

The King's Speech: Beware the Wide Gate and the False Prophet

Matthew 7:13-20

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[light candle – we will come back to that.]

Preference is one of the luxuries we enjoy in a place like Canada. For the most part we can have everything we want just the way we want it, and no one can tell us our preferences are wrong. For example if I told you the only flavor of ice-cream worth eating was Tiger ice-cream, or if I said anyone who likes their steaks done anything other than rare is wrong you would tell me I was out to lunch.

But while you would have a pretty good case in situations like those this same line of reasoning doesn't work with math. If you think 2 plus 2 is anything other than 4 everyone will tell you your opinions don't add up. And that's because math isn't about preferences and opinions, it is about sums and facts.

And of course this is where the debate about belief comes in. Canadians by and large do not believe that religious convictions have anything to do with facts, instead we categorize religion in the opinions and preferences section of society.

And the evidence for this is that in Canada when it comes to religion it is commonly believed that everyone can be right.

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Please turn with me to Matthew chapter 7. We will be picking up our series through the King's Speech starting in verse 13. Would you pray with me as we get started.

[Pray]

If you are just joining us today we are nearing the end of an extended series through what is commonly referred to as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In these three chapters in Mathew Jesus gives us some of His most profound teaching laying out what it means for people to follow Him and ultimately what it means to be transformed by His grace.

Over and over again Jesus has proved He is the master of deep teaching combined with word pictures that drive home what He is saying. And it is in front of another one of those pictures that we find ourselves today.

Look with me if you will at verses 13 and 14.

[Read Matthew 7:13-14]

When we started looking at chapter 7 we noted that here Jesus begins drawing His sermon to a conclusion in two ways. First He gives us four statements that summarize everything He has said up to this point.

So Jesus said “don’t be judgmental, but at the same time don’t throw out all your judgment.” In other words don’t concentrate on the sins other people commit, keep offering forgiveness because we all need it. But simultaneously don’t be naïve when it comes to sharing what is most valuable to you – your faith. Instead recognize that some people will take what you have and turn and tear you to pieces.

Jesus finished summarizing by urging us to “Pray anticipating the generosity of **your** Father, and then because God has been generous with you, live generously with those around you.” If you are a Christian Jesus says the Holy God of the Universe has adopted you as sons and daughters. That means we can come to Him as children before a good Father who wants to give us good gifts. And because we are now God’s children the world around us experiences God through us. So that means we must live out God’s generosity doing to others what we would have them do to us whether they reciprocate or not.

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While simple enough to understand, these four summaries and really the whole sermon they summarize are incredibly profound, and actually impossible for us to do on our own. And that’s Jesus’ point. This is why in the very first verse in the King’s Speech Jesus said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3)

Jesus says blessed are people who recognize that they can’t do this on their own. Blessed are those who know they need God – that’s what it means to be poor in spirit. Poor in spirit is the opposite of what the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were.

The Pharisees thought they had God figured out. They thought their good actions made them worthy of God’s acceptance. They had proud or self-righteous spirits. And it is in contrast to people like them that Jesus says “blessed are the poor in spirit.” The people who get the kingdom aren’t those who look perfect; they are the broken ones who know they can’t make it on their own. Does that sound like good news to you?

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Let me just stop here for a second and ask you to examine yourself. Are you someone who recognizes how desperately in need you are of God’s continual indwelling and redeeming? Do you know that you have not outgrown your need for God’s mercy and grace today? Or have you slipped into thinking you are doing pretty well? The Pharisees, who started out with noble intentions but went astray prove this second position is easy to fall into.

Wherever you are on that scale let's just take a moment to silently express our need for a Saviour – we want to be a poor-in-spirit people.

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With the summaries behind Him Jesus now turns His attention to three warnings. And these warnings are ones He thinks His disciples and people like us need to hear most. We are going to cover the first two today and the last one next week.

The first warning is of the wide gate that we just read of in verses 13 and 14.

Jesus starts with an appeal to everyone who is listening to Him to enter through the narrow gate. And Jesus gives this warning because He thinks even His disciples won't do this automatically. There are two options, there are two gates.

And here we get one of those truth claims from Jesus that sounds narrow-minded or bigoted in our contemporary culture.

Jesus says "Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Contrasting this He says "wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it." In other words in Jesus' mind not all roads are equal. Belief and faith for Jesus are more like math than they are like opinion.

And that means while there are multiple faith options available to us – you can be Christian or Muslim or Jewish; you can be Atheist or Agnostic; you can be Buddhist or Hindu or New Age – yet Jesus says "there aren't many gates, there are only two." You either enter through the narrow gate or you enter through the wide gate. There are no other alternatives.

Now there are two levels to this warning. The first level obviously has to do with those who have not placed their faith in God and their trust in Jesus for salvation. When His disciples asked how they could get to where He was going Jesus told them:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6)

In other words Jesus believed He was the only way to the Father, the only way to Heaven and to eternal life with God.

Now there are roughly 2.1 billion people on earth today who claim to be Christians. That means that roughly 5 billion people, or 2/3 of the entire population, don't. And so Jesus' truth claim here is that most of humanity is not headed for eternal life, most of humanity is headed through the wide gate to destruction, a destruction that Jesus in other places calls hell.

Now Jesus isn't happy about this. The Bible tells us God doesn't want anyone to go to Hell. When people questioned Peter about why Jesus was taking so long to return Peter responded:

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. (2 Peter 3:9 NLT)

But friends, in spite of what God wants, He allows His desire here to be thwarted. God doesn't force people to do His will. And Jesus says in spite of how much God loves all people, the reality is most enter through the wide gate, resisting His love to their own demise.

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At this point we need to address a concern that I hear often from Christians and non-Christians alike. And the concern is about the idea of hell.

Hell has to be the most unpopular doctrine within Christianity. It rarely gets talked about from the pulpit these days, and when it does it is usually mentioned with very little detail.

And undoubtedly the main reason for this is that there is so much emotion wrapped up in this discussion. People don't want to think about themselves or their loved ones going to hell – and who can blame them.

The problem is that the Bible and specifically Jesus says we should think about this. And it is to the Bible that we have to go if we are going to answer this emotional question. If we don't go to the Bible and honestly deal with the text then it is just my opinion or your opinion or C.S. Lewis' opinion or Rob Bell's opinion. And really none of our opinions on this subject matter at all. What matters is "Truth" that Jesus says is more like math than it is like preference.

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I also want to say if you've ever wondered about how a loving God could send people to hell you are not alone. This is one of the biggest concerns that is brought against Christianity. I'm going to do my best to lay out what the Bible says about this in about two minutes, but if you are interested in more information grab the manuscript for this sermon and check out the footnotes I have provided.¹

Here it is in a nutshell. Most people find the idea of hell difficult to swallow because they can't imagine that a God who is full of mercy, grace and love would send people, primarily good people, to a place of eternal torment simply because they didn't trust in Jesus. That just doesn't seem fair does it?²

¹ For a selection of scriptures concerning the biblical reality and description of hell see: Matt 22:13; 25:46; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Rev 14:11; 20:15; 21:8. For more information on the topic of how sinners could possibly deserve hell check out: <http://carm.org/loving-god-would-never-send-anyone-hell> or YouTube "Why would a God of love send someone to hell? By Living Waters". Also see David Platt's podcast: <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/the-doctrine-of-hell>. For more information contact pastor Dan.

² See Romans 9:6-33 for a text on God's justice in electing to save some and ordaining to send others to hell.

Here is how the Bible responds. The Bible responds saying actually the idea that God sends good people to hell is a faulty premise. In fact there are no good people. The Prophet Jeremiah tell us:

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? (Jeremiah 17:9 NLT)

Over and over again throughout the Bible, from Adam and Eve to Revelations, people are described, not as good and just stumbling into the occasional bad thing, but as treasonous sinners in rebellion against God. We are beings who don't want to submit to the fact that God is God, and instead want to be the gods of our own little universes. And the Bible calls that rebellion sin. And the bigger and more important the person you sin against the more grievous the consequences.

Here is what I mean. A lie is a lie, but if you were standing in the line up at McDonalds and there was a really nice car parked out in the parking lot. And in an attempt to impress, you asked the person at the register "how do you like my car?" And they responded "That's not your car, that's my car." "Your lie would be found out, you might feel a bit sheepish, but other than that you wouldn't have any consequences – you would get your burger, walk out and probably never see that person again.

But as the person you lie to becomes more important the consequences of the lie also increase. If you lie to your husband or wife about what you did last Saturday, and they find out anyway, there is going to be some very seriously hurt feelings and possibly a breach in your relationship – if you do this often enough it could even lead to divorce.

But if you lie to your country, and you are found out, you are charged with the serious offence of perjury or in certain circumstances treason. Crimes like this can lead to imprisonment or even death.

So a lie is a lie, but the consequences depend on who you lied to and what you lied about.

And God is the infinite authority of the universe and so the treason we have committed against Him is deserving of infinite consequences.

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Now perhaps you would give me that, but would respond, isn't God supposed to be a God of love. Can't He just forgive?

If you listened to the news this last week you probably heard about Justin Bourque, a cop-hating, angry 24-year-old man from Monkton Ontario, who killed three police officers and wounded two more in cold blood.

Now, imagine a scenario where Bourque made it to trial and "fortunately" found himself before a "loving" judge who decided he would forgive rather

than impose consequences for what he had done. What would happen? All of Canada would protest that crimes have penalties, love must not overrule justice. This kind of judge would be disbarred.

And it's crazy to think that God would be less just than we are. While God is loving, He also can not allow sin to go unpunished, if He did He would not be good.

Ok, perhaps it's fair for God to punish terrible sinners, but what about the crimes of my grandmother which were nothing like Justin Bourque's. Isn't hell unjust overkill for people like that?

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This objection comes from a misunderstanding not of how bad our crimes are, but of who God is. We like to imagine God as a smiling grandfather who just accepts everything that happens around him probably because he has lost touch with reality. But the Bible describes God as sovereign and holy. That means He hasn't lost touch and He is the definition of everything that is righteous and good. And it also means that He is totally different from us. To depict this Hebrews contrasts God with the rest of creation saying:

Our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29)

(paper to candle) Now this candle is not what I would call a consuming fire, but in respect for the fire department allow your imagination to run wild. What happens when paper comes in contact with fire? (paper to candle) The paper gets destroyed, it gets burnt up. And the reason it gets consumed is that fire and paper are different. Their natures are opposed one to the other.

And this is what it means for God to be holy. The standard of holiness is so hot that the best of us, like Mother Theresa, or the worst of us, like Adolf Hitler, are really the same when compared to God. The Bible affirms all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And because we have sinned we all find ourselves standing like dry paper before an open flame.³

The only way people like us can be around a holy God is for us to take on His nature. We have to become what He is or else we will be consumed by Him. This is why Peter tells us:

Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15-16)

Now there is good news in all this, and that is that hell is escapable. Meaning one has to go there. While we all deserve hell as treasonous sinners in rebellion against a holy God, in His mercy and grace God has made a single way for convicts like us to become holy like Him. And the Bible says if we follow His way

³ Romans 3:23; 6:23

we can escape being consumed by His holiness and punished for our rebellion in hell.

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So how do we receive this undeserved gift of grace? It's not by trying really hard to impress God, that's impossible. The Bible tells us:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In 2nd Corinthians Paul says God sent His perfect, sinless, holy Son Jesus to become sin for you, to take care of not only the “little” sins you have committed, but actually to take care of the desperately wicked and rebellious hearts that lie at the center of all of us. And God sent Jesus to do this for us so that we could become the righteous of God – so that we could become holy.⁴

But in Matthew 7 Jesus says the reality is most people do not want to become what God is. The desperately wicked human heart is offended at the idea that it is not worthy. And just like Adam and Eve took a shot at equality with God on their own terms, Jesus says most people don't want to accept God's terms for how to remedy this problem. Jesus says “beware the wide gate that leads to destruction.”

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And that is the first level of this warning – a level that warns those who have not submitted themselves to God's answer for how to remedy the problem His holiness poses to us sinners.

But the second level of this warning is one that strikes closer to home for most of us. Jesus not only says small is the gate, but also narrow is the road. If the small gate refers to the fact that Christ alone is the way to salvation, the narrow road speaks of the difficulty of following Jesus as a disciple.

We are going to leave this aspect alone for today and pick it up in depth next week.

And that brings us to Jesus' second warning and our last point today. Look with me at verse 15.

[Read Matthew 7:15]

If in the first warning, the wide gate, Jesus urges us to separate ourselves from the worldly majority, here Jesus warns that there are those even within our own ranks who though they look impressive are actually false Christians. While the

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

first warning was against overt enemies, these next enemies are covert operatives.⁵

And Jesus tells us that the difficult thing about these undercover enemies is that they look just like the rest of us – they look like sheep.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus often refers to those who obediently follow Him as sheep, and He contrasts them with goats who know the right answers but don't do the right actions.⁶ But here He talks about false prophets or false teachers and describes them as ferocious wolves.

While both goats and wolves wear sheep's clothing, wolves are not only not sheep but are the mortal enemies of sheep.

When it comes to concerns Jesus has for the church and for His disciples it is interesting to note that this is what is foremost in His mind. Jesus thinks people like this who get into leadership positions in church are as dangerous as it gets.

And that's because if we are to avoid the perils of the wide gate and the broad road we are going to need good leaders – we need to be discipled. We need people like prophets who can go before us calling out truth and urging us towards it. But Jesus says some church leaders don't actually point the sheep to Truth.

So how are we to know which heralds to follow? Jesus says we need to look not at appearances but effects, not at the skin but at the fruit. Look at verses 16 and following.

[Read Matthew 7:16-20]

While sheep aren't known for their cunning intelligence, Jesus says two times that it is not impossible for sheep to tell who the wolves are in their midst. Jesus says don't be deceived by appearances, look at what comes out when your leaders aren't trying.

Fruit trees don't strain to produce fruit – fruit happens. Every tree reproduces naturally in its own kind – there is no way to “fake” your fruit. And Jesus says sheep will be able to tell this. So how do we tell a wolf from a prophet?

There are at least two ways a leader's fruit can be tested. First you have the “gate” test. So does everything they teach point to Christ, His glory and the expanse of His Kingdom? Or does the focus of teaching distract to everything or anything else? Even good things like social justice or missional outreach must be secondary to a focus on Christ and His Kingdom because good prophets lead

⁵ Brunner, D. “The Christbook: Matthew 1-12” (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub Co), 2004. pg 352.

⁶ Matthew 25:31-46

sheep through the small gate. Movement towards any other destination, no matter how good it is, is evidence a ferocious wolf is present.

A second test for sheep-skin wearing wolves is the “road” test. Sheep must both enter through the small gate and walk the narrow road. And so good prophets are those who encourage the sheep to take the high road of obedience to Christ’s commands. In 1st Samuel God said:

To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22 KJV)

And earlier in the Sermon Jesus said:

Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

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One of the first conflicts that the early church encountered with sheep-skin wearing wolves came with the Marcions of the second century. These people taught the love of God but not the fear of God. They taught that God accepted everyone and never judged. And the fruit of this heresy led to unprincipled and immoral living. It led to the disobedience of God’s commands.

And as is often the case if you look at history, the more things change the more they stay the same. And it is this exact position that many people are attacking Christianity with today when they question the justice of hell. They have created a God in their own image who loves and turns a blind eye to sin, in place of the Holy God of scripture.

In contrast to this Jesus says good prophets, good sheep, good disciples are good because they have received a Holy God’s good grace. And then because they have taken His nature they naturally live out goodness to those around them – both giving glory to Christ and obediently following His commands. It is then this goodness lived out that becomes the evidence that in fact they have received good grace.

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Let me conclude by asking you what kind of fruit are you producing? What kind of fruit do you see produced around you here in our community? Is it fruit that points to the small gate of Christ’s salvation and walks the narrow road of obedient discipleship? Or do you find yourself writing off what Jesus says to do your own thing?

Friends it turns out fruit, like truth is more like math than preference; it’s based on facts that naturally show themselves in our lives, not opinions we merely hold in our heads.