



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Practicing Jesus: Just Do It

Matthew 7:13-27

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This Is Scary!

Randy Harris has said it about as well as it can be said: “The last major section in the Sermon on the Mount is the most haunting and disconcerting piece in the whole sermon. Jesus talks about how he keeps score and it’s a little scary.”¹ What exactly does he mean?

- 7:13-14 talk about two ways; that’s important, but not the scary part.
- 7:15-20 warn about false prophets. False prophets are a concern, but Jesus tells us how to discern and deal with them. If taken to heart, that information removes the scariness.
- 7:24-27, the parables of the wise and foolish men who built their houses, probably doesn’t scare us if only because we’re so familiar with the Vacation Bible School song.

So, what’s the scary part? It must be in 7:21-23.

- Verses 21-22 show what makes false prophets dangerous: just like true prophets, they confess Jesus is Lord and speak and do great works in his name.
- They are respectful (“Lord”); orthodox (Jesus is Lord; works are done in his name); fervent (repeated, “Lord, Lord”); and public (prophesying, exorcisms, and powerful works are known).² How is that scary?
- Hear v. 23. To the respectful, orthodox, fervent, and publicly devoted, Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

What if this were us? We never waver in standing up for Jesus and are among his most active servants. We work for him and do the good he models. When people think of members the church can least afford to lose, we’re on the short list. If we’re keeping score, everyone knows that we win the game; we’re even running up the score! But, at the judgment, just as we are about to step through the pearly gates, Jesus says, “I never knew you; . . .” *That’s scary!*

So, what do we do about it? To start, we study our text to see why Jesus said it.

¹ Randy Harris, *Living Jesus: Doing What Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2012), 126.

² See John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 206-207.

The Way We Follow

Repeating a biblical theme (cf. Dt. 30:19; Psa. 1; Jer. 21:8), Jesus says there are just two ways to live and only one leads to life. It is narrow, hard, and has few travelers (Mt. 7:13-14).

What is that narrow way? Start in chapter 5. “The narrow way refers to the teaching that Jesus has just given: the way of righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.”³ Why is it so narrow and hard? It “requires single-minded service and wholehearted devotion to God” (Matera, 108). The “lawless” do not take seriously Jesus’ ideals in the Sermon.

Think about that in light of the whole Sermon. We’ll illustrate with the first section (5:21-48).

- Do we take Jesus’ teaching about anger and hatred to heart, or rationalize ugly thoughts toward another with statements like, “well, at least I didn’t hit him” (21-26)?
- Do we reign in impure thoughts, or rationalize lust with such statements as, “but, I’ve never cheated on her” or “what’s wrong with admiring beauty” (27-30)?⁴
- Do we take our marital vows seriously, or excuse ourselves by stressing how hard it was for us, or how others just wouldn’t believe what it was like to live with him (31-32)?
- Are we straightforward with others (like Jesus was), or do we let ourselves off the hook as we play games with the truth and honest practices, employing platitudes about how we don’t want to be rude (“brutally honest”) or assurances that we are “mostly honest” (33-37)?
- Do we really try Jesus’ way of returning good for evil, or justify our payback or sinister motives and actions toward an attacker or enemy by reasoning that what he did was more than anyone could tolerate, or he got what he deserved (38-48)?

We confess Jesus, prophesy in his name, and do mighty works. *But, do we do what he says?*

The Teaching We Accept

Verses 15-20 remind us that “external appearances can be deceiving” (Matera, 109). Jesus teaches that wolves who look like sheep can be found out by their fruits, that we can tell the difference between good and bad, and that the bad will be “cut down and thrown into the fire” (7:19). He tells us us to be fruit inspectors. Again, we must interpret in light of the context.

- Verses 21-23 tell how not to evaluate the false prophets Jesus has in mind here. It is the person who fervently declares Jesus is Lord, prophesies in his name, casts out demons in his name, and does mighty works in his name who will be told to depart. Since all those actions are usually endorsed in Scripture, he must have something else in mind here.
- Note the context. True prophets bear the fruits of “righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20). They accept the deeper application of the law (5:21-48), do pious works only for God (6:1-18), have right priorities regarding treasures and worries (6:19-34), and tend to their own sins before hyper-analyzing the lives of others (7:1-5).

³ Frank J. Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 108.

⁴ Obviously, it is good to have never cheated on one’s spouse, and there is nothing wrong with admiring beauty. My point is that we use such good things to justify things that Jesus said we are to avoid.

- In other words, they are single-minded in their devotion to the Lord and his narrow way. There is no question that they are seeking his reign first (6:33).

Jesus says to find those people and let them be role models.

The Life We Live

It is here that we must consider the most important thing we need to know about this Sermon: Jesus meant for us to live it. That's not as obvious a statement as it first appears.

- Early church teaching (see James, then later the *Didache*) thought it could be practiced.
- But, as Christianity became Rome's state religion and church membership came to be considered a condition for national citizenship, Christian leaders began to distinguish "between those who *really* keep the hard teachings of Jesus (monks and bishops and the like) and those who are baptized adherents of the church who are expected to follow only the basic precepts" (Harris, 10).
- Over time, the Sermon "became something that was for extra credit. Eventually people believed the sermon was just too hard to do, that Jesus was proclaiming an ideal of the new kingdom, but that his words were not meant to be practiced literally" (Harris, 10).
- As different groups sought reform, (e.g., the Anabaptists), they rejected the false distinction between clergy and laity and returned to an emphasis that said the sermon's teaching should not only be cognitively understood, but actually lived.

Often without even realizing it, we've been influenced by the "ideal-that's-too-hard-to-really-do" position. We need to restore the early church's position, appreciating the sentiment of G. K. Chesterton who said, "'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried'" (Harris, 13).

This was what Jesus was saying in 7:24-27. Wise people don't just study the sermon, master its contents, or memorize it. Wise people do what it teaches. Narrow, hard, and unpopular as it is, it "leads to life" (7:14). "Jesus actually expects us to do this stuff" (Harris, 21).

Easy? No, Jesus said it's hard. We'll stumble and encounter resistance from ourselves and others. But doable? Yes, but only if we decide to try.

So, do you really believe Jesus? Are you trying to do what he says? It's time to decide.

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