

SLIDE 1

It's What's Inside That Counts
Matthew 7:21-23
West Valley Presbyterian Church, November 12, 2023

It's been a couple of weeks since we last heard from Jesus' sermon, right? Last week was All Saints Sunday, and the previous week we were blessed with Teen Challenge. So this is now 3 weeks since we heard Destiny Robles speak about the good tree bearing good fruit (defined by the Fruit of the Spirit that Paul speaks about), and the bad tree bearing bad fruit. Jesus' point was that sometimes it's not obvious whether a person is trustworthy, just by looking at them or listening to them. The way we can recognize a trustworthy person is by looking at what they do. If their actions line up with what Jesus tells us to do, then they are trustworthy. If their actions do NOT line up with what Jesus tells us to do, then they are not trustworthy.

But what if their actions aren't what they seem to be? What if there are worms in the apples, so to speak? Today's passage is one that makes me squirm, because it's about Christian leaders who seem to be doing very good things, and yet they aren't. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Matthew 7:21-23:

SLIDES 2-4

"Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Here ends the reading of God's holy word. (Thanks be to God.)

I have to say, this is one of the passages that makes me really uncomfortable. As it should; it's addressed to religious leaders. Pastors aren't expected to be prophets; but we are expected to interpret God's word in Scripture as accurately as we can. Pastors aren't expected to be exorcists or miracle workers; but we are expected to oppose that which is evil, and we are expected to pray for people in Jesus' name. The vast majority of the pastors that I know are sincere Christians, who love the Lord and do their best to meet those expectations. The vast majority, including me, pray along with Thomas Merton: "The fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing."

However, as we all know, there are some spiritual leaders out there who are more driven by their desire to please themselves, than they are by a desire to please God. For example, I've known a few who have engaged in sexual misconduct with members of the congregation and were forced to resign their pastorates as a consequence. And that's appropriate. Why should people listen to you if they can't trust you?

But still. Leaders or not, the fact is that none of us are perfect. There are worms in the apples. Each one of us here today has a ministry of some kind; and none of us do our ministries perfectly. Maybe we don't always remember when it's our turn to bring the donuts. Maybe we don't always say the right thing when someone is upset or angry with us. Maybe we don't always make the best decisions, and then we try to justify ourselves rather than apologizing and trying to fix the problem we've caused. We've all done those things, including me. But are we really so evil that Jesus would say to us, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers"?

Well, context is important here, to interpret this passage accurately. It comes right at the end of the Sermon on the Mount; so all the things that Jesus has said before he gets to this point are the context for what he says here. For example, remember back in Matthew 6 when Jesus told us not to practice our righteousness in front of others, to be seen by them? And he expanded that by telling us to make our charitable contributions secretly, and pray secretly, and fast secretly? His point was that if we make a big public deal about any of our spiritual practices, then we've received our reward already, and we don't get a reward from God.

That applies here. The people Jesus describes in this passage have made a big deal about their discipleship. When they say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?" – they do sound as though they had been showing off, don't they? Maybe today's equivalent would be, "Look at all the things I did! Why, I had a following of tens of thousands on Tiktok. I influenced a lot of people for you!" It's very possible that the people Jesus is describing in today's passage were more interested in attracting attention to themselves, than they were in asking Jesus what he wants them to do. Perhaps Jesus says, "I never knew you," to them, because they never wanted to be known by Jesus. Perhaps they only wanted to be known by the people around them.

And maybe you remember in Chapter 7, vv 7-12, which we discussed four weeks ago, where Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,"? Well, it doesn't sound like the people who were told to go away, ever actually asked Jesus what he wanted them to do. If they'd asked God what he wanted, I'm sure God would have answered! Jesus is clear in his Sermon on the Mount about what God wants of us; and it's mostly the low-key, relationship tasks. Maybe, for instance, instead of prophesying, maybe God wanted them to stop being angry at other people! Which is a lot harder than prophesying is! And, doing the low-key relationship building IS what Jesus asks of us, because it's a LOT more important to the spiritual growth of God's people.

Jesus has quite a lot to say in his Sermon, about what DOES please God. For instance, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." Or, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Or, "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Or, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." Or, "First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Nowhere in the Sermon on the Mount does Jesus say, “I want you all to prophesy and drive out demons and perform miracles.” Those are specific tasks that some people may occasionally be called to do, as we saw in the Book of Acts; but those tasks are neither better nor worse than other tasks that people are called to do, such as being an honest lawyer or a skilled teacher or a truthful scientist. What matters is our obedience to God, in whatever our tasks may be. What Jesus does say is really clear. “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Be merciful, and you will be shown mercy. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness first. That’s what a true disciple is like.

Okay. So that’s the context of what Jesus said about true and false disciples in today’s passage. Do you still feel a little anxious about Jesus saying, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven’”? Well, good! Jesus wants us to pay attention. He is warning us, because he loves us. We’ve all warned our children not to do something that would harm them or get them into trouble, right? We don’t want them to get hit by a car or caught up in the drug trade, for instance! We want them to study hard, get along with others, eat their vegetables and get enough sleep, because that’s what’s best for them. And so we warn them because we love them.

Jesus is doing the same thing. He warns us because he loves us. He knows that following the will of our Father in heaven is what’s best for us. And so he warns us of what will happen if we don’t do what God wants us to do – if we don’t do the quiet things like forgiving our enemies and letting go of financial worries, and instead of that we do the flashy stuff like prophecy and miracles. And that applies to us as a church, as well as to us individually. Jesus also warns us as a church, because he loves us. He wants us as a church to do things like settle our disagreements quickly, and pray for the people who work against us, and give quietly to the needy, and not worry about tomorrow. It’s what’s inside our souls that counts, not the outside things that others can see and praise us for.

So if it’s what’s inside us that counts, then what can we do to fix our souls? To get the worms out of the apples, so to speak? Well, WE can’t fix ourselves. We don’t know where the worms are or how big they are. But God sees us, a lot better than we can see ourselves. He can fix us; and he will, if we can trust his mercy and open ourselves to him. Do you remember the first part of Chapter 5, that we studied months ago? The Beatitudes? Let’s read them out loud together:

SLIDES 5 - 8

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

These are the blessings that God wants for us, as individuals and as a church. When we are humble, ours is the kingdom of heaven. And we will hear, "Welcome, good and faithful servant," not, "I never knew you." When we are merciful, we will ourselves receive mercy. When we make peace with one another, we are behaving as God's children. And if we get into trouble for living as God wants us to do, then so be it, because ours is the kingdom of heaven.

SLIDE 9

So let's come before the Lord, and open our souls to him, and trust him to restore our souls in whatever way we most need. Let's pray.

Merciful God, you know us far better than we know ourselves. We want to draw closer to you now, and remain with you forever. And so we ask that your Holy Spirit would make us known to ourselves; and in your great compassion, cleanse us from our sin. May we truly love you with pure and undivided hearts. May we learn to love our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to forgive all who have harmed us; help us to let go of the annoyances that distract us. Open our hearts to whatever you would ask of us. And by your grace, help us to follow wherever you lead us. For we know that your love for us is greater than we can understand or imagine. In the name of Jesus Christ, whose followers we are, we offer our prayers to you now. Amen.