has changed in 2000 years, are pigs. In Hebrew culture, pigs are considered the dirtiest of animals. The one thing for us to know is when we say ***"pig,"*** we are not talking about "Babe" or "Wilber." In Jesus' time, He is talking about something closer to a wild boar. When Jesus says ***"pigs,"*** He is referring to an animal that is dirty, greedy, and vicious. With all that in mind, when Jesus speaks of ***"dogs"*** and ***"pigs,"*** His point is a person who is antagonistic, unclean, wild, and who prefers their own filth.

5. What does Jesus tell us not to give to the ***"pigs"*** and ***"dogs"*** of our lives?

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6. Was Jesus a dog person?

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I pray you had a "wait a minute" moment here. I hope you now see why we needed to start with logs, planks, and eyes before we got to dogs, pigs, and pearls. One thing we have to know more than anything is that no one is too far from the love of Jesus. There is never a person to whom we should avoid preaching the Gospel of Jesus. Even while preparing this lesson, I was praying that no one would walk away from it thinking, "Hey, there are people in my life who are in clear need of knowing Jesus, but they are jerks sometimes. So, because Jesus said they are a pig, I am not going to go talk to them, and I am okay with them suffering in Hell for eternity."

In 2 Peter 3:9, we read, ***"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."***

7. What should you do when you encounter incorrect biblical interpretation?

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8. Why is growing in your understanding and application of the Bible so important?

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The next big truth we have to understand is what Jesus means when He talks about ***"holy"*** and ***"pearls."*** While the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a precious thing and is holy, that interpretation here leads us to a horrible truth. To understand the ***"holy"*** and the ***"pearls,"*** we have to know what Jesus was just talking about. Jesus was discussing the standard of the pearls and the holiness of His Kingdom. Jesus never taught to avoid teaching a person about the Kingdom of God, but what He did teach was to not go and present Kingdom truth and its standard to someone who is antagonistic towards God's truth. Proverbs 9:7 says, ***"Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury."*** Jesus echoes this instruction.

9. If you see a person who is unsaved, what is the only message they need to hear?

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Too often, we approach people who do not know Jesus as their Savior and go to war about their immoral living. Early in my walk

with Christ, the man who was sitting with me teaching me the Bible asked the question, “What is your expectation for something that is dead?” It was a perplexing question, and the more I thought of it, the more I realized that I did not have an answer. As if he knew I did not have an answer, he looked at me and said, “Exactly, dead things are dead. That is the same approach we have to have with someone who does not know Christ. You cannot have the same expectations that they will live, act, or respond like those who have life. Yet, it is our responsibility to preach the Gospel so that they come alive.”

10. Have you ever approached an unsaved person and instructed them to live as if they were a ***“brother”***? How did that go?

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Our understanding of the Bible is so crucial. If we are off on our understanding, it alters the way we view God, and it can alter how we show the reality of who God is to the lost of the world. Jesus loved the world, which includes you, me, and the most hostile towards Him. He loves us all so much that He died on the cross for our sins. For some of us, we know that truth and tragically, there are some who are hostile towards the truth that there is a God who loves them more than they could ever understand. If you do not know Jesus as Lord, tonight can be the night. Talk to your Growth Community Leader. As brothers and sisters in Christ, let us hold each other accountable, but let us also make sure that the first holy and precious thing the lost hear is that Jesus loves them and died for them, and if they put their faith in that truth, they can know life.

NOTES

HONORING GOD

DEVOTION #1 - PASTOR CALEB COMBS

It has rightly been said, “A smart person knows what to say, but a wise person knows whether or not to say it.” Knowing whether to speak about a situation or someone’s life is extremely difficult. Whether you enjoy dabbling in others’ affairs or like staying in your own lane, using discernment is extremely important and God-honoring. Webster defines the word discernment as the ability to judge well. I enjoyed Wikipedia’s definition of discernment as it reads, “The ability to perceive, understand, and judge things clearly, especially those that are not obvious or straightforward.”

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus is preaching in the closing moments of the greatest sermon ever spoken, the Sermon on the Mount. He magnificently teaches the spiritual as well as practical aspects of how we are to live. In Matthew 7:6, He says, ***“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”*** First of all, for all the dog lovers, Jesus is not attacking dogs here. Instead, He is directly addressing this concept of discernment, specifically dealing with when to speak the Gospel or the things of God. Having the ability to assess a situation, knowing when and what to say, and not wasting words, is an important skill to learn.

Christians have oftentimes earned a bad rap for this. A few years ago, my son and I were in San Diego for a few days. I had just finished speaking at a camp, and we decided we would spend a few days in the city exploring and taking in the sites. This was both a great and terrible decision as I did not look into what was happening in the city. Every year, Comic Con invades the city of San Diego,

and millions of people from around the world come to explore the exhibits, presentations, and movie previews. We were smack dab in the center of this craziness for a few days. I wish I could show you pictures of some of the costumes! As my son and I explored the city and traversed through this mass of people, we came across a mob of people yelling at one another. My instincts were to draw closer to see what was going on (which was probably bad discernment, now that I think about it). To my amazement, many of this group were "Christians" with signs yelling and screaming at attendees of the event. Their signs had verses and different biblical slogans printed or written on them, but their delivery was awful. I began to see them attack people in the crowd verbally, and the crowd responded. Back and forth they went, and the message they were attempting to communicate was lost. I remember telling my son that I think they would have had more success if they had set up a food stand for free. It is the classic phrase, "You catch more bees with honey than vinegar."

While I am all for truth and standing on it, Jesus directly speaks to this topic in Matthew 7:6 when He encourages believers to think before speaking into a situation. Do not waste words by speaking them to someone who is against you when it will only exacerbate the situation or person. Now, I know for many of us, discernment with when to speak and not to speak is a struggle. Trust me, my hand is up, and I get myself in more trouble than I would like with my mouth. James 1:5 tells us to go to God and ask him for wisdom. It says, ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."***

So, whether you are dealing with a coworker, friend, sibling, or neighbor, think to yourself, "How am I saying this? How are they hearing this? How is my heart when communicating this message." Most importantly, we need to ask, "Does this honor God and advance the message of the Gospel?" In all situations, seek God before speaking and ask Him to give you the correct words to speak or not speak. Paul's prayer for the church of Philippi is so relevant to the church today, and we would do well to keep it fresh in our minds!

Philippians 1:9-11 says, ***"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."***

SEEK PERSECUTION?

DEVOTION #2 - CHRIS MONTVILLE

"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you." Matthew 7:6

This verse confused me as a new Christian. It can often end up being one of those verses we kind of write off in our own head and then move past (no verses should be like this!). I think understanding a few key terms can help our understanding of the passage.

First, we need to understand the word ***"dogs"*** here. Dogs during the time of this writing were mostly wild and viewed as dangerous. In the simplest interpretation, this refers to unbelievers who are hostile to the Gospel. We see this definition line up with other passages of Scripture (for example, Ephesians 2:2 and Revelation 22:15).

The other keyword to understand in this passage is the word ***"pearls."*** We can find the definition of this through something Jesus spoke later in Matthew 13:45-46, ***"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."*** So, ***"pearls"*** in Matthew chapter 7 refers to the treasure we have in our salvation through faith in Christ.

Now that we have that clear, what is this passage saying? Is it saying never to share your faith (your pearls) with unbelievers (dogs)? Obviously not! That directly contradicts the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20! So, what do we make of this passage? We should never avoid offering the Gospel. However, the important

distinction this passage makes is that it is not a matter of “don’t share the Gospel,” but rather, it is, “don’t waste your time if someone is actively hostile to it.”

We are called in Scripture to endure persecution, and the Bible tells us that persecution will come (2 Timothy 3:12), but nowhere in Scripture does it say to seek out persecution. Persecution is never the goal of sharing our faith. What did Jesus tell His disciples to do in the face of persecution? Matthew 10:23 says, ***“When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”***

We see in Acts where Paul and Barnabas were persecuted, and what was their response? ***“Shook the dust from their feet”*** and moved on! Acts 13:50-51 records, ***“But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.”***

I have seen too many people in my lifetime carrying the Christian name go out and incite anger from unbelievers under the guise of being “persecuted” rather than genuinely share the Gospel in love. Will the Gospel sometimes bring persecution in response to it being shared? Yes. However, as with many things, it boils down to your heart. Is your heart looking to be persecuted so you can be viewed as a “holy” person, or are you genuinely trying to bring others to faith in Jesus? The Gospel is needed in our world. We need to genuinely seek to make disciples of all nations, not fan a flame of hatred.

JESUS' LOVE WINS

DEVOTION #3 - ADELINE SANCHEZ

A couple of the closest people in my life are not believers. For a long time, my friends, family, and I tried so hard to reach them with the Gospel, but were only met with constant rejection. After a while, it got to a point where our constant pushing of the Gospel only angered them and injured our relationship with them. I prayed a lot about what to do next. On one hand, I knew how much better their life would be with God in it; but on the other hand, continuing to try and push the Gospel on them was only going to hurt our relationship further and push them farther away from God.

The situation comes down to a matter of discernment. Matthew 7:6 says, ***"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."*** In this passage, Jesus is using dogs and pigs as an example of those who reject and attack the Gospel. It is important for us to be able to discern the dogs, pigs, or those whose only goal is to attack the Gospel and continue on in their evil ways. The truth is, some people just are not ready to accept the Gospel, and we have to trust that God will reveal Himself to them in His own perfect timing. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, it says, ***"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."*** We cannot expect those who are not spiritually discerned to see the value in the Gospel that we do.

God calls us to love, so I am not saying you have to cut off, abandon, or reject those who reject the Gospel. Matthew 5:16 says, ***"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may***

see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." While we cannot conform with those of the world, we can and should love them. By living out the Word of God and showing others that, we are shining our light for everyone to see. John 1:5 adds, ***"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."***

SEEING IS BELEIVING?

DEVOTION #4 - NATHAN ELLIOTT

Today, the Detroit Lions are one win away from playing in a Super Bowl, and I think to myself, “The Lions in a Super Bowl? How is this even possible?” It is an event so rare and so unbelievable that I almost cannot believe it is real. The mindset of not believing in things unless they are right in front of our eyes, is the same approach we often use with the gift of discernment. We cannot explain it, and we cannot see it. So, what is it? Thankfully, Scripture brings clarity on how we use practical discernment in our daily Christian lives.

Paul writes this in his letter to the Ephesians, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”*** (Ephesians 6:12). Scripture is clear on the spiritual realm being real, although we cannot see it, we know it exists. Discernment gives us the ability to distinguish between good and evil spirits (1 John 4:1), but also the ability to weigh the motives of our own heart and mind (1 Corinthians 2:14). With those biblical truths in mind, how do we grasp the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:6? It reads, ***“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”***

We should always approach Scripture within the context of the passage or teaching. Verse 6 comes right after a lesson from Jesus on not judging others. Although we are not to judge others, Jesus has also enabled us to use wisdom and discernment in certain situations. God has called us to be holy and righteous like His Son,

who is the ultimate example, and we are to treat others with Jesus in mind. However, there are some relationships, some scenarios, and some circumstances where it is okay to walk away. Jesus views our kindness, love, grace, and mercy as treasured pearls. They are valuable to us and profitable to the world. These qualities are given to us by the Spirit of Christ Himself. Unfortunately, there are those who will use and abuse these traits that Christians have been gifted.

Have you been experiencing this recently? Is it time for you to step away from a toxic relationship? Pearls are precious, and so are you. Pray this week that God will give you discernment in your relationships and circumstances. James 1:5 says, ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."***

JUDGEMENTAL OR DISCERNMENT?

DEVOTION #5 - PASTOR JOHN CARTER

Have you ever, as a Christian, heard these expressions:

- “You can’t judge me only God can!”
- “Judge much?”
- “How dare you judge me!”

It is often said in a spirit of conflict and often because we are generally saying things that someone else does not want to hear. I love how Jesus teaches us the difference between making prideful, arrogant, and judgmental statements versus using discernment. Maybe this is a new thought for you today. Have you ever considered how the two are different? Jesus has been teaching some great things to us in His Sermon on the Mount.

In the passage today, we are going to see Jesus teach us the difference between being judgmental and using discernment. Trust Jesus when He says this; there is definitely a big difference.

Matthew 7:6 says, ***“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”***

In the previous passages, Jesus has been teaching the aspects of judgmentalism, pulling the log out of one’s own eye before you try to pick a splinter out of someone else’s eye. The concept is pretty clear: do not judge or condemn someone else’s issues while you have your own huge issue to deal with. Jesus calls it what it is - hypocritical. Right after dealing with this overly condemning spirit

that a person may have, he almost does a 180, ***"Do not give dogs what is holy"*** or ***"Throw your pearls before pigs."*** Your initial response may be, "Who are you calling a dog or a pig? Whoa, man! That is a little harsh! That does not sound very nice or Christ-like at all! In fact, it sounds to be just a little judgmental, doesn't it?" What is Jesus doing with these passages?

The simple answer is that He is teaching us the difference between judging somebody and using our God-given ability to use discernment. I have no idea how you picture a dog or a pig. I happen to be a dog person, so I see them as loyal, kind, protective, caring, compassionate, and devoted companions. I do not have a lot of experience with the pig side of things, but I have seen people have them as pets. Maybe they, too, are soft and cuddly in their own unique way. I do not know. The point I am making is this was not the perspective Jesus had when He made this statement. Jesus was not highlighting the positive character traits of a dog or a pig (If they exist! Not judging if you have one as a pet). He was actually highlighting the destructive nature of the animal. You can understand this by his last statement in the passage, ***"Lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."*** Jesus is talking about the natural state in which a pig or a dog may come at you. I like to hunt, so I tend to watch hunting clips here and there. It is always amazing to watch how fast a pig can turn on you in the wild. I imagine a wild dog is the same way. There is a reason Animal Control has the long sticks with a leash at the end. They do not want to go home with a dog bite on the arm. Jesus is telling us here to be wise in our engagement with people. In some sense, Jesus is saying there are some wild-natured people who might just attack you if you are not careful.

Not all humans are vicious, wild, and ready to attack you at the drop of a dime. However, there are some, and using discretion to engage with them is an absolute necessity. Maybe you can think of someone you have engaged with that might fit this trait. You want to share something amazing that God has done in your life. Maybe you just got to know Him as your own personal Lord and Savior, so you want to share the exciting, holy, wonderful truths about Jesus. Maybe you

were wrestling with a passage or something going on in your life, and the Lord revealed to you the understanding or the reason why. So, you wanted to share the ***"pearl"*** with as many people as you come across. I mean, who does not want to hear Good News, right? This is not always the case, but have you ever had someone get angry with you when you shared the good things God has done in your life? What Jesus is teaching us is before we go and just flippantly share our thoughts, we should use discernment because some people might not be there to hear the holy, wonderful things God has done in our life, and they are just there to attack us. Our society has words for this kind of person: toxic, narcissistic, abusive, and passive-aggressive. Understand that Jesus is not saying you are to condemn them, but you should use discernment when you are engaging with such a person.

MY WAY OR GOD'S WAY

DEVOTION #6 - DAVID HUDGENS

I do not know about you, but when I am worn out from a long day, regardless of how productive or encouraging it may have been, I am anxious to rush home and just do nothing. When I finally arrive home, I quickly want to throw off my shoes, find my favorite chair, turn on the game, and scroll through my phone. Honestly, considering my schedule lately, what I have described seems like a pretty fantastic idea right now. After all, what is wrong with a little "me time," right? I mean, come on, I worked hard today, worked hard this week! Do I not deserve a moment to just "disappear" for a little while and "unplug"?

Perhaps, but for me, this line of reasoning and "self-care" rarely leads to anything profitable. Instead, what often results from the actions described above is this: my children are not seen nor heard by their father, and feelings of neglect invade their thoughts; meals are not made on time; necessary care to the home and pets is not given; laziness is modeled as an acceptable lifestyle; intolerance for those who love me the most forms.

Now, anyone would agree that those are not desirable outcomes. Yet, why would my choices to care for myself in seemingly innocuous ways lead to such destructive results? In Matthew 7:6, Jesus shares a heavy metaphor for the need to learn and practice discernment in our lives. He says, ***"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."*** In other words, be careful with all that God has blessed you with; be mindful as to how and where you spend the currency of your life.

Why is this important? It is because often opportunity will promise "Eden" but instead deliver the wilderness. Consider this thought from 1 Corinthians 6:12, ***"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful."***

When I think about how I want to spend my time at home after a long day, I can make the choice to "turn off" the world around me and just "zone out." That idea may present itself to me as "just what I need" in order to feel relaxed and better about myself. However, what actually results is this: those who love and depend upon me are ignored and uncared for according to their needs; my home and other resources are not properly maintained and biblically stewarded.

In those moments and others like it, I am tempted to exchange the sacred callings to be a husband and father for what promises to be great satisfaction, for what inevitably always becomes poisoned fruit.

How is it with you today? I want to encourage you, along with me, to seek the Holy Spirit to reveal where in your life you may be handing over the goodness of God to the devouring dogs and trampling pigs of this life. Let us pray for each other today as we learn and grow in discernment.



LESSON THREE

ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN

PASTOR PHILIP PIASECKI



"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Matthew 7:7-11

1. If someone was given the power to grant you three wishes, what would you wish for?

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Obviously, the correct answer here is with your first wish to ask for unlimited wishes, then you would be set for life. Of course, this is a ridiculous question; we know there is no such thing as a genie in a bottle. However, the way many of us structure our lives toward the Lord, it seems that we believe He is that mysterious genie. There is this false theology that can creep into our walk with the Lord that whispers, "Just keep God in your back pocket and pull Him out when you need to ask Him to give you something." Unfortunately, some take it even further to teach that with just enough faith, the Lord will give us what we ask for.

2. Have you ever found yourself guilty of going to God as if He were a genie in a bottle?

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3. Why do you think this is such a popular belief of who God is?

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We know that Scripture is true, so when Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount tells us, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you,"*** what does that promise mean? Does it mean God will give us whatever we ask from Him? Does it mean that every prayer we pray will get answered the way we want it and when we want it answered? First, we can answer with what we know it does not mean. John Piper said it this way, "If you can boss God around, you're God." An all-powerful God that I can boss around to do whatever I want does not seem too powerful to me. We see examples throughout Scripture of godly men and women getting a different answer to their prayer than they wanted.

4. How would it impact your view of the Lord if whatever we prayed, He had to answer yes?

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Deuteronomy 3:23-29 says, ***"And I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, 'O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.' But the Lord was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, 'Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again. Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan. But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see.' So we remained in the valley opposite Beth-peor."***

5. Why was Moses forbidden by the Lord to enter the Promise Land?

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We see in Scripture here the account of Moses being forbidden to enter the Promise Land due to his disobedience to the Lord. God had a different plan for his life. Instead of entering the Promise Land, he was charged with encouraging and strengthening Joshua for him to lead the people in the new land. It is hard to find someone in Scripture that we might deem more "spiritual" than Moses, yet here he is asking the Lord, and the answer is no.

6. Has there ever been a time in your life that, in hindsight, you were thankful the Lord did not give you what you asked for?

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I would argue that, in practice, we would not actually want God to answer yes to all of our prayers. So often, we think we are asking for a fish, but really, we are asking for a snake. We believe what we are praying for is what is best for us. I do not think many of us would pray for something we think would be harmful to us. However, in God's infinite wisdom, He knows that what we desire at times is not best for us, so His answer is no. I look back on my life and see so many times when I thought what I was praying for was the will of God, but clearly, now I can see how that would not have been God's best for me.

7. When we feel like our prayers are not being answered, how can we shift our perspective to understand what God may be doing?

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We have clearly established what we do not believe this Scripture is saying, so what is the Lord teaching us in Matthew chapter 7? It is good to read it again.

Matthew 7:7-11 records, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"***

The movements of "ask, seek, and knock" give us a blueprint for how eagerly we should approach the Lord. We bring our cares, wants, and desires before Him in prayer, asking Him to align our will with His will. As the Scripture says, we know the Father only gives good gifts, so our prayer to Him needs to be one that asks Him to help us understand what is good for us. We need to ask Him to help us trust that He knows what is best for us.

Romans 8:28 says, ***"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."***

8. What does Scripture mean when it uses the word ***"good"*** in Matthew chapter 7 and Romans chapter 8?

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9. Do you struggle to trust that God is working things together for your good?

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We have to be reminded that all of God's attributes are true at the same time. He is good, He is just, He is fair, He is sovereign, He is all-powerful, He is all-knowing, and the list could go on and on. Many times in our lives, when we think of the word ***"good,"*** we are thinking of earthly comforts. Something that is good for us in the spiritual sense is something that is making us more like Christ. So, knowing that all of God's attributes are true at the same time, we can rest assured knowing that the answer to our "asking, seeking, and knocking" is in the hands of the Almighty. There will be things that we have to go through in our lives that will not be comfortable, but they will make us more like Christ.

10. What is something hard that you have gone through in your life that you see now was spiritually beneficial to you?

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11. How does knowing that all of God's attributes are true at the same time help you have peace in your asking, seeking, and knocking?

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God does not hide Himself from us. When we seek Him and knock at His door, He will open it. He desires to give us bread and fish even when we are unknowingly praying for a stone and a snake. We see from this Scripture that God is a loving Father who wants to hear from His kids and willingly opens the doors of grace and mercy through salvation to us. Ultimately, He has given us the greatest ***"good"*** gift of the forgiveness of our sins through our repentance and belief in the Good News of Jesus. Our Heavenly Father cares for us so much that He gives us good gifts in our lives that we did not even know we needed. So, diligently seek the Lord and His answers to your prayers, and while we ask, seek, and knock, we can rest on the truth that God's plan for our lives is better than our own plan.

NOTES

GOOD GIFTS

DEVOTION #1 - PASTOR RYAN STORY

Like it or love it, the Christmas season is right around the corner. Ever since my kids were born, I have attempted to find that one gift that I know they will want. I take an active interest in each of their interests by finding that one character figure, game, or book that will excite them. Yes, I am that 40-year-old man sifting through Pokémon cards to find the right one. Why do I do it? For my kids. Arnold's passion in *"Jingle All the Way"* set the bar for what I do to make sure I find that exact gift that will lighten my kids' faces on Christmas day.

I strive to ensure my kids know that their father loves them. There are many times I fail at showing them that I love them more than myself, but in the moments I am "fathering on all cylinders," my hope is in all the Pokémon Cards, in all the superhero toys and costumes, in all the food, in all the amenities, and in all that I am. My hope is that my kids just know that their dad loves them in the most passionately irrational way.

I have an ulterior motive for why I want to show my kids such love. Yes, I want them to know that their earthly father loves them, but Matthew 7:11 says, ***"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"***

I am not sure which statement Jesus makes here that your heart focused on, but for me, when Jesus says, ***"You then, who are evil,"*** and ***"How much more will your Father,"*** it really brought me closer to Him. The ***"you then, who are evil"*** is not meant to

be a shot at one's parenting skills. Jesus is letting us know the inescapable reality that outside of Jesus, everyone born on this Earth has sin. Yet, even we sinful, rebellious, selfish, proud fathers are capable of giving good gifts to our children. However, the ulterior motive for our gift-giving should be to reflect the One who gives at a level of ***"how much more."***

The reality is our Father, who is in Heaven, has given us the greatest gift, His love. The way that we know that God gives the best gifts is because God sent His Son to be with us, live among us, and die because of the evil that lives in our hearts. This Christmas season, give a good gift, but make sure that in your love, you are pointing your children to the One who gives far better than us.

STAYING WARM

DEVOTION #2 - KATIE PETTIBONE

There is a poem I thought of when I was reading this passage. It is a poem I have been thinking about a lot recently because it is about a topic I have been dealing with in my own life. It is *"Nearer"* by C.S. Lewis.

> If you want to get warm, you must stand near the fire:
> If you want to be wet, you must get into the water.
> If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life,
> You must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them.

I feel like there are a lot of us who love to be in control. I would plan to do this until my dad got home from his early morning route. We like having a plan for the day and for the week. It was a plan of tasks for the day, even a plan on what the bedtime routine would look like later. Being a planner is not a bad thing; however, it is hard when something interrupts those plans. When an interruption comes, you think, "I did not plan for this!" I have been there, and let me tell you, it sends me into a spiral of thoughts and emotions. I begin to think of all the "what ifs'' and wonder,"How am I going to get through this?" It is so easy to forget that in those moments, there is someone who does have a plan and who has already taken care of it, as we see in this passage.

Matthew 7:7-11 records, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he***

asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

I believe that we fall into the spiral of worries so easily because that is exactly what the enemy wants of us. The enemy wants to keep our eyes away from the Lord and to keep them on all the burdens that we face.

It is so easy to forget that God has already promised to get us through whatever we face as long as we are consistent in asking what needs to be asked. We also forget that even in good times, we should draw near to God because He is a part of those times, too.

I love this poem by C.S. Lewis because it brings to light what we need to be doing as followers of Christ. We need to surround ourselves with God. We need to be in prayer, letting God know our worries, asking Him things we need, and fully giving the control we think we have to Him (who actually has control). However, if we do not spend time with the Lord and let Him know our worries, we will not be satisfied. We will feel distant from God. If we feel distant, how are we to get any answers given to us? If you think about it, it is just like how you may feel cold and you want to be warmer. Instead of leaning toward the fire, you are too worried about being cold. You forget that the fire is right there, ready to give you the warmth you need.

I challenge you to start leaning toward the fire. Start beginning your days by spending time in the Word and in prayer. Stay near God and let Him know everything, because He loves you, and wants you to tell Him everything. Even when it is hard, let Him know that it is hard, and He will make a way. Even when you feel content, let Him know you feel content, and praise Him for it. He is waiting for you to tell Him these things. He is waiting for you because He loves you! Ask, and you shall receive.

THE LOVE OF THE FATHER

DEVOTION #3 - GARY WRIGHT

God blessed me with a fantastic dad growing up. My dad's name was Roy. Dad loved camping, hunting, fishing, and honestly, anything to do with being outdoors. He included his family in all of his outdoor adventures. I loved my dad, and I am very thankful for all the time I was able to spend with him, sharing the things that he loved.

In Matthew 7:9-11, Jesus is speaking about earthly fathers and asks a question, ***"Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"*** I would love to tell you that my dad was perfect, but just like all earthly parents, he made mistakes because he had a sinful nature. One thing is for sure though, my dad loved us, and if we asked for help, he did all he could to provide that help.

In the passage you just read, Jesus is asking if earthly fathers who have a sinful nature provide for their children, how much more is God, your heavenly Father, going to provide for those who pray and ask. My dad loved me, but that love does not compare to the love our heavenly Father has for us. God loves us so much that He gave His own Son, Jesus, to die for our sin.

In the previous verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been teaching us how to live our lives as Christians. Living the Christian life cannot be done in our own strength. We need God's help. We need a prayer life. In Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus tells us to do three things

when we need help: ask, seek, and knock. He says, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."*** When we are in need, Jesus tells us to pray to the Father and ask, seek, and knock. Ask, seek, and knock are all in the present tense, which means we should be praying continuously for all our needs. God answers our prayers, not because we keep asking, but because He loves and cares for us. Our prayer should line up with God's plan, just like when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, ***"Not my will, but Yours, be done."*** We should be praying expectantly with faith. When we pray this way, Jesus says the Father will answer and provide for our needs.

There are a few things I would encourage you to think about today.

- How is my prayer life?
- Am I praying continuously?
- Am I praying and expecting God to answer my prayers with faith?
- Do I trust God's plan and His will over my own?

LEARNING TO LOVE

DEVOTION #4 - MITCHELL HOLMES

If you grew up with siblings, you will know the difficulty of loving someone unconditionally. I am here to tell you, when I was a young boy, there was no one harder for me to love than my three sisters. We had nothing in common. They constantly encroached on my space, toys, TV time, and more. Being the selfish child that I was, I had a very difficult time loving my sisters. I had convinced myself that tolerating my annoying sisters, not knocking their heads together as they deserved, and avoiding them when I was angry with them was all that was required of me to love them.

Jesus, in the passage for today, calls out this form of "love." To love someone fully and unconditionally requires action and sacrifice. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, but I find it far easier to simply not wish ill on them or avoid them. What Jesus commands is that we, as representatives for Him, do not do the bare minimum of tolerance. He calls us to truly love unconditionally, which requires action. If you think that this seems a task too difficult, you are right. Thankfully, we are not tasked with doing this alone.

Our passage for today comes from Matthew 7:7-11, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"*** The passage starts

with Jesus saying that we have been given the ability to call for help. If you belong to Christ, you can faithfully go and love people in a superhuman way because you have the confidence of God at your back. You can have confidence that no matter what the situation becomes, your eternal resting place is set. God will provide the means to help you overcome any obstacles that arise during the mission of loving people well if you only ask Him for it.

Jesus then concludes our passage for today by drawing a comparison to an earthly (sinful) father who would never abuse his son and how much more our infinitely righteous and holy Heavenly Father cares for us. We who have been given grace and love that we do not deserve ought to demonstrate that same love in an unconditional way to those around us. It is not in an appeasing, tolerant type of way, but in an active, selfless way.

THE GOOD FATHER

DEVOTION #5 - SIERRA COMBS

I have the greatest dad in the world. He is loving, patient, protective, and kind. When he says He will do something, I know that he will follow through. He wants what is best for me. I know that he loves me and I can trust him. He is a good father. While he certainly is not perfect, the way I view him has only enhanced my view of my Heavenly Father. I have never known anything else, but I am not naive to the fact that many people do not share my experience. For many, their entire perception of God the Father has been twisted and skewed because of the broken relationships with the ones who were supposed to love and take care of them. Perhaps this is you, and what seems like a lifetime's worth of emotional baggage has left you damaged and doubting the goodness of God. Or maybe things are going okay at the moment, but you are just waiting for the other shoe to drop, wondering how long it will be until you are left alone, abandoned, or abused at the hands of an angry and uncaring God. However, my friend, when we truly get to know our Heavenly Father, we will quickly find out that this is not who He is.

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus tells His listeners that God is a loving Father who gives good gifts to His children. He is not stingy and selfish, and we do not have to grovel and beg at His feet when we seek Him out in prayer. Matthew 7:7-11 says, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your***

children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" I love these verses because it gives a glimpse of the heart of the Father. Not only does He provide for us, but He is understanding and caring. He has good plans! The child in the verse asks his father for basic necessities. Would a good father give him a snake or a stone instead? Of course not. Yet, even the very best earthly father is nothing compared to our Heavenly Father. The amazing thing about God is that He gives us full access to Himself. If you have been born again into the family of God through the blood of Jesus Christ, you can go to Him, not just as some lowly peasant, but as a child whom He deeply loves. He promises to meet you there, and you can rest assured that when you seek the Lord, you will find Him. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you. Tell Him that you want to know Him more. The more you know Him, the more you will come to trust Him. He will not trick you and give you a rock when you ask for some bread, and He will not harm you by giving you a poisonous snake instead of a fish. He knows exactly what you need (even when you do not), and He will give you just that in His perfect timing. You can trust Him because He is good. Seek Him, know Him, and know that He has a good plan for your life.

As I read through these verses and reflect on our Good Father, I am reminded of one of my favorite songs called *"Good Plans"* by Red Rocks Worship. I encourage you to take a listen and read the lyrics below. When we truly know our Father, we will know that He has good plans for our lives.

> The Lord is my shepherd, and He is everything I need
> So I will not worry; I will not fear the enemy
> He said that He loves me; He said that He's with me even though
> I walk through the valley of shadow and death, and still, I know

He has good plans; He has good plans for me
So, I will take heart in deserts and gardens
He has good plans; He has good plans for me
If I know my Father, I know my Father has good plans

The Lord is my Savior, so why should I doubt my victory
Why would I question the rod and the staff that comforts me
He quiets the waters; He quiets the storm inside of me
So what could be better than walking with Him when I believe

He has good plans; He has good plans for me
So I will take heart in deserts and gardens
He has good plans; He has good plans for me
If I know my Father, I know my Father has good plans

IS IT GOOD?

DEVOTION #6 - PASTOR JUSTIN DEAN

Growing up, I had a similar issue to many other boys: I was constantly hungry. This being the case, I went to my source of food, my parents, to provide me with the food I so desperately desired. The problem was that many times, they did not think I needed the same food that I was hungry for. In my head, I am dreaming of Domino's Pizza, McDonald's fries, and Taco Bell, but they are thinking of much healthier options. I was asking for something, but what was best for me was much different than what I had in mind. Many times, we experience something similar with our Heavenly Father.

Matthew 7:7-11 says, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"***

On first read, this can be misinterpreted to mean that we can have free reign to treat God like Santa. I want you to re-read this passage but with the mindset of a child asking their parent for the things they need.

I think that last line really illuminates the truth of this entire passage, ***"How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good***

things to those who ask him!" The problem is what we think is good and what God thinks is good are often very different. Our own sinful desires, the cultural lies we believe, and the comfort we wish to fuel often lead us to serpents when we really need fish.

God is concerned with our needs, and He wants us to come to Him in our times of need. We must understand that the way He meets those needs may be different than we think is best. So, how does this change the way that I live now? As I read this passage, I am reminded of the way I pray. When I am in need, do I go to God in the specific way I want it accomplished, or do I lay my needs before Him and trust that He will provide in the best way that only He can? Do I ask for a million dollars, a new truck, or a raise to satisfy my anxiety about my finances, or do I lay my anxieties before Him and trust that He will show up in a way that truly satisfies me and leaves me content?

Romans 8:27-28 (NASB) adds, ***"And He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."***

God promises that He will provide for us what is good and for our best. We must remind ourselves of this truth when we get discouraged or feel that our prayers are not immediately answered in the way we think is best. We must also remind ourselves that He knows what is best and is working all things, the things that seem good and bad, out for our best as we follow him.

How can you remind yourself of this truth today?



LESSON FOUR

THE GOLDEN RULE

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD



The Golden Rule is a very interesting term that has crossed over from being a biblical teaching to a worldly teaching and advisement. For some, they believe this to be "the way of the world" or karma; you do good things, and good things will return to you. Therefore, the opposite is viewed as true; you do bad things, and bad things will return to you. However, as with many things in God's Word, this has been taken grossly out of the context of what Jesus was truly teaching.

1. What other biblical teachings have been taken out of context by the world?

_____
_____
_____

2. Do you have a "golden rule" in your household or life?

_____
_____
_____

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus is continuing what is argued to be one of the best sermons ever; I would argue that all He teaches is where the bar is set (haha!). Regardless, as we continue the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes an important moment to essentially summarize the entirety of the Old Testament. He says in verse 12, ***"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."*** This profound yet simple command is an all-encompassing command of how one who is being sanctified by the Spirit ought to live. Earlier in this sermon, Jesus teaches that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. However, He makes the important note that this ***"neighbor"*** is everyone. Not only are we called to love our neighbors who we enjoy and get along with (our friends and family), but we are to love our enemies the same as they are our neighbors as well. With this as the foundation for our understanding of how we, as followers of Christ, are called by Him to live, then this passage Jesus teaches here in Matthew 7:12 simply reinforces His earlier teaching.

3. What things, physically and emotionally, cause us to struggle to love our enemies?

_____
_____
_____

4. Has there been a time in your life when the Spirit convicted you of your reaction or thoughts toward your enemy?

_____
_____
_____

So, Jesus has now instructed twice within this teaching the importance of loving others in both word and deed. Why? Personally, I believe that Jesus knows this will be the instruction and action that we will struggle with most. Being called to read God's Word, pray without ceasing, share the Gospel, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, tithe, and have community together are all incredible things to not only do but to be a part of. They are also things that can be done with comfort, convenience, and ease to have accountability. However, this "Golden Rule" and "Greatest Commandment" are two instructions and commands from Christ; these are not convenient. These two commands, which truly go hand in hand, are not comfortable nor enjoyable to partake in. That is exactly why the world has corrupted and manipulated this rule and command. Jesus knew that this would happen and that it was happening. This is why He expounded in Matthew 5:43, calling out the world's standard to hate your enemy and corrects with the Golden Rule and Greatest Command. He called us, His followers, to love our enemies and therefore treat everyone, whether redeemed by His grace or still living for the world, with His love.

5. How do loving your enemies and treating others the way you want to be treated correlate?

_____
_____
_____

6. What are some inconveniences in your life you have learned to overcome or handle?

_____

_____

_____

If you have known me for more than five minutes, there is a good chance that you quickly learned that I am a huge Beatles fan. The Beatles are truly pillars of Rock-n-Roll who took the world by storm. A little trivia: back in November of 2023, their final song, *"Now and Then,"* was released, and it is a phenomenal track! Yet, back in July of 1967, they released another song called *"All You Need Is Love."* The chorus, as many have surely heard, proclaims, "All you need is love." Yet, in one of the first lines in the first verse, John and Paul wrote, "There's nothing you can do that can't be done." Now, please know that, first and foremost, I do not support all of the Beatles' thoughts, comments, lifestyles, or ideologies. However, I do believe that while they may not have known it, in penning this hit, they were trying to focus people on the bigger picture: to love one another. In the first verse, they are saying how there are things that we will physically not be able to do and some things we are simply not supposed to do. However, the whole point is to take a step back, be yourself, and love. Now, if we take those lyrics and view them through the lens of Christ's death for our sins, His burial, and His glorious resurrection, how easy would it be for us to carry out the Golden Rule? This is exactly what Christ is teaching and calling us to do. We are to be our new reconciled selves through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not to try to be something or someone we are not. Then, in all we do, say, and think, do it all in love, but not just any love, the love of Christ.

7. Are there any songs that help emphasize or encourage you in the teachings of God's Word?

_____

_____

_____

8. Is there someone in your life whom you did not treat with the love of Christ that you need to pray for an opportunity to love as we are called?

_____

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_____

The Golden Rule and the Great Commandment are all about love. At the core of them all is the call to be a reflection of Christ in action to the world. This is only accomplished through the moving, equipping, and leading of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Jesus proclaimed, ***"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them."*** He did not say this flippantly. He proclaimed this in love to us, His followers, the Church. It is that we are to truly be His hands and feet to a lost, broken, selfish, and hurting world. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 that we have not only been reconciled to our Heavenly Father through Christ but also that we have entered into the ***"ministry of reconciliation;"*** therefore, we are His ambassadors here on this earth. If we are truly being obedient in our walk with the Lord, this call to do to others as we would have done to us will not be a rule, but a way of life. We only have so much time here on this earth. We only have so many opportunities and encounters with the people who are placed in our path. May we, as followers of Christ, truly allow the Spirit to sanctify us daily. May we not simply treat others the way we want to be treated because it is the right or nice thing to do, but may we do so to seize every opportunity to show the love of Christ. It is in the hope that through our obedience, lives would be changed for the glory of the Gospel of Christ!

9. What does it mean to you to be an ambassador of Christ?

_____

_____

_____

10. How can we encourage one another to be obedient to the Golden Rule?

_____
_____
_____

NOTES

BE RADICAL

DEVOTION #1 - DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:12

At first glance, the verse seems basic to all religions:

- Buddhism - Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
- Confucianism - One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct: loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.
- Hinduism - This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.
- Judaism (Talmud) - What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

All these religions teach a Silver Rule. They teach that we should not do to others what we would not done to us. Even a person who does not acknowledge God normally raises their child with the concept that if you do not want it done to you, do not do it to others. This is a great principle of life. It is logical. It makes sense. It should be the norm.

However, the Silver Rule is passive. The common phrase is "do not." The Golden Rule is a step up. It is the principle of doing unto others what we would want done to us. It is active. This is radical. God calls us to a higher standard.

Jesus did not call His followers to just survive. We are to thrive. We are to make a difference in the world. Those who encounter us should be better off from having met us. There are several ways this can be done each day:

- Be courteous in traffic
- Encourage others
- Practice empathy
- Give people the benefit of the doubt
- Be friendly, smile
- Listen to others
- Forgive
- Express gratitude
- Pay it forward
- Be kind

Please note: Jesus' command is more than just doing good things. This does not clear the slate in God's list of our good and bad deeds. Positive actions do not tip the scale in our favor. Followers of Jesus should not do good things to go to Heaven but because they are going to Heaven. Hopefully, the Golden Rule lifestyle will be so attractive that others will be drawn to Jesus.

Live the Silver Rule and take it up a notch to the Golden Rule.

Be radical.

CROSSING PUDDLES AND OCEANS

DEVOTION #2 - ALYSSA FAIRSE

Matthew 7:12 contains the Golden Rule, ***"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."***

I complain way more than I would like to admit. For a long time, I found myself complaining about the most simple things: cooking dinner, doing the dishes, and taking out the trash. It was easy for me to serve the Lord in all the ways I wanted to. However, when it came down to serving the Lord in the places of my life that did not fit my idea of worship or that even made me uncomfortable, I became bitter while doing them. I found myself saying things along the lines of:

- My husband made me mad, so I will not do his laundry today.
- My friend canceled on me again, so I will not watch her kids on Saturday like I promised.
- I do not want to be here, I just want to go home.
- This woman has been nothing but mean to me, she does not deserve anything from me.

Often, when we do something for someone, we think we are doing it directly for that person in that moment, and in a lot of ways, we are. Every interaction we have with people affects them. It can be from simple hellos, to picking something up off the floor when they drop something.

I want to offer a different perspective on serving. These small and large interactions could very well determine someone's salvation one day. Someone recently said to me, "You may be the only Bible some people will ever read." That phrase alone changed my whole mindset on how I am called to love others efficiently.

Matthew 20:28 sets the tone, ***"Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*** Jesus did not spend His time on earth worrying about all of the ways people wronged Him. We are all aware of how much they truly did wrong Him, to the point of the cross where even there, Jesus said, ***"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"*** (Luke 23:34). Jesus spent His time here on earth loving everyone He came into contact with. He focused on helping the blind see, healing those with sickness, feeding the hungry, and turning the broken away from sin. He did not bother asking, "Are they worthy of this?" or "What have they done for me?" Jesus was not worried about what they had done at all. Instead, He came with the perspective of, "How can I serve them?"

I think it is important that we all have this mindset. In today's society, we often hear phrases along the lines of, "Do not cross oceans for people who would not cross a puddle for you." I am here to encourage you to do it anyway. Serve others and help bring them to Jesus. At the end of the day, that is the only thing that will ever matter in this life. Matthew 25:35-40 tells us exactly that. When we serve others, it is not just for them. It is directly for the Lord and His Kingdom. In every way we serve, whether small or big, it is for the glory of the Lord! It does not matter if we think someone is worthy of it; it does not even matter if we personally like the person we are doing something for. It only matters that we ***"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"*** (Matthew 6:33).

Our flesh will continuously tell us not to serve others. Our flesh will even deceive us into thinking things like, "This person does not

actually need help," "This makes me too uncomfortable, so I'm just not going to bother," or "Someone else will help them."

I encourage you to ignore all of those thoughts and do it anyway!

At first, the act of serving others may be uncomfortable for some of you. This is uncommon ground for a lot of people. When fleshly thoughts pop into your head, remind yourself, "I am not called to be comfortable. I am a child of the most high King and I am called to be His hands and feet!" Eventually, serving others and His Kingdom will come so naturally to you that it will not even be a second thought. You will not bother wondering if you are making the right choice or if the other person is worthy of it. You will just have the desire and heart to do it, and you will have the desire to do it without complaining.

Lastly, in every opportunity that God gives you to serve, I encourage you to start asking yourself two questions.

- Is this what glorifies the Lord?
- Is this what I would like to have done to me?

More often than not, the answer to both of those questions is yes.

WWJD

DEVOTION #3 - KATRINA YOUNG

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:12

In the 1990s, there was a grassroots movement called W.W.J.D. (What Would Jesus Do?). It spread worldwide among Christian youth wearing bracelets as a reminder that their actions should be like Jesus. A few years ago, people started doing "random acts of kindness." You might be in a drive-through, and the person in front of you would pay for your order. The idea was for you to then pay it forward and do the same for someone else. Today, you do not have to look far to see "Be Kind," a catchphrase to remind us how to treat our fellow man. Social media memes, t-shirts, and even rock gardens all display a reminder to be nice. It is as if our culture has forgotten how to treat others, so we need a reminder on our coffee mug.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus gives us a perfect example of doing to others as you would have them do to you. A man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. Others passed by him and walked on, but the Samaritan, an enemy, showed compassion and helped him. The Samaritan did not acknowledge differences when he approached the man but only saw a man in need and cared for him. It is horrifying to think that if I or someone that I loved were stranded and in need, we could be passed by due to race, gender, or beliefs. The world is full of hatred and cruelty, but loving ***"your neighbor as yourself"*** is the example the Samaritan gave. The Golden Rule is a call to serve and love others as Christ loves us. Luke 6:27-28 tells us, ***"Love***

your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

The bracelets, t-shirts, and coffee mugs all serve as a reminder of how we should treat our fellow man. They cause us to pause and hopefully act on the reminder. Unfortunately, over time these things will fade and lose their impact. If I were to ask my son what does W.W.J.D. mean, he would have no idea. One thing for certain is that God's Word will not fade. The bottom line is that we do not need material things as a constant reminder of how to act or treat others. We need to know who we are in Christ and to follow His example. Philippians 2:4-5 says, ***"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."***

THANKING GOD FOR HIS GRACE

DEVOTION #4 - ELIJAH EDWARDS

Growing up as the oldest of three siblings created many moments of friction and "getting even." There were countless times when we would mess with each other or push each other's buttons. This constant tormenting would create even worse situations where if one of us was wronged by the other, no matter if it was an accident or not, we would get our revenge somehow. Yet, looking back, there were times when I could have and should have been much more merciful to them. There were moments in my life when I wished that other people were more merciful and gracious to me for my mistakes.

What are some examples of when you were not merciful to someone? When was there a time you wished someone was merciful to you?

In Matthew 7:12, we read, ***"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."*** Jesus is telling us how to treat people. It is not just your friends, family, or fellow believers in Christ. It is all people. Jesus tells us that whatever we want to be done for ourselves, we must do for others. No matter the wrong they have done to you or the evil they have committed against you, you must treat them the way you would have or wish they had treated you. The command includes showing them mercy and having grace upon them for what they have done.

Those in Jesus' time found this pretty profound. To tell someone that they need to show love to someone who has done evil to them

sounds insane. What makes following this rule so difficult? Do you like this rule in principle but not in practice?

The reality is that this rule has already been used on us. Romans 6:23 says, ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

Each of us has sinned, and that sin deserves death. We deserved that punishment, yet Jesus took it for us. Jesus, on the cross, took that punishment and had mercy on us all. Know that we are called to show that same love and mercy to others.

LOVING OTHERS ANYWAYS

DEVOTION #5 - JAZMINE SERIO

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:12

Have you ever been in a friendship or any kind of relationship where you always go out of your way to love or support them just for them to turn around and hurt you, maybe even multiple times? Many times, our first reaction is to go back and hurt them or treat them the way they treated us. It is so easy to love people when they love us. Matthew 5:46 asks, ***"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?"*** We are called to live set apart. The world says to treat others the way they treat you or do not go out of your way for those who would not do that for you. However, Christ calls us to love one another. John 15:12-13 says, ***"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."***

I serve in the student ministry at our Goodrich location. I help lead a group of 6th-grade girls during our Growth Community. We got on the topic of treating others the way you want to be treated. A few of the girls had said that if they are kind to someone, just for them to turn around and be mean, they do not think they should continue to be kind to them. I then asked them if treating them the way they treated you would make the situation better or worse. Do you stand apart from them, or are you just like them? Christ calls us to live set apart to be different from the world. If we go out of our way to love those who hurt us, we start to stand out.

I had someone close to me treat me poorly, and instead of turning around and hurting them back, I continued to love that person by sticking up for them when others close to them began treating them poorly. They then reached out to me and told me that after how they treated me, they did not deserve me sticking up for them or treating them with kindness. They added that I had every right to join in and speak poorly of them. If I am honest, it was difficult for me to show kindness toward this person who hurt me so badly; I could have easily joined in and treated them poorly after how they treated me. However, I treated them the way I would have wanted to be treated. If I had treated them the way they treated me, it would not be honoring God, and it would have created more hurt and pain on both ends. So, I want to encourage you to go out of your way for others who would not do it for you. Love those who are difficult to love and see what God does in and through you will be special.

WORD AND DEED

DEVOTION #6 - RICH SAWICKI

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:12

Are you familiar with the Golden Rule? It is more about helping other people than it is about discovering hidden wealth. Jesus kept it simple, basically saying, "If you want kindness, give kindness." Treat others the way you would like to be treated.

To better understand a situation, try imagining it from another person's perspective and asking yourself what you would want to happen. That is what the Golden Rule is all about. It is about understanding, putting yourself in the shoes of others, and showing kindness. In the midst of our hectic lives, we often fail to pause and consider the impact of our actions on others around us. This rule, however, summarizes all that the Bible says, according to Jesus. ***"Love your neighbor as yourself"*** (Matthew 22:39) is like a CliffsNotes note on the subject.

When it comes to the little things in life, as well as the large ones, always remember to follow the Golden Rule. It is simply being there for someone, whether it is by holding a door open, listening to a friend, or simply smiling at someone. It may make a big difference in their day.

Our words and thoughts are equally as important as our actions. Imagine a world where everyone interacted with you in the manner they would like to be addressed. Surely it would be very helpful, right? Let us watch how we talk and choose encouraging and helpful

remarks instead of hurtful ones. The way Jesus spent His life taught us how to apply the Golden Rule. He showed kindness to all people, regardless of who they were or where they came from. He showed love to everyone, welcoming the outcasts and healing those who were sick.

Let us consider ways to live by the Golden Rule today. We could forgive those who have wronged us, be nice to strangers, or provide a hand to the lonely. Let us shine our lights one act of kindness at a time. Even the smallest acts of kindness have the power to point others to Jesus. It is where they can find freedom and redemption through His sacrifice, the ultimate act of kindness.

Prayer:
Jesus, thank You for the simple yet powerful message of the Golden Rule. Please help us to put it into practice every day by being loving, respectful, and kind to everyone we meet. Make us aware of the struggles of our fellow humans and grant us the strength and courage to respond compassionately to their needs. May our words and actions reflect Your love, bringing glory to Your name. Amen.



LESSON FIVE

THE GATE AND THE PATH

PASTOR FERDINAND SANDERS



Growing up, were you ever (condescendingly) asked, “If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too?” We all probably responded in the same way, with a humbled and embarrassed, drawn-out, “No.” Whether it was from a parent, a teacher, or a coach, I think it is safe to say that we have all put ourselves in a situation where this was a fair question that we deserved to be asked.

1. Share a time that you were asked that question or when you asked your own child(ren) that question.

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In every situation in which that question has been asked, there is a constant: the question is always followed by a foolish choice that was made. Hopefully, you and I have all learned and grown from these decisions. Is anyone thankful that they are not the same person that they were years ago? There is a famous quote that says, “Show me your friends, and I will show you your future.” It is a good reminder of how easily we can be influenced by those around us. As we continue in our study of the Sermon on the Mount within the book of Matthew, we see that Jesus gives the audience a similar warning in the midst of His teaching. ***“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few”*** (Matthew 7:13-14). In typical Jesus fashion, Jesus lays out a relatively straightforward message but a very profound truth. In these two verses, we see Jesus lay out a decision that everyone in their life will come to face. There are two options, two gates. One leads to life, and the other leads to destruction. You might be thinking to yourself, “Why would anyone choose the gate that leads to destruction?”

2. Do you think anyone knowingly or willingly chooses to walk the path that leads to destruction? Why or why not?

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Maybe I am giving people too much credit, but I would venture to say that most people would not knowingly choose destruction or death over life. One thing that always amazes me is that people walked the world with Jesus, knew of His miracles, and still rejected Him and His teaching. They say, "Hindsight is 20/20," and I think in a number of situations, people do not always realize the path they are on until they have been walking it for a number of years.

3. How do you think people find themselves on the path that leads to destruction?

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In referring to Matthew chapter 7, one commentator writes, "Jesus did not speak of this gate as our destiny, but as the entrance to a path" (Guzik, 2018). We need to remember that this choice that Jesus is referring to is not just a one-time conscious decision, but is one that is made by looking at our actions over time. As much as I would like, I cannot just wake up and decide that "I am healthy" or "I am debt free." There is a process or a series of decisions that must be present in order for that to be true.

4. What is the difference between ***"the gate"*** and ***"the way or the path"***?

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5. What do you think is more important: the initial decision or the series of choices that follow?

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6. What influences your decision-making more, the process or the end result?

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It may seem like a "chicken versus the egg" question, but ultimately, what good is our initial decision if our actions do not match? In the event that you are like me, reading Jesus' words in these two verses may feel like taking a sip from a fire hose. With that being said, we will spend the remainder of the study looking at each verse individually.

Matthew 7:13 says, ***"For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many."*** I wish that I could sit here and make light of how seemingly foolish it would be for anyone to walk the path that leads to destruction, but sadly, we know that this is not the case when we look at the world around us. Going back to our ice-breaker question, how many times have we used the phrase "everybody is doing it" to justify our decision? Looking back on those decisions, they probably were not ones that we should have been trying to justify. Sprinkle in the fact that we are told that the path is ***"easy"*** and avoids hard work and sacrifice; it is no mystery that this is the more "tempting" path.

7. What do you think is more influential: the fact that the path is ***"easy"*** or the fact that ***"those who enter by it are many"***? Why?

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Matthew 7:14 says, ***"For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."*** On the other side of the coin, Jesus tells us the conditions of the path that ultimately leads to life. Jesus even opens up this section of teaching by simply instructing to ***"enter by the narrow gate."*** Did you ever have an open-book test in school? It feels like we have been given the answers to the test! However, even with the "answers" being made readily available, Jesus lays out that ***"those who find it are few."*** As opposed to verse 13, we can draw the conclusion that the work and sacrifice required, in addition to going against the crowd, makes this the path less traveled.

8. Why do you think that Jesus says, ***"those that find it are few"***?

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9. What makes walking the path to life ***"hard"***?

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Earlier in this lesson, I used an analogy about how I cannot just wake up one day and decide that "I am healthy" or "I am debt free" and that it is a process more than it is a decision. While that is true about my health and my finances, I want to clarify that it is not the best example when talking about our relationship with Christ. If you have been a Christian for any amount of time, you know that it certainly is a process, but the decision alone holds a great deal of significance, too. I am reminded of the thief on the cross who, in his final moments, acknowledges that he was walking the path that leads to destruction. Look at how the Gospel of Luke records this special moment: ***"'For we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And***

he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'"

For those who may find themselves walking on the path that leads to destruction, the temptation may be to think that you have to "undo your wrongs," or that you would need to make up the distance that you have been walking in order to walk through the gate that leads to life. Praise God that this is not the case! For anyone who may find themselves walking on the wrong path, all it takes is one decision to redirect yourself onto the path that leads to life. Romans 10:9 adds, ***"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*** It really can be as simple as that.

10. How can we help or encourage someone who finds that they have been walking on the wrong path?

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NOTES

FOLLOW GOD'S MAP

DEVOTION #1 - MARK PITTENGER

How many of you use Google Maps? I use it every day. I like that it verbally gives you step-by-step directions. Every morning, before I start driving to Pontiac, I put in the location I am headed, which is always the same. I know the directions to get there. I know all the turns and roads and whatnot, but sometimes Google Maps will tell me there is a better way to get there. This happened the other day. As I was about to leave, Google Maps directed me down M15 to I75 instead of taking Saginaw Street. This seemed crazy, as I75 is only about twelve minutes away. If I take Saginaw, M15 itself is about ten minutes away. So, I looked more into the reasoning. The map shows that I75 was very congested with traffic between Grand Blanc and Clarkston.

Oftentimes, we hear that the Bible is like a map for our lives. It shows where we should be going. It gives us directions to follow, and often, those directions may not be what makes sense to us. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:13-14, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."*** In life, when we arrive at a place in which we have to make a decision, sometimes we choose the easy way. We may say things like, "I just don't feel like dealing with it right now," or, "It's such a hard thing to do; I'm going to take the easy way out." It may even be the thought, "I know what I should do, but that's not what I want to do!" Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, that choosing the right pathway will not be easy. It may take us down a road that forces us out of our comfort zone, forces us to grow, and forces us to learn. The world

tells you, “Don’t take that route. Go this way. Everybody’s doing it like this! Look how easy it is.” However, Jesus is showing us that when we follow the crowd or when we allow the world to direct us, we can only arrive at destruction.

Entering the narrow gate may not seem like the right direction to follow, but if we look into the reasoning, we find Jesus (John 10:9). He tells us in John 14:6, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** We see that Jesus is the only way. What may seem hard for us is nothing for our Lord (Luke 18:27)! We have God’s map (Psalm 119:105), and if we listen to what it tells us (John 14:15-16) and follow the directions (Matthew 16:24), we will reach our eternal destination (John 3:16). While the way is hard, His strength will get us through (2 Corinthians 12:9). I urge you, every day choose the narrow gate! I urge you every day to follow Jesus!

In 2 Corinthians 12:9 we read, ***“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”***

WHAT ARE YOUR ORDERS?

DEVOTION #2 - JOE WILSON

As we continue the Sermon on the Mount series, Matthew 7:13-14 records, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."***

When I read and study this specific set of verses, I cannot help but think of the word "intentionality" or lack thereof. I would like to look at these two gates being presented to us:

- The wide gate - It is what I refer to as the "easy button" course of action, following the crowd without any thought or intentionality. However, it leads to ***"destruction"*** or eternal separation.
- The narrow gate - This gate (or pathway) is not always easy, and you will definitely not find it following the crowd. To locate and enter through this gate, you must be intentional in your choices. God's Word tells us if we choose to be intentional and enter through this gate, it ***"leads to life"*** or eternal life.

Did you make the connection?

Jesus confirms He is ***"the narrow gate"*** when speaking to Thomas in the Gospel according to John. John 14:6 says, ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."***

Now, as a military veteran and history buff, there was a conversation that took place in one of my all-time favorite movies, *"Saving Private*

Ryan." It was between Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) and Technical Sergeant Horvath (Tom Sizemore) when they were in discussions regarding a particularly difficult mission.

> Sergeant Horvath: What are your orders?
> Captain Miller: Sergeant, we have crossed some strange boundary here. The world has taken a turn for the surreal.
> Sergeant Horvath: Clearly, but the question still stands.

Now, bear with me. What if the conversation actually went like this?

> The Holy Spirit: What are your orders?
> Us: But, they won't like me. I will be laughed at. I don't understand.
> The Holy Spirit: Clearly, but the question still stands.
> Jesus: ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"*** (Luke 9:23).

So, I challenge each of us today, "What are your orders?"

EXCLUSIVE

DEVOTION #3 - KARSEN THEEDE

Exclusive, limited, select, premier, and private: these are words we love to see and hear in our everyday lives. Whether it is a shirt, where the only difference between it and the store brand is the name of the brand that made it, or how every fall, pumpkin spice is only here for a limited time and you had better get it before it is gone. Even news stations or media outlets will pride themselves on having the most exclusive scoops and will do anything to make sure they have the newest and most exclusive news. As humans, we love the idea of having something that others do not, except when it comes to our lifestyle.

As a church, we are in the midst of our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount. For nine weeks, we have been reading through Matthew chapter 7 and taking a look at what it says for believers. Today, I have the privilege of focusing on Matthew 7:13-14.

Matthew 7:13-14 says, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."***

What Matthew is talking about here is our eternity and how we have to live to reach it. The world is going to tell us a lot of different ways to reach eternity in Heaven, if they even agree that there is a Heaven. The world will say, "Live how you want, it is your life," or "Do whatever, as long as you try to be a good person. Hold the door open for someone every once in a while, and that is your ticket to Heaven." However, that thought process is the wide gate, the easy

way, and ultimately the path that does not lead to Heaven but to destruction and an eternity away from Jesus.

What about the narrow gate, the one we should enter? How do we start down this path? The first step is to accept Christ into your life. Once you have accepted Christ into your life, whether that was today or 50 years ago, you are called to live a changed life. It is a life that is different from those who are on the wide path. We are to live an “exclusive” life, but according to Matthew chapter 7, this path will not be easy. We are going to look at the people on the wide path, and we might think that we want what they have or want to be able to do what they do. Yes, this will be hard, but unlike the wide road that ends in destruction, the narrow path leads to life, eternal life in Heaven with Christ. So, walk the narrow path and seek an exclusive and Christ-centered life. That is where our reward lies.

THE BLUE LINE

DEVOTION #4 - LORENA HABER

When people ask me for driving directions or how I got from point A to point B, my shameless response is typically, “I don’t know, I follow the blue line!” That bold blue line is the route that Apple Maps sets before me. GPS technology on iPhones alone has come so far. In 2017, lane guidance was introduced, better-preparing users for turns and exits. In 2021, the addition of 3D modeling brings additional clarity to interpreting directions and surrounding streets and buildings. In 2023, trips with multiple locations became seamless with multi-stop routing. The introduction of these features, along with many others, made driving to an unfamiliar destination clear and simple. Sometimes, I go as far as mapping my regular commutes to plan in case there are road closures, traffic, or accidents.

Imagine having Apple Maps for the course of your life. I would not mind hearing Siri telling me, “Your life will take a turn in 10 feet!” or “Detour ahead!” or “Take the next exit out of this situation!” In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus presents us with a metaphor for the journey of life, ***“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”***

Jesus tells us there are two gates, two ways, two destinations. We come face to face with the truth that the way to life will be hard to find and full of twists and turns. However, it is clear, when we consider the destinations, life with God or destruction apart from God, the harder way is the right one. Similar to Apple Maps, the fallen world offers multiple routes to the destinations of life, truth,

and happiness. These routes often look like the following: do what makes you happy; focus on yourself first and only. It is easy to take these paths and shortcuts that seem to benefit us, but in reality, the smoothest, quickest road to what we think is best ends in hurting ourselves or colliding with others.

However, Jesus, in His loving-kindness, calls us to action, ***"Enter by the narrow gate."*** He tells us that the hard way means making conscious choices that align with God's will, even when it is hard or simply does not make sense. We can trust what Jesus says because He lived it. It is even more so because Jesus traveled by foot! He stepped down from His throne and lived a perfect, sinless life as an example for us. He experienced all of our humanity to the point of death on the cross. Then, He came back to life, plowing sin and death out of the way.

He did this so we would not be wandering lost in sin, but so we could live in pursuit of the way He designed for us. We are saved from our self-destructive ways and in the fullness of God. Even when the ride is riddled with obstacles, in Jesus and His Word, we can be confident in the route He made toward the destination of true life.

THE NARROW ROAD

DEVOTION #5 - DEBBIE GABBARA

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus teaches that the way to God's Kingdom is like a road. He describes one road leading to life and the other to destruction. The wide road is easy and is traveled by many. The narrow road is difficult, and few choose to take it.

Matthew 7:13-14 (NLT) says, ***"You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it."***

One Sunday morning a couple of years ago, a lady stopped by the church to ask a few questions about what we believe and teach. During our short conversation, she told me that she believes that there are eight billion people in the world and eight billion different ways to get to God. However, Jesus tells us so clearly in the book of Matthew that the one road that leads to Him is difficult, narrow, and not found by many. The lady only stayed a few minutes, but before she left, she told me that a place that strictly teaches the Bible was not what she was looking for. Sadly, she had no interest in the narrow way that leads to Jesus.

In Jesus' day, many false teachers, including the Scribes and Pharisees, taught the importance of religious rules. They appeared to be religious by practicing rituals for others to see. They believed they could please God through a system of rules and relied on their own self-righteousness. They judged those they felt did not live up to their standards. In Matthew 23:28 (NASB), Jesus said of them, ***"So***

you too, outwardly appear righteous to people, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Today, many religions still teach that through works and rules, you "might" earn your way to Heaven. So many people trust in themselves and what they can do to get to Heaven on their own. Yet, the Bible says, ***"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"*** (Ephesians 2:8-9, NLT).

Religion also suggests that you can earn your way to God if you are good enough. Romans 3:23 (NLT) says, ***"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard."***

There are not eight billion ways to get to God. Though we have all sinned, we are made righteous in Jesus. We cannot ever do enough or be good enough to earn eternal life on our own. Jesus told us small is the gate, and difficult is the road that leads to life. There is only one way to salvation. Eternal life can only be found through our faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The road to God may be narrow, but it is available to all who will choose it.

John 14:6 affirms, ***"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"***

WHICH WAY?

DEVOTION #6 - CAMERON ALDRICH

Which path do you prefer: the easy way or the hard way? Does your answer maybe depend on the situation? I believe it is safe to assume that nearly all of the time, we are prone to choose the easy path no matter the situation. Most people prefer not to add extra, unnecessary challenges into their lives, but can you blame them?

In the Gospels, having the choice of different paths is a common concept. In fact, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus focuses on this choice as it relates to the lives of believers. He speaks of different gates as compared to different paths. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus states, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."***

When Jesus uses the word ***"easy"*** in verse 13, He highlights a major flaw in our sinful nature that cannot be overlooked. We as humans are so apt to choose whatever is easiest and most comfortable in every situation. Sometimes, we are tempted to choose what is easiest without even considering how that path may affect us in the long run.

Choosing what is easiest might not bring us much future harm when it comes to more casual situations in our lives. Sometimes, choosing what is easy can make the most sense and can bring comfort and happiness into our lives, and it is so relieving when things work out that way. However, if we choose what is easiest over what is best for every one of our various situations, harm and discomfort are sure to follow.

This is especially true when we consider the choice between gates that Jesus sets in the verses above as He expresses that the easy gate leads to destruction. Yet, this is also not the only place in the Gospel where Jesus expresses the importance of making the correct choice of which gate we choose. When He speaks to His disciples in John chapter 10, Jesus states that He is the gate for the sheep and that whoever enters through Him will be saved.

When Jesus refers to Himself as the gate in either of these Gospels, it is important to remember two things. First, this gate is open to all who may wholeheartedly seek and choose it. We can have confidence in Jesus' promise that He will always be available to us so long as we repent and believe in what He did, declare Him as our Lord and Savior, and seek Him daily. Second, please realize the gate He urges us to choose is the only entrance into everlasting life alongside our Father in Heaven. In John 14:6, Jesus states, ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."***

Although we are given the freedom to choose our gate, it is making the choice between them that remains supremely important and immensely difficult. This is evident considering how Jesus describes the gates and the number of people that choose each. For the wide and easy gate, there are many who enter by it; but for the narrow and hard gate, there are few who find it.

It is our sinful nature that makes this such a difficult choice. It is so crucial to remember that this choice is not a one-time deal, it is a lifelong process. Every day, we are given opportunity after opportunity to either take the easy path or to live in a way that helps us find the narrow path, just as Christ lived. Thankfully, if we put our hope and faith in Jesus, then we have a Savior on our side who will guide us through the difficult life in which the narrow gate demands. So, let us not lose heart and remain focused on choosing the right path. In Christ, we have strength.



LESSON SIX

A TREE AND ITS FRUIT

PASTOR KEATON WASHBURN



1. Who are some of your favorite preachers or teachers to listen to and learn from? What do you like about them?

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As we continue our study of Matthew chapter 7 and near the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we see that Jesus gives His listeners a couple of stern warnings. In the preceding verses, Jesus compares salvation to a narrow gate, saying in verse 14, ***"Those who find it are few."*** We pick it up from there in verses 15-20.

Matthew 7:15-20 says, ***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."***

This warning from Christ has to do with prophets or, in our context today, we could call them teachers. The idea of an Old Testament prophet, to most people, is usually someone who foretells the future. It is someone who can predict and say, from God, what is going to happen. In reality though, more than anything, most prophets forth-tell. The one who fore-tells looks to the future and makes a prediction, but a forth-teller speaks on behalf of God.

2. What has your understanding of a prophet been? Is it a fore-teller or a forth-teller? What difference might it make in your understanding of the role of a prophet?

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3. Where does a forth-teller of God's Word receive their authority today? Is it from themselves or another source? Why is that important?

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In verse 15, Jesus warns of false prophets that come in sheep's clothing, but the key is the word ***"inwardly."*** The inward part of a person reveals their true character. Someone might be able to put on a good show and say all the right things, but who are they deep down? What are their motivations? Who are they seeking to honor, themselves or the Lord?

The idea of a ravenous wolf is one that is seeking to devour. It is not a pretty picture. However, that is how Jesus describes false prophets. They are those who take the teachings of Jesus and leverage them for personal gain. They care more for themselves than for those they are teaching. Jon Courson says, "They will seek to draw men after themselves instead of pointing them to Jesus." False teachers seek to draw an audience for themselves, while true teachers continually point to Christ as the only One deserving of praise and glory.

In verse 16, Jesus gives a clear call, ***"You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"*** How do you discern between a true and false teacher? You will be able to tell from the fruit of their life. Do their actions line up with their words? The source of fruit only grows what it truly is. An apple tree does not grow oranges, and an oak tree does not grow pine needles.

4. What are some of the fruits of a true teacher? How do you look out for and see those fruits?

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5. How have you experienced the love and care of a Bible teacher? How do you know if a teacher's motives are true?

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A teacher of Jesus' commands must be the first one to follow His teachings. To make it simple, a genuine teacher is obedient to the Lord and His Word. They live in the light, and the Fruit of the Spirit is evident in their life and ministry. They are not one person when they are on stage and another person off the stage.

Reflecting on verses 17 and 18, Leon Morris says, "The sound tree produces good fruit, but not so the worthless one. The worthless tree bears only bad fruit; the nature of the tree makes any other result impossible." If the nature of a teacher is that of a ravenous wolf, it will surely come to light one day, as Jesus makes clear in verse 19. Yet, in the meantime, followers of Christ must still discern whether the motives of the teachers they listen to and trust are genuine.

A couple of years ago, I sat under a teaching by a long-time pastor and counselor named Dr. Scott Engleman on the idea of Pastor Soul Care. In this session for pastors, he drew attention to this reality of the pastorate, which he called the front stage and the back stage. For most pastors, this is a literal reality as they get up on a stage almost weekly and then make their way off the stage to the backstage. One of my main takeaways was, "The backstage of my private life will always inform the front stage of my ministry life." This is true for all pastors. When the backstage, the private areas of life, are not aligned with the Lord, the front stage gets out of whack. Dr. Engleman pointed out that one of the most dangerous traps for a pastor is success. I do not believe that most false teachers begin with an intent to deceive. Rather, as their ministry and influence grow, so does their ego.

6. What are some of the dangers of success? How have you seen success get to someone's head?

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7. How are the dangers of success especially prevalent for a pastor?

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A pastor must have accountability. To have accountability, a pastor needs community. I am reminded of Moses in Exodus chapter 17, whose arms grew weary of being raised in battle, so he had Aaron and Hur to stand with him and hold his arms up. A pastor or teacher who isolates themselves from honest conversations and accountability is one who is walking a dangerous path.

8. What does it look like for a Christian to have a real Christian community? What are the benefits of community? What holds some people back from authentic community?

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Though we began talking specifically about pastors, the front stage and backstage of a person apply to every Christian. There is the way you act and speak when you are at work, and the way you act and speak when you are at church. There are the family members that you talk a certain way around, and the friends that you speak a totally different way around. There are the friends that you are trying to win to Christ, so you act right and speak right when you are with them, and then there are the family members that you have given up on sharing Christ with, so you are not quite as careful about the jokes you make. The call for the pastor and every single Christian is to be grounded in Christ. When Christ is the source of your identity,

worth, and purpose, you are the same person no matter who you are around. When someone is grounded in Christ, sure of what He has done for them, it frees them up to be honest about their sin and shortcomings. This leads to true community where confession and honesty are present.

9. What does it look like for a Christian for the front stage to match the backstage? Are those the type of people that you surround yourself with?

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Referring to verse 19, ***"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and throw into the fire,"*** Leon Morris says, "Jesus is making it clear that discipleship means a great deal more than religious activity." Becoming more like Jesus, sanctification, is the end goal. Discipleship happens in one-on-one relationships, in groups, and when the church gathers together.

When I was in college, I heard a sermon by a godly, humble preacher named Alistair Begg. Speaking on the idea of humility, he said something that has stuck with me for years, as clear as day. He said, "Humility is not lived out in a vacuum." This means it is possible to be humble when you are all alone, but the real test of humility is when you are with others and you find out how humble you really are. While he made a good point, I think we could take it a step further and say that discipleship does not happen in a vacuum. A pastor that is all alone is a dangerous place to be. In the same sense, a Christian that is all alone is a dangerous place to be.

NOTES

BEWARE

DEVOTION #1 - MELVIN FRICK

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Matthew 7:15-20

Jesus knew there would be false prophets that would infiltrate the church, so here we find Him providing us with a stern warning concerning recognizing this issue. He begins with the word ***"beware."*** It is a word better understood defined in its original Greek language as "to give heed; pay attention." As the church, we keep watch over our brothers and sisters in Christ by paying attention to the teachings and actions of those we corporately listen to so that no one may be deceived.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, the Apostle Paul writes instructions to the believers in Corinth (present-day Greece) who were actively being deceived by these ravenous wolves Jesus warned us about in Matthew chapter 7. Take a moment to read what Paul is urging the Corinthians to pay attention to in order that they might not be deceived. In 2 Corinthians 11:4, we read, ***"For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough."***

Paul warns the Corinthians of false teachers by providing them with three simple warning signs to beware of:

1. Different Jesus - We must have a firm understanding of who our Lord Jesus Christ is so that we may know the difference between the Jesus that Scripture speaks of, as opposed to the Jesus false prophets speak of. We come to a firm understanding of who Jesus is by reading the Bible. Specifically, we see Him in the four Gospel accounts in our Bible that paint a beautiful and accurate picture of who our Lord Jesus is.

2. Different Spirit - In Galatians 5:22-23, we learn what tangible characteristics we can expect to see from a person who claims to have the indwelling Holy Spirit. If we are to properly survey Matthew 7:15-20, cross-referencing Galatians 5:22-23 for the purpose of identifying these characteristics (fruit) is critical. We read, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*** Can you identify these fruits in the lives of those you trust for spiritual guidance?

3. Different Gospel - Last but not least, if any person comes to you and preaches a different Gospel than the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, that person is a false teacher. If we, as the church, are charged with removing a false Gospel, we ought to be familiar with the true Gospel. Paul declares the true Gospel we are speaking of this way, ***"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures"*** (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

A TREE AND ITS FRUIT

DEVOTION #2 - KADEN KAR

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Matthew 7:15-20

Have you ever bitten into an apple expecting a sweet, satisfying crunch only to be disappointed by a mouthful of mushy brown applesauce? Or maybe you grabbed a banana with one too many brown spots and thought, "This should be fine," but when you peeled back the peel, it uncovered some overripe banana pudding.

When you realize that fruit has gone bad, what do you do? Do you plug your nose and eat it anyway, or put it back and hope the next person does not notice? Do you consider cutting out the bad part and trying to salvage the good? Hopefully, you do the normal thing and just throw it out.

Nobody likes bad fruit!

Much in the same way, Jesus uses the metaphor of ***"bad fruit"*** to teach us how to identify false prophets, teachers, and Christians. They will be identified by their fruit and then dealt with accordingly. Now, what does Jesus mean by ***"fruit"*** here? I believe there are two main ways we can understand the meaning of fruit as it is used here.

First, do we see the Fruit of the Spirit embodied in their lives? Galatians 5:22-23 describes it, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."***

Second, when it comes to leaders in the church, do we see the fruit of the ministry (and, of course, that can mean a lot of different things)? Mainly meaning, do we see the life-changing work of the Gospel going out into the world?

Jesus tells us the secret to bearing good fruit in the Gospel of John, ***"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"*** (John 15:4-5).

Now, if you are not sure what Jesus means by ***"abide in me,"*** or how to do that practically, Jesus continues, ***"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love"*** (John 15:9-10).

You might be wondering, "What are those commandments?" Jesus tells us directly, ***"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends"*** (John 15:12-13).

WARNING: BEWARE OF WOLVES

DEVOTION #3 - GRANT GRIMES

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Matthew 7:15-20

The first thing that pops into my brain when I read this verse is one of those cheesy Halloween signs telling people to beware of zombies. As a child, I remember laughing when I saw this and yet, continuing on. The sign was a prop. There were no real dangers heading my way; zombies obviously are not real. I had nothing to worry about or need to fear. However, this warning by Jesus is no joke. It is not a prank or a decoration that serves no purpose; this warning is intentional and a matter of life or death.

Throughout the Bible, we are warned of false prophets and enemies of God trying to pull the flock away from Jesus and ultimately into the grasp of Satan (Matthew 24:11, 24; 1 John 4:1). The Bible repeats these warnings over and over. Jesus continues this warning and tells His followers about the outward deception that will take place. False prophets will disguise themselves as clean and harmless, yet behind the mask, a killer wolf. For many of us today, if not all of us, we will never have to come into contact with a wolf, but this metaphorical beast Jesus talks about will come.

Since the ***"beware"*** Jesus gives us is real and an active danger, we need to be able to identify this danger. It is a good thing He gives us a test to run to reveal the ***"ravenous wolves"*** in disguise. I feel that as a church, we so often focus on the beginning warning and go on alert, fearing false prophets everywhere. Yet, we neglect the second half. There is nothing to fret over because Jesus provides a way to see through the deception. This means do not be fearful or paranoid, seeking false prophets in everyone, when there are clear steps. Paul writes to Timothy, ***"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control"*** (2 Timothy 1:7). Use that power, love, and self-control God has given us to hold strong and reveal the truth. So, that leaves us asking ourselves, "What is this pop quiz I have to give?" ***"You will recognize them by their fruits."*** All we have to do is look at the fruit that is shown. Do they resemble Christ? Are they showing the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)? Christ loves us and prepares us, so do not worry; trust God.

WHO CAN WE TRUST?

DEVOTION #4 - ZACH HONNEN

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Matthew 7:15-20

Ever since I was a kid, I have struggled with one question, "Who can I trust?" I did not grow up with bad parents or anything like that, but I did grow up relatively sheltered, and as I grew up, I realized that not all people are trustworthy. I would share things with people in confidence and come to find out they had mismanaged my information. I was burned many times and eventually learned that not everyone values trust and not everyone can or should be trusted. So, back to my question, "Who can we trust?"

Jesus starts by pointing out the important truth that teachers, preachers, and people in general can act like sheep when they are really wolves. When we fully understand this, we can become very cynical, jaded, and maybe pessimistic about pastors, friends, and possibly even family. Many of us have experienced this in our own family, personal, or church lives. However, Jesus brings us a good idea of how to find out who we can trust. As Christians, we have a responsibility to ***"be wise as serpents and innocent as doves"*** (Matthew 10:16). We are to be wise about who we listen to and trust but yet remain innocent. Whether we are looking at pastors, friends,

or even our own souls, we have a command to be wise, but we also have a standard to know if we or someone is a sheep or a wolf. That standard is found in the rest of our passage.

Matthew 7:16-18 says, ***"You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit."***

A tree with no fruit looks like it has potential, but we cannot build trust on potential. We cannot build relationships on potential. We have to build relationships and build trust in patterns. A pattern of good fruit is an indicator. A pattern of bad fruit is an indicator. A tree with no fruit has the potential for both good and bad, so we must look at the patterns.

Now comes wisdom. If we look at someone and see the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) in them, then we know that they are sheep and have the Spirit of Truth in them. However, if we see the fruit of the flesh at work in them, then we know that they are not God's sheep. If anyone is not with God, they are against Him (Matthew 12:30). So, who can we trust? Well, we can trust Jesus. He is perfect and will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus is the One we can ultimately trust. We can also trust those who look like Him, not those who only look good on stage, in a pulpit, or in front of others. It is those who are truly producing fruit that can only come from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 7:19-20 adds, ***"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."***

Now that we know who we can trust, I want us to take a very important look at our own lives. Can we see ***"good fruit"*** in our own lives? I am not asking you to make sure there is no ***"bad fruit"*** in your life. I am talking about ***"good fruit."*** The absence of ***"bad***

fruit" does not mean there is automatically ***"good fruit,"*** either. The standard is ***"good fruit,"*** anything less does not have the Holy Spirit. Anything less has not been changed by the Gospel of Jesus. When Jesus came to a fig tree that did not produce fruit, He destroyed it. When Jesus comes back on the final day, He will look for good fruit. Anything less will be thrown into the fire. So, let me ask you, "Are you producing good fruit? Is the Holy Spirit present in your life?" If you are struggling with this, I highly recommend you talk to your Location Pastor or Growth Community leader. Jesus wants all of us to be saved. He wants you, He loves you, and has given you a chance to be saved.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

DEVOTION #5 - CATHY STORY

I recently read a book with my children that was meant to be a funny play on the wolf in sheep's clothing. In this rendition, the wolf has his plan to get in with the sheep to find one to eat. Of course, he is dressed as a sheep and goes throughout much of the story unrecognized as he lives a normal day with these sheep, waiting to find one to trick. Except for the plot twist, after spending a day with the sheep, he starts to like them! He changes his plans and goes home to figure out something else he can eat instead. As the book comes to a close, the wolf hears a knock at the door and opens it to find the sheep, now dressed as wolves, outside, wanting to spend more time with him.

Now, I am not encouraging that we should start walking around trying to be wolves, but when reading Matthew 7:15-20, this story came to mind with some interesting correlations. Matthew 7:15-20 says, ***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."***

In the story referenced, the wolf believed that he was getting away with being a sheep, but the fact was he was not. The sheep, at some point, recognized that he was not actually one of them. Another thing to note from this story is the behavior of the sheep, their caring

and sweet behavior, changed the wolf. He gave up his original plans and went home different than he had arrived.

As Matthew chapter 7 informs, we must be aware of those who may be ***"ravenous wolves"*** with ***"bad fruit."*** Like the sheep in the story, are we able to recognize when there is a wolf in our midst? Do we value and immerse ourselves in God's Word, the Truth, so that when wolves try to creep in, we can tell? Secondly, as the sheep lived their daily life, the wolf was changed by them. Do our lives bear such ***"good fruit,"*** that the people around us are drawn to change, to come to find and know who God is, simply by the fruit of our lives and the truth we profess? Spend some time today praying and asking God to show you examples of the fruit that your life is bearing.

SHOULD CHRISTIANS EVER JUDGE?

DEVOTION #6 - JOANNA MONTGOMERY

Do you know people in your life who are genuine and kind? I hope each of us has those types of people in our lives. They have the ability to lift us up and bring us hope even in difficult times. I have known genuine, trustworthy people in my life, and they have proven over time to be exactly the person they seem to be. Sadly, in our Christian walk, there are people who appear to be loving and caring; however, with close scrutiny, we find out they are not trustworthy or God-fearing at all but are living for their own glory.

We are warned about this in Matthew 7:15-20, ***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."***

An important way for us to discern when someone is not what they appear to be is to judge the fruit in their lives. Look at the lives of those who claim faith in Christ. We should evaluate whether or not who they say they are and the way they actually live their life mirror each other. This passage asks, ***"Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"*** If a person claims to be a Christian, will they lie, cheat, and pursue evil choices? We are sinners, and we all sin; however, do we choose to continue in that sin and excuse it over and over? Do we instead sorrow over

sin in our lives and repent? If there is no sorrow, it could be grapes growing on a thistle. We need to test our own spiritual walk.

We will recognize them by their fruits. A healthy tree (a Christian) cannot bear bad fruit (will not enjoy sin but will be disappointed in themself). A diseased tree (one who does not want Christ as their Savior) cannot bear good fruit (truly living their life to glorify Christ). It may take time, but every person will eventually be recognized by their fruit.

Watch Christians whom you admire and discern if their fruits match their claims or if they are a wolf in sheep's clothing. Additionally, we must look inward and make sure we do not appear to others as a wolf in sheep's clothing. While God will make the judgment for our eternal destination, we are told to closely watch the lives of those who claim to be Christians and pray for discernment. If we follow Christ and lean on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will find our lives are focused in the right direction and not struggling on a path full of problems because we followed a wolf. Ultimately, we are all sheep; we need to know the voice of Christ, our gentle Shepherd, in order to live a joyous life. We must know Him, and then we will produce the fruit that others should see from our lives.



LESSON SEVEN

I NEVER KNEW YOU

PASTOR PHILIP PIASECKI



"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Matthew 7:21-23

I love the band Coldplay. Back in 2014, I got an email from the band that said, "Click here to enter to win tickets to our live recording of Coldplay Live at Austin City Limits." I figured, "Why not? I will enter this contest. I am sure there is no way that I will win tickets." Weeks later, I got an email letting me know that I had won two tickets to attend this show. At the time, Coldplay was playing sold-out stadiums, regularly playing to a crowd of fifty-thousand people, and here was my opportunity to be one of twelve hundred people at this intimate show. I was so pumped. I had to arrange my own flight and place to stay down in Austin, but nothing was stopping me from attending this show. I remember as I was walking up to the concert venue with my friend, this fear came over me. I could not help but think, what if they do not let us in? What if, when we get to the front, that bouncer looking at the list can not find my name on it? What if I misread the email, missed a step, never confirmed we were coming, or just overlooked some other simple thing? By the grace of God, when we went and checked in, my name was on that list, and we got to enjoy the concert.

1. Have you ever tried to get into an event and, for some reason, been rejected?

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In reading Matthew 7:21-23, I cannot help but think that this Scripture makes many people feel the exact same way that I felt walking up to enter that concert. At first glance, we may feel this overwhelming dread come over us. Could I really get to Heaven and possibly hear

the Lord say to me, “Depart from me. I never knew you?” Jesus’ words here are very heavy, and I believe they are meant to catch our attention. This section of Scripture clearly lays out a warning for those who think they know Jesus but actually do not. It clearly gives us the understanding of how we can fully know and trust that we are true believers.

2. At first glance, how does reading this section of Scripture cause you to react?

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3. Discuss the difference between the question “Will I get to Heaven?” and “Do I know Jesus?”

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If you are asking the question, “Will I get to Heaven?” I believe you have already missed the point. Our focus should be on if we know Jesus as our Savior. If He is the Lord of our life, then eternity with Him is guaranteed. In verse 21, we see that just because someone says, ***“Lord, Lord,”*** to Jesus does not mean that they actually know Him as their Savior. Just because you say you know someone, does not mean you actually know them. I remember when I was in college, Michigan State had this star point guard named Kalin Lucas on their basketball team. He was the Big Ten player of the year and had an incredible college career. He was on the varsity team at my high school when I was on the JV team. So naturally, when anyone talked about Kalin Lucas I would tell them, “Oh yeah, I know him. I went to school with him.” Did I actually know him, though? I do not think I ever actually spoke one word to him. I tried to guard him once in a scrimmage and almost got dunked on. I think I was stretching the word “know” a little far.

4. Do you have anyone in your life that you would claim to know in this way?

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5. Have you ever acted this way towards “knowing” Jesus?

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Jesus is teaching us here that anybody can say they know Him, but that is not a mark of a true believer. These people were trying to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and they knew the right words to say, but Jesus knew their hearts. Salvation in Jesus Christ does not come from just saying you know Him.

6. Do you often spiritually find your words not matching up with your actions?

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I am sure that many of us understand those people who said, ***“Lord, Lord,”*** not actually knowing the Lord makes sense. It may be the next part in verses 22-23 that we get tripped up on a little more. Matthew 7:22-23 says, ***“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”***

7. Why were these works not evidence of their salvation?

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Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly shows us that it is not by works that we are saved, ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."*** The problem here is that the first thing these people point to on why they should enter the Kingdom of Heaven is all of the things that they did. Their heart was in the wrong place behind those actions. Many people today, when asked if they are Christians, would very quickly say that they are, but their defense for why they are would have something to do with their actions. It may be they grew up in Church, their parents are Christians, they attended a religious service once, were baptized as a child, are a kind person, and the list could go on and on.

8. Are you currently leaning on your own works as your assurance of salvation?

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Our words and our works mean absolutely nothing without submission to Jesus as King. Jesus says, ***"The one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven"*** will enter.

9. What is the will of God for our lives?

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John 6:29 says, ***"Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'"*** His will for our life is that we do the work of God, and that work is to believe in the Gospel. It is that we believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It includes that we believe we are wretched sinners in need of a Savior, and we fully surrender our lives to Christ. It is not just that we say the right things or that we do good things to appear as Christians, but that our lives are actually surrendered to Him. Romans 10:9 clearly states, ***"Because, if you confess with your***

mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

10. How has your life changed after becoming a follower of Jesus Christ?

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It is not a mystery; we can have eternal assurance. In a sermon on this topic, Pastor JD Rodgers said, "Falling in love produces life change." When you love the Lord, your words will change; you will declare Him to be the Lord of your life. When you love the Lord, your actions will change, and your life will grow godly fruit. These people that Jesus rejected from the Kingdom of Heaven were trying to just say the right thing or do a religious activity that would make them appear as if they knew Jesus, but they refused to actually commit their lives to His Lordship. In 1 Samuel 16:7, we read, ***"But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.'"*** Let this section of Scripture be an important reminder that we need to reflect on the content of our hearts. If Jesus is the true Lord of your life, then you do not have to fear hearing the words one day, "Depart from me. I never knew you."

NOTES

A QUARTER OF AN INCH

DEVOTION #1 - PASTOR RYAN STORY

There have been three verses that send a cold chill down my bones whenever I read them. While the entire Bible needs to be held with reverence, three verses have the ability to stop me in my tracks and begin to beg Jesus to forgive me for my prideful rebellion. Matthew 7:21-23 says, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"*** Jesus says that. Jesus, the loving Savior of repentant sinners, can be very frank. Jesus, the one who ate with tax collectors and adulterous women speaks of judgment too. Jesus, the one who said, ***"Let the children come to me,"*** (Matthew 19:14) does not overlook evil. Jesus, the perfect example of the love of God, told His followers (and us - because the Word of God has been preserved for 2000 years) that just because you say, ***"Lord, Lord,"*** or do amazing, indescribable things in His name, does not mean that He truly knows you.

I have a really bad habit of interjecting jokes or humor into serious situations. This is one of those moments. In the oddest correlation to a Bible verse I may have ever had, Gordon Bombay (yes, Emilio Estevez's character in *"The Mighty Ducks"*) told one of his players about the time he missed the game-winning shot. In the movie, Gordon is haunted by a missed shot in his peewee hockey days. Gordon then tells the story to one of his players and says, "I go in, I triple deke. I fake the goalie right out of his pads. The puck

is headed in, and then, Clang! Hits the post. We lost in overtime. A quarter of an inch this way, and it would have gone in. A quarter of an inch, Charlie." I have always loved Charlie's response in this scene. He says, "Yeah, but a quarter inch the other way, and you would have missed completely." I have always loved this scene because Gordon's mentality for so many years was focused on how little he missed, not the fact that he just barely missed the shot.

While grace is a major necessity for us to give and receive in life, "I missed by a quarter inch" is a dangerous metric to use in your relationship with Jesus. "I missed by a quarter inch" is not an acceptable metric when it comes to ensuring that your soul is saved by Jesus. It terrifies me that a person can be so spiritually self-unaware that they do not recognize the fact that a true relationship with Jesus is not something they have, despite doing ***"mighty works"*** in the name of Jesus. When Jesus says, ***"Thus you will recognize them by their fruits"*** (Matthew 7:20), He is telling us that Heaven, Earth, and Hell recognize a person by what they produce.

The question for us all is are we so focused on our works (our "missed by a quarter inch") or are we focused on the work and person of Jesus. Do not miss.

ANSWER IN THE THIRD PERSON

DEVOTION #2 - PATRICK BICKNELL

One of the gravest dangers that any of us can fall into is the idea that what we do will earn us entry into Heaven. It can be the faulty thinking that the number of hours we serve at Church, the times we read through the entire Bible, or what good works we do for people, even if it is in Jesus' name, will give us merit to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus gives us the warning of what will happen to people who think this way when the final judgment comes. As Jesus wraps up the Sermon on the Mount, we get to a passage of Scripture that many people have described as the scariest passage in the Bible. Jesus makes it clear that on the last day, not everyone who says, ***"'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven."***

Some people have used this verse to mean that we can lose our salvation. They feel Jesus is going to arbitrarily decide who is going to Heaven and who is not. However, Jesus is making a clear distinction between those who are genuine followers of the Lord and those who merely just "say" they are followers of Jesus. If you look at the response of the people after Jesus says they will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven, it is kind of interesting. Their justification for why they should get in is that they did so much in Jesus' name. They prophesied, they cast out demons, and they did many mighty works. The issue with this reasoning is that those are not the reasons why we should get into Heaven. The reason alone for why we should get into Heaven is only through the finished work of Christ on the cross.

I listened to an amazing sermon by Alistair Begg in which he talked about this idea and said, “If you were to die tonight and were getting entry into Heaven, what would you say? If you answer it or if I answer it in the first person, we have immediately gone wrong.” He goes on to cite how people will say, “Because I have faith, because I believe, because I did this,” but the only proper answer is in the third person! It is because He died for me. Jesus is the only reason you or I will gain entry into Heaven.

I hope that this passage of Scripture does not discourage you, but rather encourages you to continue to trust in Jesus Christ alone for your entire salvation. We are given a great truth of our salvation in Romans 10:11, which says, ***“For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’”*** If our faith, hope, belief, and life are in Jesus, then we should have no fear on that judgment day because we will be kept safe through what Jesus did for us on the cross.

STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE

DEVOTION #3 - PASTOR KEATON WASHBURN

I spent the summer between my junior and senior year of college interning at a church in my hometown under their Youth Pastor. It was a wonderful summer where I was given many opportunities to teach and lead (some of which I failed and others of which I did alright), for which I will always be grateful. Over the course of the summer, though, there was something that the Youth Pastor said that will stick with me for many years. One of my tasks at the beginning of the summer as an intern was to assess the needs of the youth group. What was going well? What areas were the students excelling in and struggling spiritually? How engaged and trained were the leaders? As I was discussing this with Jesse, the Youth Pastor, he said to me, "Lots of the students grew up in church; they know the right things to say, they are very moral, and they stay out of trouble." That all sounded like good things to me. I was ready to put that under the strengths section of my assessment. However, he continued, "That is one of the greatest problems we have here. The students are good kids, but they lack intimacy with the Lord and true spiritual hunger." Up to that point, I had thought that the point of church and youth group was to produce good, moral teenagers who stay out of trouble. Yet, there is so much missing to that. I went on to learn a lot that summer.

Continuing in this idea, let us look at Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And***

then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" These can seem like intimidating words from Jesus. They can lead you to wonder, "Am I really saved? How do I know?" As we examine Jesus' words, we learn a couple of things that are not indicators of true salvation.

John Stott points out that this confession of ***"Lord, Lord,"*** is polite, orthodox, fervent, and public. Yet, it is still lacking. Manners alone do not save. Knowledge alone does not save. Zeal alone does not save, nor does baptism. Though these are good and often facets of salvation, they are not salvation. So, how do you know if you are saved? Jesus tells us in verse 21, ***"The one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*** To do the will of the Father is to be obedient to the Lord in all things. Kent Hughes puts it this way, "Jesus is referring to a profound heart obedience that is not only on the surface but permeates our inner being." It is this heart obedience that is the fruit of salvation. As I learned in my summer as an intern, the goal of the Christian is not to be moral and stay out of trouble, but to seek the will of God with an earnest heart.

EVERYONE WILL FACE JESUS

DEVOTION #4 - SIERRA COMBS

There are many songs I love to sing that center around an upcoming day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Every time I ponder these words, words given to us straight from Scripture, I rejoice that I will one day get to come face to face with my Savior. I rejoice on behalf of my brothers and sisters in Christ who truly know and love the Lord and how we will all get to live in paradise with Him for eternity. However, I shudder to think of everyone else. Philippians 2:9-11 excludes no one. One day, every single person will know that Jesus is Lord, and they will bow down. Then, they will either be given eternal access to the Kingdom of God or be told to depart from His presence forever.

I hesitatingly admit that I am a sucker for reading internet article comment threads. I do not really know why; they pretty much only waste my time and make me angry and sad. It seems as if the algorithm always puts articles in my feed with comment sections sprinkled with a couple of good-hearted Christian grandmas, internet evangelists, and apologists, and then five times as many God-hating atheists and people who just like to mock Christians. It is a sobering reminder that one day, these same people will be in that judgment line. While absolutely devastating, it is not that surprising that the God-hating atheists will be told to depart from God's presence because He did not know them. However, they will not be the only ones. In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus says what I believe to be some of the most terrifying words in the whole Bible, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did***

we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" The atheists will certainly be regretful of their life's decisions, but they will not be surprised. However, Jesus says that many people will go to Him on judgment day completely expecting Kingdom access, and they will be denied. These are people who claim Christianity, preach about Jesus, tell others about Him, and even do things that appear spiritual and miraculous. They claim to know Him, but Jesus says, "Depart, I never knew you."

You could do every good work you could think of, follow all of the rules, look like a perfect Christian, read the Bible a hundred times, and know all of the stories. You could build world-famous ministries that center on healing the sick and performing miracles. You could know all about Jesus and still not truly know Him. Good works are great, and they are a very important aspect of sanctification (fruit that comes after salvation), but they cannot save you. Studying Scripture and learning about God is important but does not equate to truly knowing Him and having a relationship with Him. You may be able to fool everyone else, perhaps even yourself, but you cannot fool God. You may think that you know Him, but does He know you? Just saying you are a Christian is not enough, and relying on your own works to save you is exactly the opposite of where true salvation comes from.

So what must we do to be saved? Jesus says that it is those who do the will of the Father who will be saved. It is His will that we put our faith completely in Christ, trusting that He alone can save us. It is only through the blood of Jesus that we can know and be known by God.

WHAT DO WE DESERVE?

DEVOTION #5 - ZACH HONNEN

Do you remember being a kid? Do you remember having to do hard and "unfair" yard work for your family or parents? As you probably know, when parents become grandparents, things tend to change. My second cousin, from time to time, will make an agreement with my aunt and uncle to do yard work for cash. However, one time, while I was visiting, my little cousin came inside and went to his grandpa (my uncle) and told him he owed him $25. This was a surprise to my uncle, so he asked my cousin why he owed him money. My cousin answered, "I saw weeds in the front yard and pulled them, so you need to pay me."

The problem with this arrangement is that my uncle had not agreed to this. He did not ask this of him. He did not make this agreement with my little cousin. Yet, my cousin thought that he was entitled to his reward. This is the same way with God. At times, we can fall for the "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" or "I do this for you, and you do this for me," but that is not the Gospel. It is not what Jesus says when it comes to salvation.

We see this clearly pictured in Matthew 7:21-23, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"***

Christ does not require progress, perfection, or even profession from us, but He requires possession. He wants all of you. He wants all of me. He desires our complete and total surrender to Him. Christ did not say, “Come to me all who work hard, live perfectly, and say nice things about me, and you will find your reward.” He says, ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”*** (Matthew 11:28). The standard for salvation is complete and total perfection, but that perfection comes from Jesus. It is through Jesus alone that we become perfect, righteous, and saved.

When we come to Jesus with an “I” mentality, we are in the wrong state of mind. Salvation is about Jesus’ work, not ours. The Gospel is about Jesus’ power, might, and mercy. We should never come to Jesus as if He owes us something because, in all reality, we deserve nothing but death, Hell, and the grave. Ephesians 2:4-5 says, ***“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved.”*** Because Jesus so loved us, He took what we deserved and gave us what He deserved. So, in short, there is nothing we can do to earn Heaven; Jesus is the only way.

Today, my hope is that you will not be like my little cousin and work, work, and work, only realize that it was all for nothing. Just because you think you did something good and think you deserve a reward, does not mean that you are actually entitled to anything. If you take away anything from this devotion, please understand that salvation is surrender and submission; it is about what Christ has done, not what you and I do.

MY FRIEND, MR. PRESIDENT

DEVOTION #6 - NATHAN ELLIOTT

There is a story of a man who visited the White House because he wanted to see the president. He emphatically demanded to see him at once because he claimed to have known the president personally. Not surprisingly, his attempt to meet the president quickly failed when he was promptly escorted out of the White House. Even though he claimed to have known him, it does not necessarily mean that the president knew him in return. I tell you this story because there is a strong parallel to our relationship with Jesus. Do you know Jesus, or does Jesus know you?

In my opinion, this passage is the most terrifying of all the Bible. There are those who we know and love in our families, churches, and communities who are deceived. They claim to have a genuine relationship with Jesus, but they do not. There are many people who associate with Christianity and the Church their whole life, only to realize on judgment day that their faith was never genuine. However, the intent of this teaching is not that we live in fear of our relationship with God. Jesus is lovingly giving us these warnings in Scripture so that we may examine our faith and test the authenticity of it. Thankfully, through Scripture, we can have assurance of our own salvation.

As we serve our community, are we doing it out of obedience to God or because we believe it is the right thing to do? Both can be true at the same time, but we must recognize our service is just that, service. The works we do in the name of Jesus must not be mistaken as our assurance of salvation. While works are evidence of salvation, we cannot rely on them to do anything for us in eternity.

I challenge you to take a moment before serving to examine yourself and ask the question, “Am I doing this primarily because it makes me feel good or because I am eternally grateful for what Jesus has done for me?” The only way of escaping God’s wrath and judgment is to place our faith in the One whom God poured His wrath upon in our place. He is Christ Jesus.

Romans 10:9-10 promises us, ***“Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”***



LESSON EIGHT

BUILT ON THE ROCK

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND



I do not know if you enjoy the deeper meanings or the reasons behind something or not, but I love looking for the deeper meaning behind songs or sayings. I enjoy learning and discussing the meanings of what prompted a song or a saying to emerge and what made the song or saying powerful for the person who wrote or performed it.

1. Can you name a secular song or saying and explain the deeper meaning behind it?

_____
_____
_____

2. Many of our church songs also have a deeper meaning behind them. Can you name a church song or saying and explain the deeper meaning behind it?

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If you grew up in the church as I did, you may know a lot of songs that have deeper meanings or spiritual truths behind them. When we were kids, we were often taught these songs with hand motions to help us remember the song and then recall God's truth.

3. Can you think of a children's song that you remember the hand motions for?

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_____

4. If you grew up in the church, what was your favorite kids' song from childhood? Do you remember the hand motions? Go ahead and share the motions with your group!

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There is a great children's song written in 1948 by Ann Omley, which included these lyrics:

> The wise man built his house upon the Rock,
> The wise man built his house upon the Rock,
> The wise man built his house upon the Rock,
> And the rains came tumbling down.
> The rains came down and the floods came up,
> The rains came down and the floods came up,
> The rains came down and the floods came up,
> But the house on the Rock stood firm.
>
> The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
> The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
> The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
> And the rains came tumbling down.
> The rains came down and the floods came up,
> The rains came down and the floods came up,
> The rains came down and the floods came up,
> And the house on the sand fell flat.
>
> So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
> So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
> So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
> And the blessings will come down.
> The blessings come down as your prayers go up,
> The blessings come down as your prayers go up,
> The blessings come down as your prayers go up,
> So, build your life on the Lord.

The Scripture that this song is based upon is found in Matthew 7:24-27, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built***

his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

5. Is there anything in the Scripture that is not reflected in the song?

_____
_____
_____

6. Is there anything extra in the song that is not directly mentioned in the Scripture?

_____
_____
_____

We know that this Scripture is a continued layer of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus employed a parable (story or narrative) to help us understand the principle. We are introduced to the two men who built their houses, one built on the rock and the other built on the sand. It is interesting that the same type of storm hits both houses, but the outcome is quite different. The builder who built his house on the rock was a wise builder, and the one who built on the sand is called foolish because his house collapsed, and the loss was great. When the foundation of something is weak or unsteady, the structure on top of it will suffer damage and will need repairs or will completely collapse. We must realize that the life built upon the proper foundation will still see or face the storms, but with the proper foundation, it will stand!

7. Go back to the main Scripture. What does Jesus say we must do to build our house (life) on the sure foundation?

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_____
_____

Jesus is concerned about those who would not build their lives on the Word of God. I would challenge us that it is more than just hearing Jesus' words, but what we do with His Word. James 1:22 reads, ***"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."*** This verse is very challenging because it tells us to not only listen, but put into practice the Word of God in our daily lives. However, there is a warning telling us that if we hear the Word but do not put it into practice, then we deceive ourselves.

8. Why is it so hard to put the Scripture into practice?

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9. Can you think of another verse that gives you encouragement about building your life on Jesus and His Word?

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_____

I know for myself and many others that our life circumstances seem to have a very heavy impact on my opinion, actions, and ultimately, how I live my life. We need to be reminded that as we grow, trust, obey, and follow His Word, our lives cannot be shaken by circumstances. This section of Scripture reminds me of a hymn that I learned after I left the children's church program. It is called *"My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less."* This song is also based on this parable. The first two verses and chorus are as follows:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus Christ, my righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.

10. Do you see the truths and comparisons to the parable of the ***"wise man who built his house upon the rock"***? Please name them and share them with the group.

_____

_____

_____

NOTES

FIRM FOUNDATION

DEVOTION #1 - GARY WRIGHT

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." Matthew 7:24-27

This passage of Scripture reminds me of the nursery story *"The Three Little Pigs."* All three little pigs had the same opportunity to build a house; however, they took different approaches. The first little pig took the cheap route and built his house out of straw. The second little pig took the economic route and built his house out of sticks. However, the third little pig did everything he could to build a very structurally sound house. He built his house out of brick.

Jesus is wrapping up the Sermon on the Mount by calling us to respond to what He has been teaching. Just like the three little pigs all had a choice on how to build their houses, Jesus is giving us a choice on what kind of foundation we are building our lives on. Is it going to be the solid rock foundation of Jesus and obedience to His Word, or will it be on ourselves? Faith in Jesus is the only thing that gets us to Heaven, but our obedience to Jesus' Word proves that we truly know Him as Savior (John 14:15). Jesus goes on to say that those of us who build our lives on the solid foundation of Him and

obedience to His word are wise. Those of us who build our lives on anything else are foolish.

At the end of *"The Three Little Pigs"* story, the big, bad wolf huffed and puffed to blow down the houses. You guessed it, only the third little pig's house stood firm. The wolf was the final judgment on the quality of houses that the little pigs had built. The storms that Jesus is talking about in our passage are referring to God's final judgment. Will we stand firm at the final judgment or will we fall with a great fall?

This is going to sound funny, but which little pig are you? Do you have a firm foundation? Do you know Jesus as Savior?

In 2 Corinthians 13:5, we read, ***"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith."*** One way that we can examine ourselves to see if we know Jesus as Savior is by whether or not we are obedient to His Word. Jesus is not asking us to be perfect; He is, however, telling us when we truly have faith in Him, we will do our best to be obedient to His Word and allow it to transform our lives.

James 1:22 says, ***"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."***

CASTLES OF SAND

DEVOTION #2 - JEANNIE YATES

My 8-year-old self was an expert in making sandcastles. Whenever we would go visit my grandma at the beach, I would make sure I had my brightly-colored bucket and shovel. I would pack my plastic bucket with sand, packing it down as firmly as I could, over and over again until my castle was complete. I would take great care in constructing a moat around my fortress and finish my masterpiece by adding adornments of shells, sticks, and seaweed. However, no matter how securely I built the walls and towers of my castle, it would all be washed away as soon as the tide came in. Did you know that there are professional sandcastle builders? I must have missed my calling! Now, my castles were not a picture of structural integrity or grand architecture, but these professional "sandcastles" look like marble statues. They are works of art! No matter how talented the professional or marvelous the structure is, the truth remains that they are still made of sand. The same tide that washed away my meager attempt at a castle will wash out the grandest sand structure.

That is the picture I have in my mind when I read Matthew 7:24-27, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."***

If I would never build my physical house without a secure foundation, how much more should I take care of what my eternal, spiritual house is built upon? We sing about it with poetic words, “Christ is our firm foundation,” and “On Christ, the solid rock I stand,” but do we ever stop to consider what that actually looks like?

Later on in the book of Matthew, Jesus tells His disciples, ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”*** (Matthew 16:24-25). If Christ is the Rock, then I am the sand. Building my life on Him means letting go of my plans, my desires, my dreams, and myself to pursue Him and His plans, desires, and dreams for my life. Galatians 2:20 puts it this way, ***“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”***

I can think I have it all together, with all of my plans solidly in place, all the while continuing to build up my life in this world. However, the storms will come. The tide will come in, and the things of this world will all be washed away. I have to make sure that I place all of who I am on the true and secure foundation of Jesus Christ. If my foundation is anything but Him, I might as well be building a sandcastle.

I BUILT MY HOUSE OF STONE

DEVOTION #3 - GRANT GRIMES

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." Matthew 7:24-27

Growing up, I loved to watch Disney movies, and I vividly remember watching Disney's *"Silly Symphonies,"* which was a group of short films that had a moral lesson throughout the film. My favorite one was about the tale of *"The Three Little Pigs."* Many do not realize that this tale is a rip-off of the Bible. The moral lesson and main objective of this fable is directly from Jesus' teachings in Matthew chapter 7. The fool builds his house on the sand (or made of twigs and hay), and when the storms of life come, the house is blown down and destroyed.

I remember thinking as a child that the first two pigs were crazy and made no sense. How could you know that danger is near and you fail to prepare? Growing up has only shown me that all too often, we, as Christians, fail to take up the tasks given to us by Christ, and we fail to listen to His teachings. We build our house on falsities and lies, and when sin and Satan (the wolf) attack our lives, we are left in disaster, just like the fable shows. Our house is destroyed, our

family is lost, and we are running for our lives, seeking the help we should have sought and listened to in the first place.

Jesus is calling us to live a life that is wise and built on the rock who is Jesus Christ, a firm foundation, as we so often hear in worship. A warning is being given to us that the storm, the flood, or the battle is coming, and we must be prepared. Jesus is giving us the lesson now. We can choose to either learn it the easy way, prepare, and build our house on Christ, or we can choose to be foolish and pick up the pieces of the shamble that our life is the hard way.

I love that the Bible prepares us for situations before they ever happen. Jesus knows that these trials are going to come and so He wants us to be prepared before they even happen. So, the choice is up to you. Which fable character will you choose to be, the first two who were foolish or the last one who was diligent and wise that built his house of stone?

BUILD YOUR HOUSE ON THE ROCK

DEVOTION #4 - MITCHELL HOLMES

What does it mean to have security? For some, a solid bank account comes to mind, as well as having the funds to meet any emergency that may arise. For others, it is to be so confident in their abilities that they know they can master any obstacle that life throws at them. For the true Christian, it is to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that no matter what problems arise in this life, their eternal resting place is certain, and they can weather any storm because they have built their life on the firm foundation. Today's passage discusses this exact idea of security as Jesus winds down His Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:24-27 states, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*** As Jesus finished His sermon, after having discussed the difficulty of finding salvation and how few will ever find it, He ended with a final warning. He says that to hear the Word of God and to live a life of disobedience will result in a fall. Jesus is talking specifically to hearers of the Word; this is not directed at those who do not know the name of Jesus and have never heard of the Good News found at the cross. Jesus' warning here is to those who, as we saw in verses 21 through 23,

call Him Lord, practice mighty works in the name of the Lord, yet know Him not.

Earlier in this passage, in verse 14, Jesus says, ***"The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those that find it are few."*** These texts are clear; there will be people who build their lives on the belief that they are saved when they are not. In our passage for today, Jesus is admonishing believers to build their lives on the rock that is His Word. To be a believer, to be part of His flock, and to be covered in the blood of Jesus is to live a life of obedience to His Word. There are many who believe in God, have said a prayer, and believe that their works will save them on the day of judgment. They then build their house on the shifting sand of self-will, self-fulfillment, and self-righteousness. On the outside, their house may appear the same, but when the storm comes, everything that they have built will fall away into nothing.

Jesus tells us that the way that we can have security in our salvation is in our obedience to His Word. What is your foundation? If it is belief alone, then you are missing it. To be God's child is to be a hearer and a doer of His Word. Your fruit is the sure sign of your desire to follow Christ fully. In Matthew 16:24-26, Jesus says that in order to follow Him, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross. We have to be willing to give up our lives and build our lives on Him alone, on His Word alone.

Ask yourself today if you have security. Many who think they are the Lord's have built their life on the foundation of sand. Christ invites you to build your foundation on the rock of His Word if you are willing to lose your life for His sake.

NOT JUST A ONE-TIME DEAL

DEVOTION #5 - CAMERON ALDRICH

The tempting trap of worry can be difficult to avoid. With so much taking place in our lives, there is always an opportunity to worry about something. Our thoughts can often be shrouded with fear of things going wrong or with anxiety of the unexpected — especially when we consider all that is to come in the future. The more we worry, the more of a prominent tendency our worrying becomes as we think of all that is taking place now, as well as what lies in front of us. It would be great if there was something that could help us remove overwhelming worry and fear from our minds.

When we put our faith in and focus on Jesus, we can be blessed with a perception and confidence that is grounded and steadfast, no matter the difficulties and struggles that lie ahead. It does not matter whether they are anticipated and planned or unexpected and unplanned. Those blessings come from none other than our God. Through His Word, He constantly reminds us that there is no greater foundation we can build our lives upon compared to Jesus.

I love the reminder that Jesus Himself preaches in Matthew chapter 7. He contrasts the lives of the wise man and the foolish man. In verses 24-25, He states, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."***

To me, it is so relieving and encouraging to think about the incomparable faithfulness of our God when I read those verses. His

faithfulness is not just a “one-time deal” that expires after a single use. It is something that extends far beyond the here and now. God’s protection, provision, and promises will remain no matter what good or bad comes our way, just as how Jesus describes the rain, floods, and winds that fell upon and beat on the wise man’s house. We have to remember that Christ, our firm foundation, is not only with you for one battle, but He will be by your side through every battle, so long as we put our trust in Him.

I am not saying that we will never venture into a battle or circumstance that seems too overwhelming or impossible to overcome. However, even in those situations, we can still gain more confidence when we focus back on the words and teachings of Jesus. This is what He instructed us to do at the beginning of that passage in Matthew chapter 7.

Whenever I feel shaken by a seemingly impossible situation, I can find peace and comfort when I focus on Jesus’ words to Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. As Paul described his difficult situation to the church in Corinth, he mentions Jesus’ words to him in verse 9, ***“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”***

When we remember that the faithfulness of God is always on our side, we have no reason to worry. Even further, when we also remember that God’s power is made perfect within our weakness or in our times of difficulty and struggle, we can be filled with confidence, peace, and comfort no matter what lies in front of us.

NUGGET COUCH

DEVOTION #6 - STEPHEN BILLINGS

This past year my wife and I bought our toddler son a Nugget Couch. If you are not familiar, a Nugget Couch is made up of several cushions that can be put in many different designs. Take a moment to Google Nugget Couch designs, they can be so fun for children in your life!

Overall, the goal of Nugget Couches is to provide a safe place for children to climb indoors. My wife and I enjoy putting the cushions in different formations to create obstacle courses to challenge our son to climb.

Over the last several months, I quickly learned that it is so important to make sure that I create a firm foundation for each Nugget design I create. If I fail to create a firm fountain for my Nugget Couch design, my son will potentially get hurt. This really relates to today's passage.

Matthew 7:24 says, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock."***

Jesus is proclaiming that those who hear the words that He is teaching and then apply them are like a man who builds on a rock. A rock is an example of a firm foundation. We build on a firm foundation by listening, studying, and applying God's Word in our lives.

This is not always easy, but it is so important because a firm foundation is the only thing that can stand the test of trials and tribulations.

In 2 Timothy 3:16 (NKJV), we read, ***"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."***

We can build our lives upon God's Word because His Word is not written by man. It has been given to us through the inspiration of God.

Just as it is important for me to have a firm foundation for my Nugget Couch design so my son will be safe when playing, we need to be building our lives on the firm foundation of God's Word so that when trials come we know our faith will stand the test of time.



LESSON NINE

AUTHORITY

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD



When you hear the word “authority,” what comes to mind? For some, this may be a person, a corporation, a collection of leadership, a system, or maybe a specific place in the world. Wherever you may land or whatever comes to mind, as Jesus finishes His teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, the people around Him could see that He had authority.

1. What was the first thing that comes to mind when you hear or read the word “authority”?

_____
_____
_____

2. Do you have a good or bad perception of authority? Why?

_____
_____
_____

As Jesus concludes this incredible teaching on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, there must have been a mix of emotions. Some were convicted about how they needed to treat their neighbor. Others may have needed to realign their personal desires and aspirations in life. Then, some may have truly come to an understanding of the Lord and who Jesus is. Regardless of where they landed and what convictions the people had, one thing was truly undeniable - His authority.

Before the birth of Christ, way back in the Old Testament, the Lord would speak to His people through a mediator the majority of the time. As a mediator to the people of Israel, He would use prophets such as Elijah, Jonah, Jeremiah, Hosea, or Daniel. He would use His judges such as Gideon, Ehud, Deborah, and Jephthah. The Lord would use kings, such as David, Solomon, and Asa. The one thing all of these leaders and mediators had in common was that they spoke with purpose and authority. It was authority that came from the One true God of Israel.

3. Have you ever thought about who authority comes from?

_____
_____
_____

4. With all the different figures and positions of authority you discussed, who was the authority that entitled them?

_____
_____
_____

In Matthew 7:28-29 we read, ***"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."*** The authority of Christ is an essential and foundational part of who He is and all He does. While the prophets, teachers, kings, and mediators before Christ all spoke, led, and taught with the authority of God which was placed upon them, the authority of Christ is eternal.

In John 5:19-29, we read, ***"So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in***

himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.'" This passage is so crucial as it gives us further understanding that Jesus did not simply have the authority of words or miracles, but He has the authority to judge over all life.

Further on, in John 17:1-2, we read, ***"When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.'"*** Here, we read how Christ has authority over all flesh and the authority to give eternal life.

Finally, when we look at Matthew 28:18-20, we read, ***"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"*** Here, Jesus makes the declaration that all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Him. There is no room for discussion or critique; all means all.

5. Which one of these passages (or another passage) on Christ's authority really impacts you?

_____
_____
_____

6. From whom was the authority of Christ given?

_____
_____
_____

When Jesus had finished His teaching in Matthew chapters 5-7, the people understood that Jesus was not merely another teacher or even a scribe. They were left astonished by all that He had taught. I am sure that if we had been there, the look on the crowds' faces between bewilderment, shock, conviction, and amazement would have been more profound and incredible to see than any Taylor Swift concert! The one thing that none of them could deny or ignore was the authority with which Christ taught.

So, what does this all mean? We understand that Christ has been given eternal authority by God the Father. He has authority to judge, to give eternal life, and over all of Heaven and Earth – so, literally, authority over everything! Yet, the One who has authority over all has given us, His followers who confess and believe in Christ's death for our sins, burial, and resurrection as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, a mission. That mission is found in Matthew 28:18-20.

7. When was the last time you were left astonished? What was that experience?

_____
_____
_____

8. Was there ever a time when you were left astonished in a bad way? What was that experience?

_____
_____
_____

That mission (cue the *"Mission Impossible"* theme song), should we choose to accept it, is this, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"*** (Matthew 28:19-20). The truly astonishing part of this mission is the trust that our Savior has in us. Jesus trusts us with the most important calling, job, opportunity, and mission in

the whole world - the call to share His Gospel message with those around us. This is not a mission that you want to miss out on. The Savior of the world, the One who has all the authority in Heaven and on Earth for all eternity, has called you and I to boldly, lovingly, gracefully, unashamedly, and intentionally share the true message of His Gospel. Wow!

That day, when Jesus was done teaching, the crowd was astonished, and His authority was heard. Now, because of His sacrifice and resurrection, we have been given the opportunity to be a part of His incredible mission of redemption, and we can stand boldly in His authority and proclaim His Gospel in love to all those around us!

9. Have you truly accepted the mission of the Gospel?

_____
_____
_____

10. Who is someone in your life that you can and need to share the Gospel in word and deed?

_____
_____
_____

NOTES

THE PROPER PLACE OF AUTHORITY

DEVOTION #1 - PASTOR JOHN CARTER

We live in a world and society where it almost seems impossible to be surprised. The scenarios range from the depravity that has taken over Hollywood, the cold-hearted, unthinkable responses of people in desperate situations, or the political climate where you could never imagined the cruel climate of slander we call our governance. How about the church? Maybe you see the church walking in a manner that is just numbing to the mind. Unfortunately, the church that disregards clear instructions written in the Bible is no longer surprising. Honestly, I think it takes a lot to astonish us anymore. The unthinkable is not so unthinkable these days.

I wonder if the crowd that heard the words of Jesus in this sermon may have thought the same thing. As far as culture goes, the Romans were not exactly the role model of society. You will better understand this if you do some historical research on the city of Corinth. I am sure the behavior of society grieved people who were in attendance on that hillside. Politics is politics, no matter what the era is. I am certain that some individuals heard the sermon Jesus preached with the same concerns we have today regarding the state of government, society, and religion. It is most certain that people in the crowd had strong emotional responses toward the current situation, and their religious leaders had found themselves to be compromised towards the things of men rather than the things of God. The statement that is recorded after Jesus' message is one that I hope we take to heart.

Matthew 7:28–29 says, ***"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."***

Listen to similar words spoken of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, ***"And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him"*** (Mark 6:2–3).

To consider these statements in our own era and our own circumstances is something that should make us ponder for a while. What would cause me to be astonished? What kind of teaching would shock me? What kind of authority would make me stop and be amazed? Would it shock you to hear a man of authority speak words of care and concern for the marginalized? Would it be an amazing sight to hear a man put evil rulers in their proper place? Would mighty words of wisdom stop you in your place and make you examine it?

Jesus said words that astonished the people:

- ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** Matthew 5:3
- ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."*** Matthew 5:14
- ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*** Matthew 5:17
- ***"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites."*** Matthew 6:5

- ***"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."*** Matthew 6:19–20
- ***"Judge not, that you be not judged."*** Matthew 7:1
- ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*** Matthew 7:21

These are just a few of the shocking statements that were spoken by Jesus in this message. The conclusion that the people walked away after hearing all the wonderful things Jesus preached was that He was indeed a man of authority, a man of power, a man of wisdom, and a man of truth.

This was the opposite of their current leaders. Their scribes and Pharisees were not men of honor, power, or authority. They were not men of truth and righteousness. They were men who opposed true things and thought it would be better to destroy anyone who dared speak of them.

Mark 11:18 records, ***"And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching."***

This can be taken in many different ways, so I want to be careful not to mislead anyone. However, this sentiment could feel a little closer to home in our current season as a nation, church, and society. Instead of looking for the authority of Jesus in our lives, we would rather seek how to destroy the opposition. The hope is that Jesus had authority then, He has authority now, and He will always be in authority! The choice for us is whether we are going to let Him actually rule with that authority in our lives. Are we going to be amazed at His wonderful, wise, loving, and sometimes shocking instructions for our lives, or do we walk away and ignore them?

Are we going to be offended by the words of Jesus? Are we going to look for ways to destroy His credibility or make His words seem less significant? Will we choose our own thing and be shocked at the result of our life without Jesus?

My hope and prayer is you will place Jesus at the proper place of authority in your life, right at the very top. Take the sermon that has been written for your benefit and mine. Submit to His authority and make Jesus the King of your life!

SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY

DEVOTION #2 - JOSH THAYER

So, here we are at the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and what a ride it has been, right? Jesus has been dropping truth bombs left and right, challenging the way we think, act, and relate to one another. However, let me tell you, it is not just the content of His message that has got people talking. It is the way He delivers it.

Matthew 7:28-29 says, ***"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."***

I do not know about you, but when I picture Jesus teaching, I imagine it is more than just a guy standing up there reciting some nice words. There is something different about Him. It was something that set Him apart. The people noticed it, too. They were ***"astonished"*** at His teaching.

What was it that made Jesus' teaching so impactful? It was not just the eloquence of His words or the depth of His wisdom, although those were certainly part of it. It was the authority with which He spoke. The religious leaders of the day (the scribes and Pharisees) were all about rules and regulations, but their teaching lacked real authority. It was more like they were just going through the motions, saying what they were supposed to say without any real conviction behind it. It was not the way for Jesus. When He spoke, it was with power and conviction. He did not just talk about God's Kingdom; He embodied it. That is what made all the difference. Also, the teachers of the Law, back in the day, often cited traditions and quoted authorities to support their arguments. However, Jesus spoke with

a new authority: His own. He did not need to quote anyone because He was the original Word.

John 1:1 says, ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."***

What does that mean for us today? It means that when we share the message of Jesus with others, whether it is through our words or our actions, we need to do it with that same authority. We need to speak and live in a way that reflects the truth and power of the Gospel. It is not about putting on a show or trying to impress people with fancy words. It is about speaking from the heart, with conviction and sincerity. It is about letting the love of Christ shine through us in everything we do.

As we go about our day today, let us remember the example of Jesus. Let us strive to speak and live with the same authority and conviction that He did, so that others may be astonished at the message of hope and love that we have to share.

CONNECTED TO THE SOURCE

DEVOTION #3 - PASTOR FERDINAND SANDERS

I learned something new today. Have you heard of the saying, "straight from the horse's mouth"? It is one of those phrases that you hear from time to time, and for the most part, you know what it means. In writing this devotional, I looked up the origins of this phrase. Here is what *"grammarist.com"* had to say:

"The idiom straight from the horse's mouth seems to have been coined around the turn of the twentieth century, used at first in horse racing circles. The idea is that a racing tip has been received from the race horse himself. Some believe that the phrase relates to checking the teeth of a horse in order to see what sort of physical shape the horse is in, and whether he is capable of winning a race. Today, the idiom is used in a wide variety of situations to mean learning information from an impeccable source."

Another example of this is the "telephone" game. Everyone sits in a circle, and one person gives a message to be passed along that they whisper into the ear of the person next to them. This process continues one by one until the message makes its way back to the original person who gave the initial message. If you have played this game before, then you know just how quickly the message changes, and how different the message ends up being once it makes its way back around.

These examples quickly came to mind as I read Matthew's conclusion to Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 7:28-29 says, ***"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one***

who had authority, and not as their scribes." I love how Matthew records that ***"the crowds were astonished at his teaching."*** Imagine what it would have been like to hear Jesus preach and to hear these words directly from the source!

In the world we live in today, we are not lacking when it comes to content to consume. Between podcasts, YouTube, and social media, if you are looking for someone's perspective or commentary on different topics or issues, you can find it. The end of Matthew chapter 7 gives us a healthy reminder to make sure that we have a connection directly to the source. I am not saying that it is bad to listen to Christian podcasts or to listen to other Christian pastors and leaders speak or preach, but I think that we need to be cautious not to reduce our faith or our relationship with Christ to a copy or replica of someone else's. You might be thinking, "But Ferd, Jesus is not walking around preaching today like He was back in those times! How can I be connected directly to the source?" To that, I would encourage you to spend just as much time (if not more) in God's Word as we do listening to or taking in others' teachings. Reading God's Word is how we can hear the words of Jesus, just as if He was walking around today.

Hebrews 4:12 reminds us, ***"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."***

ALEXANDER CARTWRIGHT

DEVOTION #4 - MITCHELL HOLMES

I remember the way that my father spoke about baseball when teaching me. He spoke with confidence and love, but I also knew that he was saying he had the authority to say these things because he had the experience. Think about some of the authoritative figures in your life. How did they speak? Did they speak with confidence, passion, and wisdom? Each of these qualities, we can find in authoritative people in our lives.

What was the biggest form of authority in your life? What made you want to listen to them?

Matthew 7:28-29 says, ***"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."***

This passage is the ending to what is known today as the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus taught a large crowd about the law, worry, persecution, and many other topics. In this passage, the crowd listening to Jesus describes Him as teaching with authority, which was different from the way their scribes taught.

What different way of speaking could the crowd be alluding to? How would Jesus have taught differently than the scribes of the time?

Let us break it down like this and go back to the baseball analogy from earlier. I trusted my father to relay the information he knew about baseball because he played it. Yet, he was not the inventor. If I wanted to know all about baseball from the most authoritative

source possible, I would have to ask Alexander Cartwright himself. (Bonus points if you knew the name of the guy who invented baseball!)

Using this analogy, how would Jesus differ from scribes?

John 10:30 adds, ***"I and the Father are one."***

Jesus states to all that He and the Father are one. This means that He has full authority over everything He is speaking. Not only that but the manner of which He spoke was different for other reasons.

Put yourself into a scenario where you need to teach about your favorite food. You want people to really like this food, but you are also going to have people who will not like it. In a fully honest answer, would you bend the information about the food to try to sell it to everyone? Would you leave ingredients out to fool others into liking it?

Jesus not only taught with authority because He was God but also because what He said was true.

John 14:6 says, ***"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"***

He was not afraid of pushing people away with truth and never bent His words to appease more crowds like we so often are tempted to do. He spoke honestly and confidently with the authority that He had over all things. This was a radical change for the crowd at that time because Jesus was exposing the sins of the teachers, calling out hypocrisy, and teaching truth in love.

THE BABYSITTER

DEVOTION #5 - DAVID HUDGENS

While I was growing up, my parents would occasionally be called away from home, often to spiritually care for someone within the church. On these occasions, my dad would pull aside my oldest sister and provide her specific guidance as to how she was to care for my other siblings and me, as well as the home and more. As you can guess, all of us siblings willingly and lovingly accepted the role of leader that my sister, Christmas (Yes, her name is Christmas. Perhaps I will share that story another time), was temporarily granted in lieu of our father's absence. Actually, I think we both know better about that reality.

It is okay to laugh. In fact, I have no doubt that this very scenario is quite familiar to your own past experiences while growing up. My sister being left in charge was not all that challenging to either my siblings or myself. You see, my dad was very successful at setting his behavioral expectations of us, especially for times when he was not present. However, there was one aspect of my sister's deputized leadership that was particularly bothersome, and it always led to conflict.

Christmas had this unchecked urge to "help out" my dad. She was quick to move beyond his clearly defined standards for us and would instead apply her interpretation of his rules to our lives. As a result, we younger siblings experienced an inner conflict as we wrestled with obeying the clear and simple instructions of our dad while also wishing to honor the temporary authority that was granted to our oldest sister.

In today's Scripture passage, the situation described above is not terribly unlike what many who are part of the family of God were struggling with daily under the authority of the priests, the teachers of the Law, and the scribes.

Imagine, if you will, that you are one of the chosen people of God, one of His beloved of the nation of Israel. Your people possess the recorded wisdom of God, the revealed character and will of God, His truth. Yet, you are never quite settled in your position before your Creator, never quite sure as to how to please or satisfy the commands of God. You seek to know Him, to understand Him as He desires to be known and to be worshipped. You believe Him to be within reach, but your understanding as to how you are to fulfill His design for life is shaped almost exclusively by those who have been placed in earthly authority of the Scriptures and by their burdensome interpretations for living out the wisdom of God.

Now, imagine one day hearing, with your own ears, a new hope and invitation for humanity to know and love the Creator and to know His love for you. Even more so, imagine hearing these words spoken by the One who is the author of life, uttered by the pure and righteous authority over all creation.

Matthew records that those who were in the crowds that day, those on the mount with Jesus, sitting under His teaching, were amazed or astonished by the manner in which Jesus spoke, as one had authority, and not like their scribes (Matthew 7:28-29).

Would you have recognized Jesus' authority that day? Would you have been aware of His uniquely separate but familiar way about Him? Would you have been willing to consider His message as true, good, life-giving, and superior to any other?

You know, for me, when I think about the story from my youth that I shared with you at the beginning, I am always reminded of how each one of those times ended. It would end with my dad returning home, and before he even entered the room where we were gathered, I

would hear his voice. When I heard his voice, I knew that no matter what happened between us siblings during that time, he would set everything right because he held the authority of being the father.

Do you know the voice and authority of your Father? Find hope in Jesus' own words today, ***"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"*** (John 10:27).

FATHERLY AUTHORITY

DEVOTION #6 - DEBBIE GABBARA

My dad was a kind and soft-spoken man. He very seldom raised his voice, but my sister and I knew when it was necessary to change our behavior or respond to something he said. Once, when I was a teenager, I got home really late after being out with friends. We did not have cell phones back then, so my dad did not have any way to get a hold of me. I was quietly coming into the house when I saw him sitting on the couch. My heart dropped, and I knew I was in big trouble. He did not yell at me. He just asked if I knew what time it was. Before I could answer, he said, "Do not do this again," and went to bed. I felt so terrible that I had worried and disappointed him. The authority in his quiet words reminded me that we had rules. I had let him down, and I knew it. I never stayed out past my curfew again. His loving and gentle authority made it easy for me to want to be respectful and obedient.

When Jesus spoke, there was majesty and power in His words that caused people to want to hear what He was saying. Much of Jesus' earthly ministry was spent teaching. The people were amazed by the way Jesus spoke about Scripture. He taught in parables and used examples that related to their everyday lives. Their lives were changed when they heard and believed.

Matthew 7:28-29 says, ***"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."***

The religious teachers of the day, scribes and Pharisees, often began their teaching by saying, "Thus says the Lord!" Jesus spoke

in the first person. He taught with wisdom and authority that was perplexing to the people and infuriating to the teachers of the Law. Jesus told them of things to come. He exposed the hypocritical ways of the Pharisees. The authority He had been given by the Father was heard in His words and seen in His encounters. Jesus told them plainly that He was the Son of God. His teachings fulfilled the Old Testament prophesies. However, the words of Jesus and the authority with which he spoke filled the religious leaders with rage, and they reacted with hostility toward Him.

Even as a man, Jesus had authority over nature. He spoke, and the wind and waves obeyed Him. He had authority over illness, diseases, and demonic forces. The lame walked; the blind could see. Matthew tells us that Jesus healed every disease and affliction among the people. Demons were even under the authority of the Son of God. When Jesus commanded evil spirits to come out of a man, they had to ask permission before going into a herd of pigs. Even they have no choice but to submit to His authority.

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. The Messiah, Christ Jesus, heals us and changes us when we believe and submit to Him.

The religious leaders hated Jesus; His holiness shined on their pretense of being righteous. He said they were whitewashed on the outside and filthy on the inside. So, they plotted and killed Jesus by having the Romans crucify Him. They did not understand that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, also has authority over even death. After three days in the grave, Jesus rose again, just as He said He would! There is victory in the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Hebrews 1:3 (NLT) adds, ***"The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven."***

OUR VISION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "We don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

The goal of weekend gatherings at The River Church is to glorify Christ in all we do! Whether it be through singing, giving, serving, or any of the variety of ways He has gifted us and called us together, Jesus is at the center of it all. We celebrate that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher, it brings life-change!

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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