

## The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:13-23

This week and next we're going to see Jesus "land the plane" of the Sermon on the Mount. ("Landing the plane" is a euphemism used in the public speaking/preaching realm for concluding a speech/sermon.) Jesus is going to use some memorable metaphors and contrasts to really "stick the landing" and drive His point home.

As James Bryan Smith states, *"We have arrived at the final section of the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon ever given to the world by the most brilliant person who ever lived. In His clarion call to live as His apprentices, Jesus uses four illustrations that essentially make the same point: arranging your life around Jesus and His teaching is the only way to a good life."* It might be tempting to think, "Oh, that's just somebody's opinion." But I would invite you to pay close attention to exactly what Jesus is saying as He concludes the Sermon.

We're going to look at three of these four illustrations this week, and save the last one for next week. The first illustration Jesus uses is the contrast between two gates and correspondingly two roads...

*"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* (Matthew 7:13-14)

In his book *Practicing The Way*, John Mark Comer (who you may remember...we read his book *Live No Lies* at the beginning of 2023) says, *"The original name for the community of Jesus' apprentices was 'the Way' or 'followers of the Way.' [see Acts 9:2, Acts 19:23, Acts 24:14]...The Greek word for 'way' is 'hodos'. The word literally means 'a road or path,' but Jesus used it as a metaphor for apprenticeship to Him...In this word picture is a simple but revolutionary idea: The Way of Jesus is not just a theology (a set of ideas that we believe in our heads). It is that, but it's more...And it's not just ethics (a list of dos and don'ts that we obey or disobey). It is that, but it's still more...It's exactly what it sounds like—a way of life...One way to paraphrase Jesus' invitation to 'follow Me' is to say, 'Adopt My overall way of life to experience the life I have on offer.'"*

Or as Eastern Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware says, *"Christianity is more than a theory about the universe, more than teachings written down on paper; it is a path along which we journey—in the deepest and richest sense, the way of life."*

Back to John Mark Comer, *"Jesus famously said 'I am the way and the truth and the life.'...People misread this as a statement about who's in or out and who's going to hell and who's en route to heaven, but that's not likely what Jesus meant. It's far more likely He was saying that the marriage of His truth (His teaching) and His way (His lifestyle) is how to get the with-God life He offers...The Way of Jesus is 'narrow,' meaning, it is a very specific way to live. And if you follow it, it will lead you to life, both in this age and the age to come...The 'broad' way is that of the majority culture, which is as simple as it is crass: 'Follow the crowd and do whatever you want.' Billions of people live this way, but it does **not** lead them to life;*

*instead, it often leads to destruction. It leads to countless stories of people falling to pieces and never reaching their promise or potential—what Jesus called ‘eternal life,’ which describes not just **quantity** but **quality** of life. This eternal life is a new way to be human through union with God, beginning now and stretching over the horizon of death into forever.”*

Perhaps a question we need to ask ourselves is whether or not we truly believe Jesus’ assessment that, at the end of the day, there really are only two ways...His way (the narrow gate/road) and the highway (the wide gate/road). Many people chaff at this idea. But I would contend that it is really hard to be a disciple/apprentice of Jesus without believing this. Followers of Jesus need to be “all in”. Sadly, we have congregations full of people who would call themselves “Christians” but seem to be on the wide road, who seem to not trust Jesus’ teaching/way, and have no intention of actually following Jesus’ teaching. Dear friends, there was never meant to be a category of “Christians” who were not also apprentices of Jesus. This is not just my opinion. Jesus seems to be making that abundantly clear as He wraps up this Sermon.

The second illustration Jesus uses contrasts inner character versus outer appearance. (I guess, if we’re going to be technical, He uses two different images to make this one illustrative point.) *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus by their fruit you will recognize them.”* (Matthew 7:15-20)

Who were/are these false prophets that we need to keep a lookout for? For Jesus’ original audience, as we’ve already seen, it would be the religious leaders. They appeared to be good, righteous, “spiritual”, devout, etc. But Jesus says that appearances can be deceiving. These would also be the “hypocrites” referred to earlier in the Sermon...those who were putting on an act, religious performers/influencers. Jesus says, to paraphrase, *“Don’t be fooled by the show they put on, instead look at the fruit of their lives.”*

Now you might think to yourself, “That sounds like judging, and didn’t Jesus just mention that we aren’t to judge?” Please recall that recognizing, discerning, evaluating is not the sort of “judgment” Jesus was speaking against, but rather the elevating of ourselves above others, and having the type of contempt that leads to condemnation of others. Being wise and discerning is always called for.

Who might be the false prophets of today that we need to beware of? What sort of “fruit” (good or bad) should we be looking for? Or, what kind of “fruit” would we expect from someone who claims to be “good” or who claims to know the way to the “good life”?

Let’s go back to the four questions we’ve been using to frame the Sermon on the Mount...

- What is reality? **(The Kingdom of God, that is present and available.)**
- What is the “good life”. **(Life in the Kingdom of God)**

- Who is a truly good person? (One who is increasingly living more in harmony with the Kingdom and the King. )
- How do I/we become a truly good person? (By adopting the way of Jesus and becoming more like Him...taking on His values, agenda, and priorities.)

Jesus has very specific answers to these questions (in red). A “false prophet” would be anyone whose answers to these questions differ from Jesus’ answers. Or, to say it another way, a false prophet is anyone who would advocate a way of life that differs from what Jesus is offering/advocating.

I realize that in our highly diverse, pluralistic society/world this is an unpopular idea. But Jesus anticipated that would be the case—the “wide” path would be the popular path, the road many/most would take...and it leads to destruction. The narrow path is/will be highly unpopular. This is to be expected. But this is the path that leads to life (reality, the good life, becoming a good person). This is what it means to trust, to put our faith in, to believe Jesus.

The third illustration Jesus mentions focuses on the centrality of being in relationship with Him. *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from Me, you evil doers!’”* (Matthew 7:21-23)

Please notice what Jesus is saying about Himself in this passage. He is clearly making Himself out to be something more than just a wise sage. Someone who was simply a rabbi would never imply the things about themselves that Jesus was alluding to about Himself. First of all, “Lord” is a far more elevated title than “rabbi”. Notice also Jesus said, “on that day...”. What day is He referring to? The day of Judgment. Most importantly, notice where Jesus positions Himself on the day of Judgment. He paints Himself as the one allowing or denying entrance. Friends, that is an incredibly lofty thing for someone to say about themselves. No rabbi would have the gall to say such a thing. But Jesus is far more than just a rabbi. Matthew’s entire Gospel is meant to portray Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. “Messiah”, by the way, has far more political connotations than religious ones. If we jump forward to the end of Matthew’s Gospel we see Jesus say, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.”* (Matthew 28:18)

When we properly understand who Jesus is we realize that we can’t simply take the Sermon on the Mount as suggestions, recommendations, or optional advice. The whole flavor and tone of Jesus’ concluding remarks in the Sermon is one of warning. N.T. Wright puts it this way, *“Jesus ends the great Sermon on the Mount with a set of warning signs...This passage [7:13-23] has three of these warnings, coming in quick succession like road-signs on a motorway. Make sure you get through the gate—it’s not very wide! Watch out for people who will lead you off the road! Don’t think that because you’ve been tagging along with the others that you’ll get there in the end! These are sharp and worrying. We need to take them seriously...What counts will be knowing Jesus—or rather, being known by Him.”*

What does Jesus mean when He says “I never knew you.”? Doesn’t He know everybody? And surely He knows people who do big, impressive things in His name, right? Hmm, apparently not. There is an important distinction between religion and relationship.

Friends, to KNOW Jesus, and to be KNOWN by Jesus, is to OBEY Jesus. We obey Him by adopting His way of life, and living life WITH Him. This is how we demonstrate we trust Him, His wisdom and goodness, and desire His authority in/over our lives. This is the point Jesus is hammering home as He “lands the plane” of this Sermon.

### Possible Discussion Questions

- In the past we’ve used the computer language of an operating system versus an application. For a Christian, Jesus and His Kingdom and teaching is meant to be the operating system, but sadly many are content with Him being just an app. What’s been your experience of this? How have you arranged your life around Jesus and His teaching? Or, what are you doing in order to allow Jesus to be the orientating center of your life as opposed to just a part of your life?
- What have you found challenging in adopting the way of Jesus? What have you found to be relatively easy in adopting the way of Jesus? What would you say you’re still learning about His way?
- If Jesus’ way is narrow, and only a few find it, that means that those of us who pursue His way will definitely be in the minority, that we’ll be perceived as peculiar by the dominant majority around us. We won’t likely “fit in”. Additionally, to be in the minority typically comes with a loss of power. How do you feel about all this? What do you think happens when Christians try to avoid the natural “cost” of following Jesus?
- Do you think of your faith in Jesus as an apprenticeship? Explain. Continuing with the picture of apprenticeship, what phase of “training” are you currently in? What are you presently learning/developing?
- What “good fruit” would you expect to see in someone who is following Jesus? Or, what do you specifically look for to determine good fruit versus bad fruit in someone...and in yourself?
- Who might be the “false prophets” of today that we need to beware of? Who is claiming to know what the “good life” is and how to attain it?
- What are the various opinions about Jesus that people have? What might this week’s passage have to say to some of those opinions/perspectives?

- How do we respect other faith traditions without diminishing our view of Jesus? Or, if Jesus is everything we claim Him to be (everything He claims Himself to be), how is that not offensive to people of other faiths/religions?

### Soul Training Exercise ~ Apprenticing Under King Jesus

Being a Christian isn't about a set of propositions or doctrines, it's not about adhering to a system of religion, it's not about particular morals and ethics, it's about a PERSON...it's about knowing this Person, being in relationship with this Person, following this Person...becoming a committed, faithful disciple/apprentice of this Person. (Of course, that Person is Jesus Christ.)

The process looks something like this...

- Be with Jesus
- Become like Jesus
- Do as Jesus did

So what does your training plan look like? This week's invitation to so either develop a training plan, or if you have one, to review/evaluate how it's going. (FYI, another term for a training program in the way of Jesus is a Rule of Life. Additionally, the whole point/purpose of our weekly Soul Training Exercises is to help in this process.)

A good training plan will specify things like...

- When and how you will be with Jesus.
- Identify and work on specific areas in your life that need to come into conformity with Jesus.
- Progressively adopt the rhythms of Jesus, the priorities and values of Jesus.
- What will be practiced individually/personally, and what will be practiced with others/communally.

Or to say it another way, apprenticing under Jesus will likely include S.M.A.R.T. Goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) and be reviewed and revised regularly.

Furthermore, apprenticing under Jesus is not meant to be a solo project. Who will you journey with in this season of your life? Perhaps create a little cohort and work together on a plan.

This exercise/invitation is designed to help us be more intentional about our discipleship/apprenticeship. Following Jesus isn't something we do accidentally or by happenstance, or left to chance. He is worthy of our best effort.