

**Matthew 7:21-27**  
**Beware of Self Deception**  
*Many will say to me in that day... v. 21*

I believe the key to this final section of the sermon on the mount is found in verses 13,14 where Christ issues His final exhortation: *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide [is] the gate, and broad [is] the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait [is] the gate, and narrow [is] the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*

In the verses that follow Christ is explaining just how strait and how narrow the way is that leads to life. The reason that so few find it is because it runs contrary to the sinful nature of man. We have seen throughout the course of this sermon how this entire sermon from the very beginning and throughout runs contrary to the thinking of the natural man. To add to that difficulty we saw in our last study that there has been and there will be false prophets – false prophets that will encourage men into thinking that the broad way is the right way – false prophets that will endeavor to convince men and women and boys and girls that the road that leads to hell really leads to heaven and that the road that leads to heaven is undesirable.

We come now to verses 21 and following in which the Lord shows that the strait gate and the narrow way is even narrower still. In addition to man's sinful nature and the presence of false prophets we discover in these verses a common tendency for sinners to deceive themselves. The scene described by our Lord is one of the most tragic scenes conceivable in all of the Bible.

The Lord Jesus carries us forward to the day of judgment. That day will be fearful. The dead, small and great will be present on that day. Sinners who thought they had gotten away with their sin in life will awake to the awful truth that their sins have been found out and now must be accounted for. *They were judged every man according to their works* we read in Rev. 20:13. Every knee will bow to Christ on that day – every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord on that day. It will be a day of fear and trembling of such a nature that the natural man does all he can to try to suppress his innate knowledge of that day.

But to add to the tragedy of that day we discover those that are now being described by Christ in the closing remarks of His sermon who thought they were ready for that day. These are not wicked sinners by men's standards – quite the contrary, they're religious sinners. Indeed as we'll see you could call them orthodox Christians. They confess Christ as Lord. They perform deeds that require supernatural power and they perform many good works. And yet in the end they're lost – in the end they must depart from Christ – in the end Christ Himself calls them *workers of iniquity*.

The response of Nicodemus to Christ seems like an appropriate response to this portion of Christ's sermon when Nicodemus asks with regard to another subject – *how can these things be?* How can those that call Christ *Lord* be lost? How can those that cast out devils

be cast into the same place with those devils? How can those who perform good works be judged as workers of iniquity in that day? The answer to these questions must be found in the fact that these orthodox and religious sinners deceived themselves. They thought they were Christians but they were not. They thought they would be accepted by Christ but they weren't accepted. They thought they could impress Christ but they couldn't.

This awful scene certainly adds to the dread of that judgment day. That day will prove to be a day of surprises. Those who in some cases were highly esteemed by men will not be esteemed at all by Christ. Do you begin to see just how strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life? Do you begin to see what so many that profess the name of Christ don't to see which is the need for self-examination.

As dreadful as the day of judgment will be there is grace in these words of Christ. We're being warned ahead of time about the things that will be revealed on that day. We're being given the opportunity now to make sure that we don't enter the ranks of those that say *Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works?* It must be now, during our days on earth, that we must exercise the proper scrutiny to make our calling and election sure. Only by taking Christ's solemn warning to heart and making the right application to our lives can we avoid what will be the awful tragedy of that day when Christ says *depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*

We see, then, that in addition to His warning about false prophets Christ also issues a warning about self-deception. And this is what I want to focus on today – this theme of self deception. We must beware, not only of our sinful natures which have the natural propensity to follow the broad way leading to destruction and we must beware, not only of the false prophets that will endeavor to keep us on that broad road – but now we come to learn from Christ that:

### We Must Beware of the Awful Practice of Self Deception

Too much is at stake for your soul to treat such a subject casually. And yet unfortunately the ones that need to give the most attention to such a matter are the same ones that try to skirt the issue altogether. May the Lord Himself give you the grace to heed His word this morning as we analyze this theme of self deception. Think with me first of all on:

#### I. The Subtlety of Self-Deception

The thing that makes this passage so dreadful is the subtlety that underlies it all. There is so much, in other words, about these ones that stand before the Lord on the day of judgment that looks right.

Would you notice that they make the right confession. They say in v. 22 *Lord, Lord.* The implication is that they had always acknowledged the Lordship of Christ. Unlike others who would have never confessed Him to be Lord until the judgment day, the implication in this case is that these subjects had been acknowledging His Lordship during their days

on earth. They had knowledge, in other words, of who Christ was and they gave assent to the truth of it. They were familiar with His name so that the things they did were in His name. They would have acknowledged Christ, therefore, to be the Son of God and the Son of man. They would have given assent to His virgin birth, His substitutionary atonement and His bodily resurrection.

I've met people like this – perhaps you have too. They'll give assent to the truth of Christ and yet they're not Christians. They'll confess Him to be Lord and yet it is not hard to see that their assent to the person and work of Christ is not the driving force in their lives. His Lordship may be an important peripheral to their lives but at the end of the day it is their own selves that still lie at the core of their being. In other words they have never vacated the throne of their own hearts in order to yield that throne to Christ – they simply believe that He exists and that He's very important.

They may even be familiar with the verses in the New Testament that place an emphasis on believing in Him. John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* They know that verse and others that could be cross referenced to that verse. They are familiar with the promises of life that are connected to believing in Jesus Christ. *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved* – Acts 16:31.

The problem with such people as these is not to be found in their knowledge. They know about Christ, they've learned about salvation. The problem is that they never take to heart the calls for self examination in order to measure how their assent to the truth has effected their lives. And in all too many cases their lives have not been effected all that much if they've been effected at all.

And unfortunately our weak Christian culture countenances this sort of thing. The gospel is ministered in such a way that all that's called for is assent to the truth and once you've given that assent you're assured by the preacher or by the evangelist that you're saved and don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

How tragic it will be for such self deceived Christians, so called, to learn from Christ Himself that they're lost. How much better it would have been for them to take heed to Christ's warning about self deception. And the deception in this instance is the deception of thinking that it's possible to be saved without having your life effected by salvation.

We've touched on this matter in previous studies. Indeed Christ has made it a point of emphasis earlier in His sermon. And so we learned back in 6:14,15 that you cannot be truly forgiven of your sins by God without being effected enough by it to enable you to forgive others. So in the case before us now – you cannot simply give assent to the truth of Christ and be saved without having your life effected by it. Such a thing amounts to a denial of the power of the gospel.

The matter becomes even more subtle and dangerous, however, by noting that in the case before us presented by the Lord, those that confessed His name also were engaged in works. They prophesied in His name. They cast out devils in His name. They did many

wonderful works in His name we read in v. 22. So what we have before us is not simply a case of empty professions. We find orthodox professions of faith along with works – works done in the name of Christ – some works even of a supernatural nature – and yet the result is still that these people are lost. These statements by Christ ought to make you uncomfortable. Like the disciples in Mt. 19 we should be amazed and should ask, as they did – *who then can be saved?* (Mt. 19:25). I'll get to that question in due course but in the mean time I want you to see how the subtle danger of self deception becomes all the more magnified when you learn from Christ how many fall prey to it. This leads to my next consideration. We've seen the subtlety of self deception – would you consider next:

## II. The Prevalence of Self Deception

Would you notice from v. 22 that Christ says *Many. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord.* Christ does not say that it will be only a few. He does not teach that it will be the odd one here and there that stands before the Lord the way these ones in the text do. He indicates very plainly that there will be many that fall prey to self deception – there will be many that thought they were saved but in fact were lost.

In Luke's gospel chp. 13 we have the account of a very interesting question being put to Christ. It's a question that comes from someone in the crowd. We don't even know who he was but in v. 23 of that chapter we read – *Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved?* I say this is an interesting question because there are a couple of ways such a question can be analyzed.

If you analyze it in terms of some of the parables of Christ it would lead you to conclude that there will be many that will be saved. The kingdom of heaven is likened to a mustard seed that grows into a great tree and it's also likened to leaven which completely permeates 3 measures of meal. These pictures depict the growth and success of the kingdom of heaven.

Add to these parables such statements as the one we find in Rev. 7:9,10 *After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.* These are the kinds of statements that lead you to conclude that many will be saved.

By way of contrast, however, are such statements from Christ that *many are called but few are chosen* (20:16; 22:14) – as well as the statement we now find in our text that *many* will be self deceived – thinking they're saved when really they're lost. And so we find statements that indicate that many are saved but we also find statements that few are saved. The same question about how many are saved can be analyzed not only in terms of what the Scriptures say but also in terms of what we see.

We see many churches across America today. We see churches of every size and shape. We see mega-churches – we learn of house churches and we see everything in between in

terms of size and style and methods etc. And we see evangelistic crusades and revival meetings as they're called. See the large number of people that go forward at the invitation at the end of the evangelistic crusade. Look at the numbers that churches post about how many hundreds and thousands of souls are being saved. Surely the answer to the question is that many will be saved.

But then we look a little deeper and see beyond the numbers and we're led to say – look at how prevalent sin is in the church. Look at how many Christians, so called, are divorced or are guilty of marital infidelity. What sins in the world can you not find in the church these days? In terms of the impact that the gospel has on peoples lives we are led to say surely there are only a few that are saved.

It's interesting to note that when that question was put to Christ He didn't answer it by saying there will be many or there will be only a few that are saved. The Lord instead seemed to gaze right at the one asking the question and He made it a personal and individual question by saying to the inquirer and those around him: *strive to enter at the strait gate*. That's Christ's answer. The important thing is not how many or how few the important thing is that you personally strive to enter at the strait gate and in your striving be willing to examine yourself – be willing to make your calling and election sure – be aware that however many or how few are saved Christ says that there will be many that will think they're saved but really won't be. *Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord.*

Orthodoxy will certainly be required. There will not be any that enter heaven without confessing that Jesus is Lord – there will not be any that enter heaven who deny that He's the Son of God and Son of man – there will not be any that enter heaven without acknowledging the truth of salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Such things are required – the point the Lord is making, however, is that such things are not sufficient. It is not merely an orthodox profession that gains heaven nor is it an orthodox profession that may be accompanied the good works.

There are many things that can function as false guides for assurance. Lloyd-Jones makes an interesting observation when he notes that even legitimate things that pertain to the Christian life become dangerous when they're not viewed from the right perspective. The gate is strait and the way is narrow that leads to life. The way is broad that leads to destruction and a major contributing factor that will lead many to destruction is self deception. It remains for us to consider, therefore:

### III. The Key to Avoiding Self Deception

What is it in the end that leads to the condemnation of these self deceived Christians? It isn't the fact that they make a right confession – salvation depends upon a right confession of Christ – nor is their condemnation due to the works they performed in Christ's name – faith without works is dead, James tells us.

The reason that these self deceived men and women are lost is because Christ doesn't know them. *And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you.* And as Dr. Cairns once

said with regard to this verse that if these people were honest they would also have to say that they never knew Christ either.

They knew about Him. They knew many things about Him and their knowledge was accurate but they never knew Him personally. There was never any true relationship between them and Christ. And without that relationship the works that may be done in His name simply do not count. They may be amazing works – they may be supernatural works – they may be many wonderful works but they are not works that are grounded in a right union to Christ.

If I could express the issue theologically I think it could be said that these self deceived sinners never truly understood the grounds for their acceptance with Christ and so they make the tragic mistake of thinking that the fruit of that acceptance was the means to their acceptance. This may seem like just so much theological hair-splitting but as our text indicates to us it's very important hair-splitting if we must call it that. You could say that there's a definite sense in which justification and sanctification are confused by those that are self deceived.

Do you see how their plea before Christ is based on their knowledge or their activities? And even though their knowledge is accurate and their activities before men might be laudable – Christ sees them as workers of iniquity. *Depart from me, ye that work iniquity* (v. 23).

I can think of no clearer statement in all the New Testament that demonstrates that our works – our good works – even our best works – the works we would endeavor to do in the name of Christ have no intrinsic merit in and of themselves. *I find then a law*, Paul writes in Rom. 7:21 *that, when I would do good, evil is present with me*. Our best works have escaped the presence of evil – our faith in Christ is even tainted with sin. This is why it becomes a subtle matter but a crucially important matter that we understand the gospel correctly. And the gospel teaches us that the only way we personally gain acceptance with God and the only way our works will be accepted with God will be for those works to be grounded in what Christ has done.

The right answer, therefore, on the day of judgment will not be to plead the extensiveness of your intellect or the quantity or quality of your deeds. The right response will be to plead the merits of Christ's blood over all that you are and all that you have done. *Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man [whom] thou madest strong for thyself* we read in Ps 80:17. There is the right plea for the sinner. *Lord, look to thy Son and see me in Him. Look to thy Son and accept me and accept my service based on His merits not based on mine*.

I hope you begin to see, then, the importance of being grounded in the gospel. It is possible to know so much and yet still be lost. It is possible to do much and still be lost. It is possible to know and do much and still be condemned at the end of the day. The call, therefore, is to examine yourselves in the light of who Christ is and what Christ has done. Do you believe in Christ? Is He the hope of your salvation? You must believe in Him to be

saved – but your faith must be such that your life is effected by it and you must guard yourself against self deception. In won't due to say in your pride – I will never fall. *Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall* Paul warns. You need to be honest enough with yourself to recognize the propensity of your sin nature to lead you astray. And you must be sure that you understand the grounds for your acceptance is in Christ's person and work. In that sense it is not even faith that saves, it's Christ that saves. And you must beware of the subtle matter of confusing the grounds for your salvation with the means to your salvation.

Faith is the means to salvation but don't make the mistake of thinking that it's the merit of faith that saves. It's Christ's merit that saves. Faith is simply the means to disowning your own merit in order to freely receive the merit of Christ. And if you're hope for heaven is made sure based on His merit then your faith will show itself by what you do and what you avoid doing.

May the Lord help us all, then, to avoid our pride and our sinful propensity to take something as simple and sublime as the gospel of Jesus Christ and make it the instrument of our damnation rather than our salvation.