

“Choices on the Way”

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The Sermon on the Mount is ultimately not about what Jesus says, but who Jesus is.

Matthew 7:13-29

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Dabo wisdom

Linda and I had the privilege of joining a table of Corinth people in Asheville Thursday evening to attend the Fellowship of Christian Athletes banquet and hear Coach Dabo Swinney of the national champion Clemson Tigers. Dabo had a rough start in life – alcoholic father, divorced parents, homeless for a season as a teenager – but he calls himself a poster child for FCA because he met Christ through that ministry.

As you might expect, his message included some one-liners that relate to his own story and vocation –

- God will take the mess and create a message.
- With Jesus we are all first team, we are all five stars.
- God never says oops.
- Greatness isn't your destiny. It's your decision.

What he said sounded at points like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He said the only thing that will bring you through life is having Christ as your foundation. He likes to gather his football players around him early in the training and choose the biggest, toughest guy. He hands him a football and tells him to stand on top of it. The rest of the guys have a good laugh while the bruising lineman tries unsuccessfully to keep his balance. Dabo says, "That's what your life will be like if football is your foundation."

There are some similarities between football and life, however, says the Gospel according to Dabo. They include "Be prepared," "Put your armor on," and "Play the next play." I think you can see some parallels with what Jesus says.

Of the 12,000+ young men playing Division 1 FBS football in a given year, every one of them is playing for a national championship, every one of them would love to be a star player. Only one of the 130 teams will win, and only a handful of those team members will be recognized for a major role in the victory. Everyone else is dreaming the impossible dream. And yet, every one of them needs to put into practice Coach Swinney's basic formula: be prepared, put your armor on, play the next play.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seems to present a set of impossible ideals.

- Rejoice when you are insulted.
- Don't be angry, turn the other cheek, love your enemies.
- Forgive anyone who sins against you.
- Don't worry about tomorrow – ever, about anything.
- Stop judging others.
- Be perfect, like God is.

Last Sunday we noted that as Jesus moves toward the end of the message, he takes that impossible list and makes it possible by telling us to “keep it simple.” When you're overwhelmed by how far you fall short,

- Keep praying, always trusting your heavenly Father.
- Keep doing for others what you would want someone to do for you.
- Keep choosing the narrow gate and stay on the narrow way.

The rest of chapter seven, in my view, continues this theme of verses 13 and 14, so we included those verses in today's reading. I'm aware as we approach this text that many people include some of these verses among Jesus' “hard sayings.” As you know if you attend here regularly, my goal and method as a preacher is to focus on what the text in front of us says. I don't do a lot of comparing Scripture with Scripture – not because I don't value other Scripture, but because sometimes we miss what the Holy Spirit is saying in this text if we're so eager to find parallel or contrasting Scriptures.

My goal is to explain what I think Jesus is saying here. I've tried hard not to mix in too much of my theological system and assumptions, and I would ask you to do the same. Keep your attention on what's actually said in Matthew 7:13-27.

What has most intrigued me in this section is what Jesus says to do. In each section there is an implicit if not an explicit command from Jesus. He says a lot more than that, but it's for perspective, or maybe explanation. What I want to know at the end of this, his longest recorded sermon, is how I should respond.

Keep choosing focus (13-14)

In verses 13 and 14, it's too easy to get lost in the wrong questions, in my view. When Jesus says, “broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through

it,” our minds are drawn to the math. Does Jesus mean that more people are going to hell than to heaven? When he adds, “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it,” who’s in that small minority? Is our response supposed to be that we take pride in being among the few?

What happens when the majority shifts, as it does frequently in American and North Carolina politics. When your party is the minority, are you automatically on the narrow way and therefore right? What if you win the election and now you’re in the majority and in control? Are you then wrong because you’re among the many?

These are the wrong questions to ask about verses 13 and 14. Jesus doesn’t say here, and doesn’t say anywhere else, “Try to figure out who’s going to be in heaven and who won’t.” That’s not ours to discern.

Jesus gives only one command in this section. It’s a centering command: *you* enter through the narrow gate. If others don’t get, don’t let that distract you. Yes, there’s such a thing as “destruction” – and I believe Jesus is deliberately non-specific. People destroy themselves in this life and they are destroyed in eternity. Jesus says not everyone makes it. But don’t spend too much time trying to figure out the destiny of others. When you watch them choose the road to destruction, focus on the narrow road to life. That’s his one command in vv. 13-14: enter through the narrow gate.

In John 21, Jesus tells Peter that his discipleship is going to end in involuntary suffering. Peter gestures at John and asks Jesus, “What about him?” Jesus’ answer is, “What is that to you? You come and follow me.” He says that to every one of us. The life of following Jesus is unique in the gifts we are given, the experiences we have, and the suffering we have to endure. Jesus tells us to get our eyes off “the many” who are choosing the wide path. Keep choosing to focus on the narrow road you are traveling.

Keep choosing discernment (15-23)

Many Bible readers find the next section (vv. 15-23) of the Sermon on the Mount troubling, for a couple of reasons. First, Jesus said earlier, “Do not judge,” but now in vv. 15-20 he includes this entire section on watching out for false prophets because on the outside they seem innocent (“sheep’s clothing”) but in reality, they want to destroy you (“ferocious wolves”). He goes on to say not once but twice, “By their fruit you will recognize them.” As he develops that analogy, he notes that you can tell the difference between a good tree and a bad tree by its fruit. Doesn’t that sound like “judging”?

From there Jesus says not all who say to him, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he says that “many” will say to him on “that day” (clearly a reference to the final judgment), “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name cast out demons and perform many miracles?” He will respond to them, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!”

Tim Keller points out that there are three similarities between those whom Christ will send away and authentic believers: (1) orthodoxy (they call Jesus “Lord”), (2) passion “Lord, Lord” is a way of intensifying their confession, and (3) service for God (prophecy, exorcism, and miracles). That’s the second troubling part of this section. Are we to read this and say as a later crowd would say to Jesus, “Who then can be saved?” Are we to hear these words and put into doubt our own eternal destiny?

Before I answer that question, note the connection between this “false prophets” section (15-20) and the “Lord, Lord” section that follows (21-23). The first leads to the next. Those who say “Lord, Lord” and who prophesy and perform many miracles are the “false prophets” – the “bad trees” that bear “bad fruit.”

What do we do with this information? Note again that there’s only one command in these nine verses (15-23), and Jesus leads with it: “Watch out for false prophets.” In your journey along the narrow way you will have many people try to influence you spiritually. Some of them will be very convincing with their charisma, their success, their apparent spiritual power. There’s nothing inherently wrong with charisma, success, or spiritual power. But you are to exercise discernment, constantly, over who influences your life.

It’s not your place to judge their destiny. There’s nothing in this text that says you are to decide if Jesus will say to them, “Away from me.” Jesus takes care of all that at the end. Read the passage again. That’s what it says.

You are to decide by their fruit whether you will allow them to teach you, lead you, model for you what is true and right. You don’t judge them, but you do observe the fruit – their character and obedience. You choose carefully your spiritual influencers, based on their authenticity, integrity, and consistency.

Keep choosing obedience (24-27)

The next section is the familiar parable of the wise and foolish builders. Once again, there’s only implied command. One take home. One deliverable.

The parable is about two builders in a flood zone. Both build a beautiful home. The framing, windows, exterior, and roof are the same. Both use the same interior decorator, and the result is cozy and attractive and, well, it’s home. Sometimes fruit is not very visible, not at first anyway.

A storm arises. The same storm hits both houses with rain, rising flood water, and hurricane force winds. When the storm subsides, the differences between the two houses is stark. One lies in ruins, and the other stands strong.

What was the difference? The foundation. One house was built on solid ground, with footings set into the rock. The other was constructed with shallow pillars on shifting sand.

It's all parable, but unlike with some of his parables Jesus explains this one. The wise man, he says, "hears these words of mine and puts them into practice." But the foolish man "hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice." That's it. It's kind of a simple application to a complex sermon of impossible demands, isn't it?

Jesus is the first Nike pitchman: "Just do it." Do what? Do what you heard him say to do! "But it's impossible! I am incapable of doing all he said to do in this sermon, much less the rest of the Bible." Then do the next right thing. Keep choosing obedience. Don't ever tell yourself the next choice doesn't matter. Whether you succeed or fail this time, that's in the past. Keep choosing obedience. The next choice is the one that will define you. It turns out Coach Dabo was right. Maybe your last one was a touchdown. Maybe it was a fumble. Maybe you were on the bench. Be ready for the next play. Don't let the last one define you – for good or bad. Do what's next.

Listen to what Jesus says and put it into practice. All of it? Stop saying that! Stop worrying about "all of it." Do the next right thing.

I love the quote from Robert Browning that we included in our 8:30 bulletin:

A man's reach should exceed his grasp
Or what's a heaven for?

You should always be stretching toward the goal of God-like perfection. You won't make it until heaven, but never relax on the quest toward obedience in this life.

Keep choosing Jesus (28-29)

Is this passage designed to leave you fearful or encouraged? Yes. Are you supposed to be unsettled by what World War II German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," where it doesn't matter what you do once you grasp and receive God's forgiveness through Christ? Yes, you are supposed to be unsettled. On some level, are you supposed to ask yourself, "Am I putting Jesus' words into practice or am I one of those people whose house will crash?" Yes, you are supposed to ask that.

But there's more.

We almost ended this week's sermon text with verse 27. That would have been a terrible blunder. Yes, the words of Jesus' longest recorded sermon end in verse 27, but Matthew's not done with the importance of what happened that day.

What we find in verses 28-29 is the answer to the question, "Is there no grace in the Sermon on the Mount?" Is all we have here a set of impossible standards? Is all

we have some kind of utopian ideal discipleship and community to discourage us?
Where's the love?

What Matthew says is this: When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

There are two key words here. One is "authority." Jesus taught differently than all the other legal experts of his day because he didn't use "case law." It wasn't just that he was original. He was powerful. They couldn't ignore him. He said things like, "You've heard that it was said... but I say to you."

His authority became even clearer here at the close of the sermon. He claimed he would be the judge on "that day." It would be Jesus who would say to some, "Away from me, you evildoers." He called God "my Father in heaven." He said people need to hear "these words of mine" and put them into practice.

You've become accustomed to words like this from Jesus, but those who heard him first, and perhaps Matthew's readers, were "amazed." There's Matthew's second key word here at the end of the Sermon. It's a word he'll use again and again in his gospel. When he calms the storm, his disciples were amazed and said, "What kind of man is this?" (Matthew 8:27). When a mute man spoke after the demon was cast out, the crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel" (9:33). When he returned to his hometown to speak, the people were amazed and asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" (13:54).

The way Matthew lays this out, the point of the Sermon on the Mount is not even what Jesus said. It's who Jesus is. People are amazed by his authority over law and they will be amazed by his authority over nature and disease and demons and religious leaders. In other words, see the Sermon on the Mount as one of the first ways Matthew presents Jesus. Verses 28-29 are Matthew's "stay tuned." More amazement lies ahead. So keep choosing Jesus.

And that's where we're going at Corinth. We're headed into Lent, and we're going to return now to the Apostles' Creed – this time the second paragraph: "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son our Lord." We're going to the cross, and then to the resurrection, then to his glory. There we will meet grace like never before. So, like Matthew, I say, "Keep choosing Jesus." Stay tuned. Amen.