Series: From Israel to Everyone: Disciples who Demonstrate God's Presence (a study of Matthew). **Sermon Text:** Matthew 7.13-23 The Narrow Way
(**See App** for lesson, slides, and to ask questions)

The Two Ways: Matthew 7:13–23

A few weeks ago Bill said; "The most important message of the Sermon on the Mount is to prioritize God and heavenly things above everything else, letting His priorities order our priorities". In all honesty, in all the situations and circumstances of adversity in which we find ourselves living life, how hard is that to do? For whatever reasons it's easy to miss the rest of this story; Bill continued; "so that we help creation flourish and right healthy relationships as God designed and all these things will be added unto you". This is important this morning because we're gonna witness the consequences of people who don't follow this guidance.

For sake of drawing some similarities, lemme remind you that:

- Israel was exhausted by Rome's occupation and religious checklists handed down by overlording leaders stacking up achievements toward earning God's favor.
- That Jesus didn't sound like them or behave like them.

As He spoke He put all these deep seeded truths on the bottom shelf, using everyday pictures to show that being a child of the Father is so much deeper than merely imposing and following the rules.

How many have ever skipped to the end of a book to see where things are going? This last section of the Sermon on the Mount is a high impact section, with a hard saying. With areas of scripture like this it's easy to interpret the ethics and morals of them as if we have to do more, try harder, create a list of accomplishments to keep God happy. Sometimes when you begin with the hard saying or the climax of the story and investigate backwards it helps us understand a bit better what God is

actually after. In our lesson this morning we'll see people standing before God holding up resumes: *Didn't we cast out demons? Didn't we do miracles?*

I'm preaching this passage backward today because I don't want us leaving here thinking God wants our resume or more effort per se - even though effort is a good thing in the correct context.

We're starting at the climax of this hard saying to realize right off the bat that what God is always after is our hearts. From the opening blessings on that hillside to these final warnings about wide and narrow paths, Jesus the gatekeeper shows us what a heart for God looks like living day by day under His sovereignty. By the end here, the most piercing question for those hearing in Jesus time and for us this morning is: *Does Jesus know me? Or am I walking as a stranger to Him?*

The answer to this question is our Big Idea: **The Gatekeeper knowing you - or not knowing you - is the essence of entering through the Narrow Gate.**

Put your finger on verse 21. We'll begin with the VERDICT and scariest warning in scripture and work our way backwards to where Jesus warns us not to lean on our spiritual resume in **verses 21 - 23:**

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, 'will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? 'And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Jesus acknowledges that work is good: **"the one who does the will of my Father" implies work.** Jesus identifies with the biblical words these characters speak and the works they perform. In the bible using the double name *"Lord, Lord"* is always

intentional. Jesus used it for intense warning (Simon, Simon), for a gentle rebuke (Martha, Martha), and for life-alteration (Saul, Saul). The same pattern appears with Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Jesus' cry from the cross: *"Abba, Abba."*

The people Jesus refers to point to their impressive spiritual resume: prophesying, driving out demons, doing miracles. These people aren't mockers; they appear to be religious overachievers. Yet Jesus doesn't say, "you veered too far off the path, love the effort but - not enough." Instead, He issues a total verdict over their entire existence: **"I NEVER knew you."**

So what's missing? How can Jesus say this when they've worked so hard? The explanation is in the phrasing, Jesus uses their own words: **"(Did we not do this) - (in Your name)?"** They were using Jesus 'name like a key for status and power for their own good & their glory. They had the utility of religion, but they never had intimacy with God. In this context, "Know" means an intimate, personal family connection, like a shepherd knowing his sheep, like the intimacy of marriage or how parents know their child. He never knew them because they rejected God's true authority over their heart.

Ultimately, the entire divide between these two paths turns on a truth that should grab our attention this morning: **It is entirely possible to build your religion around Jesus and never actually walk in relationship with Him.** But there is still this part of me that can't quite comprehend; How on earth does anyone end up believing they were saved only to hear, I NEVER KNEW YOU?

Let's investigate it: Next, Jesus uses an organic illustration of trees to expose what's happening beneath the surface - the root - inside the heart, and places the responsibility of identifying good fruit from bad right on us.

Find verse 15 in your Bible:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

I imagine a group of desperate people standing at the judgment gate screaming, **"Look at our fruit! Look at our fruit!"** But Jesus is suggesting that these miracles and their efforts for evangelism are equivalent to fake fruit tied to a dead tree. Self-deception rarely looks dangerous at first. 1 Samuel 16:7 reminds us: "The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Jesus draws a sharp line here because counterfeits are dangerous.

Ravenous wolves are deceptive. While Jesus was primarily warning against the religious establishment of His day, His warning is broad enough that it's ever more accurate today. Wolves don't wear name tags or look like monsters. They are as common as next door neighbors or as obvious as prosperity preachers and social media influencers. Looking like model Christians, they mask themselves in morality and spiritual guidance. Outwardly, they have the performance of religion down to a science but inward the heart is completely self-serving, using the name of Jesus to feed their own ego. They need the benefits of the orchard but refuse to submit to the Landowner.

Jesus has spent three chapters contrasting the counterfeit virtues of those unknown to Him against the kingdom virtues of those known by the Father. While the unknown person relies on a performance-based resume, a child of God is poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, and a peacemaker, depraved and leaning entirely on God's mercy.

As Brandon pointed out in Matthew 6, if we perform only for human applause, that applause is our only reward. But people known by the Father treasure the hidden moments, satisfied by knowing He fully sees them.

How does a church family walk such a hard and dangerous path safely?

1. **By learning to identify good fruit from bad:** Looking past performance for Christlike humility, repentance, and self-sacrificing love.
2. **By not walking in isolation:** We need a church family to inspect each other's fruit, pull us back when we stray, and keep us anchored in truth.
3. **By how we treat one another:** Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Having seen the final verdict and recognized the danger of counterfeit fruit, let's investigate all the way back to the entrance of the gate.

Dave covered verse 12 last week, but I'm revisiting it because everything in the Sermon on the Mount so far is summed up in what's known as the **Golden Rule.** Look with me at how verse 12 is the catalyst for Jesus saying "Enter through the Narrow Gate" in verses 13 and 14:

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.
Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Jesus doesn't sugar coat it; IT'S HARD! The world presses in and we make it harder by pressing in on ourselves. Our self-will, our lack of discipline, our own selfish instincts. All these things work against "helping creation flourish in right, healthy relationships as God designed".

Having worked our way backwards, we can now see the contrast between these two ways: It's that our human nature often confuses **performance with presence** and **religion with relationship.** So Jesus exposed the ways of religious pride, warned against the danger of self-deception and clarified the nature of our salvation. Illuminating the facts that the hardness of the narrow way isn't about earning salvation through legalistic grit; **it is hard because genuine relational intimacy requires the death of our ego.**

Which is why only few find it. Jesus implies that only a "few" are willing to accept the humility of walking in and with Him, totally dependent on His righteousness. Like Adam and Eve walking in the orchard with God, naked, in right relationship with Him and with each other. Maybe you can see the hope in this verse; "for the gate is narrow and the way is hard **that leads to life-giving relationship".**

The gate is Jesus and the way through it is being known, but here's what's also clearly implied in all this: how we navigate the journey along the way matters to our discovery of being known. How do we walk that out day by day with equanimity to enter that "Narrow Gate"? I learned a new word! It means "with composure, calmness, serenity, or poise" and has everything to do with being in right relationship with God and with others…even with the wolves…even with our enemies.

Verse 12 is our compass: "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them." It isn't polite advice or a moral suggestion; it defines the righteousness of the narrow gate and the daily ethic of a heart stripped of self-righteousness:

- **At Work or School:** You refuse to take part in gossip or build your status on someone else's blunder. You extend the same mercy you hope for when you blunder.
- **At Home:** You stop counting who sacrificed more and lead with the patience, grace and mercy Christ has shown you.

Now, as vital as it is to be known by Jesus, it's equally vital to be known by one another. When we live inside this self-sacrificing ethic, we prove the narrow path is also the place where joy is experienced, true life is found, and real family is built even in tribulation, oppression and affliction.

"I never knew you, depart from me you workers of lawlessness" sounds harsh, but it's God's righteous judgment. If Jesus had said, **"You didn't do enough miracles or keep enough rules or you veered off",** we would all be hopelessly damned. But Jesus didn't reject them for a lack of religious activity, He rejected them for a **lack of intimacy**.

The good news behind this terrifying warning is that Jesus isn't asking for your resume or for you to prove how clean or accomplished you are. Jesus is inviting us to drop the performance mantra and apply the Golden rule mantra, lay down your self-righteousness, and walk the path with each other to the Narrow Gate as people who simply need to be fully seen, fully loved, fully known, and fully saved by Jesus. He endured the ultimate "I never knew you" and was stripped naked of His dignity on the cross which proved we don't have to perform for a God who already knows every messy thing about us and still bled to make us His own.

Conclusion: Because we are fully seen, fully known, and fully loved by our Father in heaven, we are finally set free to fully see, fully know, and fully love each other. In your small group or over coffee as we take our steps together this week, dare to share those areas where you might be struggling or where your life may be messy or even where you need help.

Next Sunday, we'll wrap up Chapter 7 by taking a sobering look at the Two Builders. We'll expose the tragic difference between a life built on the shifting sand of empty performance, and a life of true obedience anchored forever on the Solid Rock of Christ.

Sunday to Monday Connection: Jesus isn't looking for an impressive spiritual resume. He's inviting us into a real relationship with Him. The narrow way isn't about earning God's favor by trying harder, but about living each day dependent on Christ's grace.

- **Question**: Where might you be relying more on your religious performance than on a daily relationship with Jesus?
- **Next Step**: Because we are fully known and loved by Jesus, we're free to love others with humility, mercy, and grace. This week let's move beyond simply talking about Jesus and let His love shape how we treat the people around us.
- **Note**: If you are not a Christ follower and would like to explore what all this might mean for you, please speak with someone you know here or one of our church leaders.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. Why is the "narrow gate" so culturally offensive or unpopular today, and what makes the "wide gate" so attractive to our human nature?
2. What specific "fruit" (i.e. fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5) should we look for to discern trustworthy spiritual teachers from false ones?
3. What does Jesus mean when He bases eternal life on whether He "knew" someone, rather than what that person accomplished in His name?
4. Review the books, podcasts, and spiritual voices you consume most frequently, evaluating them not by their charisma or popularity, but by the fruit of their character and conformity to Scripture.

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- Bible Project - Gospel of the Kingdom Videos and Podcast episodes.
- Bible Project - Heaven and Earth Videos and Podcast episodes.
- Bible Project - Temple Videos.
- Bible Project – Day of the Lord Podcast episodes.

Quotes related to this passage:

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