

## **Matthew 7:13-14 “Two Paths”**

Here's how close we are to Easter. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the Sunday after that is Easter! So that means we're on the last Sunday of our study of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Now remember, according to Matthew's gospel, this is Jesus' first "public speaking engagement." This is where he lays out the framework for his ministry. This is where he makes it clear that he's the ambassador for "the kingdom of heaven." This is where he highlights the radical differences between the reign of God and the reign of earthly rulers like Caesar. And what we're seeing here today in chapter seven is the climax of Jesus' sermon. If you want to look at it in terms of the modern-day sermon, this is when Jesus says, "The last point I want to make is ..." or "in conclusion ..." Of course in modern day preaching, that means the preacher might go on for another 10 minutes.

I can't remember whether I told you this or not, but I visited a church this summer that wasn't quite a "mega-church" but it was definitely the kind of church with a stage and lights and guitars and drums ... all the things you'd expect from a mega-church but with room for only about 200 people. This church had all sorts of fancy audio-visual technology there too including this decent-sized digital clock in the back of the church that counted backwards. And it took me awhile to figure its purpose, but then it dawned on me that it was to show folks on stage how much time they had for whatever they were doing. The band was given ten minutes to lead as many praise songs as they could in that time. When the clock started winding down to zero the band started winding down too. Then they had this time for testimonies where a few church members went to the stage and talked about how God was working in their life. Again, as the clock approached zero, the last person wrapped up their testimony and sat down. Everything had a specific time ... even offering. I was actually quite impressed with their commitment to time management! Then the preacher got up to preach. I thought, "Hmmm ... wonder how much time he gets?" Because I've noticed that the average person's attention span for sermons is different

depending on geographical location. See, in Virginia, a preacher needs to preach *at least* 25 minutes for church folks to think they got their money's worth. And they will watch the clock too! If you preach anything less than 25 minutes, people will give you that little, "I'm being polite because I'm culturally obligated to" smile and say, "Nice *talk* preacher." Which is their way of saying, "That wasn't *really* a sermon and I refuse to call it a sermon. It was a *talk*. Do better next time." I've discovered that in California, the average attention span for a sermon in a mainline Protestant church is about 20 minutes. And that's *maximum* time too! Fifteen is preferable. So I was quite surprised when the preacher got up at this low-key mega-church and the countdown clock was reset to *40 minutes*! And do you know what that meant? Absolutely nothing! He just kept going and going. I thought that when the clock hit zero that maybe it would start flashing red and counting up? Nope.

I don't imagine that Jesus had any problems with time limits when it came to his preaching. What he had to say was radically different than most of the typical preachers in that time and place, so I envision Jesus having a captive audience. But here's how Jesus winds down his sermon: He shifts gears and starts talking in binary terms. There are two gates opening to two roads. You can't travel both. The wide smooth road leads to destruction. The narrow rocky path leads to life. Take the nice, easy, paved road like the Romans built ... choose that path and go along with the rest of the crowd who just want a smooth road, and you'll end up in disaster. If you dare to be different and choose the challenging path, you'll understand what it means to be truly alive.

Then you've got the two vines and the two trees. They each produce two different kinds of fruit. Choose the wrong one and you'll get scratched up by thorns. Choose the other and you'll live a fruitful life. Then you've got two groups of people. One entering Jesus' presence, the other leaving. One group has all sorts of things to brag about as far as their religious credentials are concerned, but Jesus isn't impressed. It's

just talk ... just words. But the other group *knows* Jesus. They live their faith by action, not words. Then you've got two builders. One builds a house on the sand, and one on the rock. These are both people who've heard Jesus' message. But when the storms of life hit, the one who built their house on the rock survives. This is the one who, again, doesn't just *hear* Jesus' message, but is motivated to *act* on Jesus' message. Notice that what Jesus is pointing out in all of these illustrations is that there's a difference between the people who get his message and the ones who don't.

Now here's where people can get messed up when presented with these "either/or" choices. Some folks think that these binary choices all lead up to something like "turn or burn." And folks who think this way tend to view God as one who is angry and needs to be appeased through sacrifice. They see God as harsh and demanding ... requiring humans to earn God's favor by engaging in radical rule-keeping. They think somehow that God is always in our heads looking through the corners and crevices of our thoughts for complete religious correctness. But Jesus teaches a different way. So before we misinterpret the "either-or" statements that Jesus makes as he winds down his sermon, let's review the substance of the Sermon on the Mount again --

The beatitudes encourage us to have the attitude of a servant. Show mercy. Work for peace. Be gentle. Hunger and thirst for righteousness. Dare to be boldly different. Be the salt that flavors the earth and light that shines through the darkness of the world. Demonstrate your difference through works of generosity. Don't conform to tradition for tradition's sake, but don't rebelliously reject it either. Understand the intent of the tradition and grow from it. Don't hold grudges or indulge in anger. Be agents of reconciliation. Monitor your desires. Don't pretend they're not there, but don't dwell on them and fantasize about them. Be faithful and guard your hearts. Don't make vows that you don't intend to keep. Love your enemies as well as your friends. Imitate God. Be big-hearted and generous. Give to the poor. Pray without ceasing, but don't do it as a public display of how religious you are. Resist

temptation. Trust God. Don't let greed cloud your outlook on life. Store up wealth by being generous and kind. Don't be a slave to material resources. Don't let anxiety run your life. Instead trust God's care. Seek God first. Don't spend all of your energy pointing out the faults of others while being blind to your own. Don't push your faith on other people ... when you do this, they won't be able to recognize what a treasure faith is. Don't be afraid to go to God with your needs, but don't be discouraged if you don't get everything you ask for. God will come through in due time and perhaps in an unexpected way. Treat others as you would want to be treated. Realize that life is full of tough choices ... even for those who place their faith in God. Thriving sometimes includes suffering. Don't let others' religious talk mislead you. Instead, live by Jesus' teachings.

Notice that when you look at the Sermon on the Mount as a whole we see a vision of a gracious and compassionate God who does *not* need to be appeased through sacrifice. Notice that Jesus paints a clear picture of a God whose love is freely given. You don't have to earn God's love. What God wants from us most of all is to be co-ambassadors with Jesus and to proclaim the good news of God's unfolding reign on earth. And it's surprisingly like what the prophets of the Old Testament desired from Israel too! Except in the case of Jesus, the desire extends to *everyone* from all nations ... all walks of life ... all people throughout all time. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. Ultimately the choice that counts more than anything else as far as Jesus was concerned is, "Which path will you choose? The path that resembles the kingdoms of the earth? Or the path that leads to the reign of God?"

If you were there on that hillside in Galilee which path would you have chosen? Would you have said, "yes" to Jesus' way? The nice thing is that you don't have to put yourself in that time and place in history to answer that question. The question applies here and now too. Which way will you choose?