

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

The Will to Live the Good Life

Matthew 7.12ff; Ezekiel 36.26-27; Romans 8.12-14

4.10.22

"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

¹³ *"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴ "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

¹⁵ *"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ "So then, you will know them by their fruits.*

²¹ *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'*

²⁴ *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell-- and great was its fall."*

²⁸ *When Jesus had **finished** these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; ²⁹ for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (Ezekiel 36.25-27)

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (Romans 8.12-14)

We're looking at *The Sermon on the Mount*, and again we find words that remain in our own cultural vocabulary... even as seemingly fewer people are familiar with the Bible: "the narrow

way”, “wolves in sheep’s clothing”, “built on sand”...all come from this closing section of the *Sermon on the Mount*.

This is what we might call the application part of this best-known sermon of all time. AND, in some ways, it APPEARS that Jesus Christ is reversing course. Where He began with these blessings pronounced on underdogs and failures (the poor, the mournful, the meek and hungry) but NOW He seems to focus on the strong and obedient and good.

As we “look under the hood” of this section, we find a final and climactic push *in the same direction Jesus has taken from the start*. He describes, now applies His vision of HUMAN FLOURISHING. This is the Good Life; this is righteousness for weak, failed people, a kind of goodness that even spiritual experts can’t achieve but is still required for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

In this application section the finishing touches come by way of metaphors or word pictures, images meant to really drive home the Big Ideas.

So let’s look at the:

- 1) Concluding Metaphors**
- 2) The Final Punctuation**
- 3) The End of the Sermon**

Jonathan Pennington, the Baptist professor who’s been such an enormous help to me in this study, points out the long-standing tradition of using these final figures of speech to promote behaviorism in the church. “Stay on the straight and narrow” came to mean, “shape up and don’t dance or chew tobacco” or whatever BUT the big point Jesus Christ has been making is that external behavior (like He saw in the spiritual experts) doesn’t satisfy God’s Law. There must be whole-person righteousness.

And IF we look at these metaphors/figures of speech THAT way (i.e. in keeping with the whole sermon) the metaphors contradict mere behavioral correctness.

There are three main images, starting with Two Gates, then Two Prophets (compared to wolves and trees) and finally (v. 24) Two Foundations. AND what do the three pictures have in common?

Well... the wide way SEEMS like the way to go. If you were in a massive crowd of people flooding out of a stadium and to the side you saw a single-file-line inching out through a turnstile... YOU WOULD expect the best way out would be the wide, open path and NOT the narrow, slow way.

When you’re a sheep and you’re approached by a fellow-sheep you’d expect to find a friend BUT below the surface appearance you might find a wolf only disguised as a fellow sheep.

Changing the outer appearance of the wolf doesn't make him a friend to the sheep...the wolf's ravenous nature remains.

You can tape or glue grapes onto a thorn bush but that doesn't change the nature of the bush – a rotted or decayed tree bears bad fruit and a good tree bears good fruit (no matter the look of the tree – the nature of the tree is deeper).

And when it comes to false prophets, the look of flashy miraculous stuff – prophesying, casting out demons, performing miracles is what gets people's attention – but it's NOT where we should be looking. We should look deeper beyond surface drama down to the whole person.

And finally, Jesus uses the image/metaphor of two builders. The houses look the same on the outside...but deeper, at the foundation, where we don't see, there are differences. When the storm comes (probably an image for final judgment) the differences will be known. The house founded on the rock, the life based on Jesus Christ's words will be standing and the other will have a great crash! Soooo....

Q: What do all these pictures have in common?

A: What you see ain't always what you get.

There's something much more important than the obvious. Sometimes, what we see doesn't tell the whole story and sometimes it tells the opposite story of what we expected. The narrow gate looks slower and less comfortable but in fact it leads to life.

The spiritual masters, the clergymen (scribes and Pharisees) were actually masters of disguise and NOT masters of piety and holiness and Law-keeping. AND in a great, stinging irony, Jesus says of them, "You who practice lawlessness!"

And of course they're hearing this and thinking, "Hey, Jesus! Accuse us of anything but NOT of the one thing that's our specialty – keeping God's Law – is what we do... perfectly!"

And Jesus would say, "Yes... you do amazingly well...by all APPEARANCES... but I judge NOT by surface appearance but by the true NATURE of a person...the character...the heart... And I, as Giver of the Law, can see that your "Law-Keeping" is an unholy farce...and a disguise meant to gain you social capital...in reality you're LAWLESS."

"And at the end of time whoever keeps the Law in the lawless way YOU DO will hear the words: 'I never knew you... Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

"I never knew you" ... the word "know" in the Bible can imply intimacy (carnal knowledge – "the man knew his wife and she conceived and bore a son" Gen 4.1). See, they act like they're

intimate friends of Jesus (“Lord, Lord” like God to Abraham, “Abram, Abram” or “Absalom, Absalom” – tender and familial) but they are not intimate with Jesus – “I never knew you...”

Now, here we are at the close of this most famous sermon. Jesus Christ has said, “I have shown you My idea of the Good Life – i.e. living as God commands... living in whole-person love for God and for people – NOT simply outward compliance with the Law on the surface but a deeper level (foundation, the nature of the tree, intimacy).

The modern reader gets to the end of the Sermon on the Mount...it seems to be lacking a punctuation mark: TWO. The first is a huge exclamation point – “The crowds were amazed (lit “knocked OUT!”) at His teaching for He was teaching as One with authority and NOT as their scholars.” WOW! (Exclamation point!)

This Teacher seems to speak as if He’d given the Law... and as if His words were equal in authority to the Law itself. AND it’s as if He’s the One before whom all people will stand on the last day, “Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord...” as if He IS Messiah, the Final Judge (!)

But the bigger omission is a question mark. For me, the Sermon of the Mount ends like the Hebrew Bible: where’s the next page? How can this BE? Is Jesus Christ not telling us something?

How could I possibly be externally who I am internally? How could I do when there’s NO ONE there to watch me...what God wants me to do? How could I possibly WANT to do what I also HAVE TO DO?

I would have to be a whole person, integrated, mature, undivided between my obligations and my desires... but I can’t change my desires... Maybe my behaviors... even my habits (maybe) but my desires – I’m powerless.

There’s something missing in this Sermon? (Just as the OT ends and the reader turns the page desperately looking for the conclusion -?) If the Lebron Jameses of RIGHTEOUSNESS, the scribes and priests whose whole lives were devoted to God and righteousness (clothing, money, hygiene, families, relationships, work/rest and use of time, prayers and everything) but they’re still denounced as lawless and fruitless – what about ME?

But this is Jesus Christ’s explanation of the New Covenant, those stunning promises found in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 where God promises help from out of this world.

“I will give you a new heart, a new spirit... I will put MY SPIRIT within you and CAUSE YOU TO WALK IN MY SATUTES...” In other words, I will give you the WILL TO LIVE THE GOOD LIFE...

But, how does that happen?

I'm glad you asked! See, a Man has to pick up the ball that the first man dropped. A New Adam must come to keep the agreement between God and man.

If that agreement is not kept...the infinitely glorious plan of God for the great destiny of this planet will remain sealed... with Seven Seals that no one can open. A true, flesh and blood human will have to come and face the great fork in the road... to believe God and thus to obey Him from the heart (as our first parents *failed* to do). Someone will have to pray the prayer, "NOT MY WILL BUT YOUR'S BE DONE!"

Jesus Christ went into the Garden and prayed that very prayer... He represents a new race of people... an international Nation made up of people from every tribe, country and language... NOT GOOD PEOPLE but needy, frustrated, inwardly divided and morally bankrupt people (as He described at the start of the Sermon on the Mount).

When that New Adam comes and lives the life I was required to live (but didn't) and dies the death that I deserved to die... THEN... *because He had no sin but actually LIVED in perfect, whole-person completeness like God the father is complete* – when He dies, a sacrifice for sin, death will not be able to HOLD HIM.

He'll rise, ascend into heaven and pour out the Spirit of Holiness on everyone who's desperate for a right relationship with God...and HE, the Spirit of Holiness will come and live IN those who TRUST in Jesus Christ, the New Adam.

The Sermon on the Mount looks back to these New Covenant promises (e.g. Ezekiel and Jeremiah) AND looks forward to Pentecost when "a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns (total power) and seven eyes (complete knowledge), which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth" (Rev 5.6). Jesus Christ, the Teacher with authority IS the Lion of Judah who satisfied the agreement and sends the Spirit to weak people.

St. Paul saw this when He wrote, "If you live by the flesh – which CAN look pretty religious and righteous – you must die... but IF by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body YOU WILL LIVE!"

See?...It's NOT... IF by willpower or by doing all the right rituals or if by fear of getting caught or IF BY A DESIRE TO AVOID HELL or if by a hope of earning people's respect – NO! "If BY THE SPIRIT you mortify the flesh."

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we get the Spirit who begins to put the old me (The Imposter!), the T.J. who was represented by Adam – the Spirit puts that T.J. and his splintered, messed up desires to death.

God, because of Jesus, declares me righteous and then God, the Holy Spirit, goes about shaping me into whom God has declared me to be... I'm becoming in practice what God has declared and destined me to be. Those who know this dynamic and who continue to repent and believe in Jesus, they are the free sons of God... It's why Paul could also say, *"work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."* (Phi 2.12-13)

Now, my final and briefest point: what is the end of the sermon – and I mean the goal (chief end) or the aim or the "means and the end". What should it do in us?

Well, it enables us to live in that uncomfortable tension between, "Judge not" and "by their fruits you will know them." Not everyone who claims he's a believer in Jesus really is. I can't be a spiritual Zorro going around slashing people (unless that's how I want to be judged!) but sometimes I can't ignore that this or that person is living by sweat not the Spirit... or by a desire for respect... or fear.

It enables ME to self-analyze without being morbidly introspective. I think the Spirit lives in me... but I do want to see His fruit more evident in my life... I got the Spirit (at the start) by repenting and believing the gospel...(at the start) but now that I'm down the road a bit... NOW...I get the Spirit... Yep! By repenting and believing the good news. When I discover sin in my life, my first inclination is try harder but that's the wide way that leads to destruction – the Spirit comes as we repent and believe.

Third, Jesus Christ is the very image of the invisible God – He is the Law-Giver and the Law-Keeper, the Judge and the One who IS JUDGED for all His people so we're on the right track if we plug our ears to other "saviors" and run with our eyes on Him.

He said, *"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who remains in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."* (John 15.5)

The will to live the Good Life...and the power to live this way... it depends on the Spirit – He gives us a new nature... He turns a bad tree good... He, the Spirit, is the answer to the final question mark – and we get the Spirit by first repenting and believing in Jesus and then repenting/believing again and again and again...