

A CURIOUS KINGDOM
Obedient Disciples
Matthew 7:13-23
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Our summer preaching series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is nearing its end. Jesus covers a lot of ground in Matthew chapters 5-7, but everything He says reinforces two overarching themes: the **Nature of Jesus' Kingdom**—what Jesus Kingdom looks like—and the **Nature of discipleship**—what followers of Jesus look like. Highlighting these themes, Dallas Willard says the basic message of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is: *"Rethink your life in the light of the fact that kingdom of the heavens is now open to all."*

The Sermon on the Mount has always held a place of priority for followers of Jesus and specifically for the Brethren in Christ. The early Brethren in Christ were known as "people of the Book" because of their commitment to faithfully live out the truths of Scripture and the teaching of Jesus. I've always loved that nickname.

In 2 Timothy 3:16 the Apostle Paul writes, *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* All of the Bible—including some of the more challenging Old Testament books like Leviticus, Ezekiel and Habakkuk are inspired by God—but the Brethren in Christ have historically given greater attention to the New Testament where Jesus is revealed, the Holy Spirit is explained and followers of Jesus are instructed how to live as disciples of Jesus. Within the New Testament, we've given a special place to the Gospels and Acts because they provide us with details of Jesus' life and ministry and contain his teaching. And within the Gospels, the Brethren in Christ have viewed The Sermon on the Mount as central to our lives as Jesus' followers, because in these chapters Jesus explains what it looks like to faithfully follow Him. I share that framework with you not to try and make the case that our denomination is superior to others, but to help you understand how central The Sermon on the Mount has been and continues to be for us as followers of Jesus.

Jesus concludes The Sermon on the Mount with 4 contrasting word pictures that explain what it does and doesn't look like for us to live as obedient disciples of Jesus. We'll

look at three of those pictures today and the final one next week. The 3 images we'll focus on today are: the narrow gate and the broad gate, good trees and bad trees and true disciples and false disciples. Next week we'll focus on wise and the foolish builders.

One of the things that most intrigues me about Scripture is the way in which portions of the Bible in one place fit with other sections. In his book, The Divine Conspiracy—an extended commentary on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—Dallas Willard points out that many of the great New Testament texts written by the apostles John, Peter and Paul, like I Corinthians chapter 13, 2 Peter chapter 1 and 1 John chapters 3-5 echo the Sermon on the Mount's emphasis that **Discipleship to Jesus results in ongoing inward transformation.**

Before we look at the 3 word pictures, I want to talk with you a bit about what it means to be a disciple. Some of us tend to look at following Jesus as multi-tiered. There are Christians—which entails any of us who have invited Jesus into our lives—and there are disciples—people who are really serious about following Jesus. In other words, there are JV and Varsity Christians. I don't like the distinction between regular Christians and disciples, because it's not supported by Scripture. Everyone one of us who has invited Jesus into our lives is a disciple of Jesus—an apprentice— who is being mentored by our Lord. As followers of Jesus we shouldn't be asking, "*Am I a disciple?*" The correct question is, "*What kind of disciple am I?*" A good or bad one? A mature or a baby disciple? A committed or a complacent disciple? As disciples of Jesus, in whom the Holy Spirit lives, we're intended to spend time with Jesus learning from Him how to be like Him in every aspect of our lives. That's discipleship and that's Jesus' intent for each of us as people who have been created in the image of God.

I encourage you to follow along as I read verses 13-23 of Matthew chapter 7. After I read these verses, we'll go back and look more closely at the three contrasting word pictures.

Matthew 7:13-23

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

“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!’

Each of these contrasting images focuses on OBEDIENCE. Like the word submission, which we looked at last week, obedience is a word of which most of us aren’t fond. After all, we’re Americans who cherish our freedom and independence. We don’t like people telling us what to do. Obedience may be ok for children or employees or students or players following the instructions of a coach, but even then it’s often given begrudgingly. Generally speaking, obedience isn’t something we love, but obeying Jesus and the leading of the Holy Spirit is foundational to our growth as disciples. We can’t escape it.

The image of the narrow and wide gates has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Some have viewed it as referring to correct versus false doctrine and others have focused on the difference between taking the easy way out and making difficult choices. At its heart, the image of the gates speaks to obedience. Will we choose to meander through life choosing our own course and what’s most expedient or desirable to us? Or, will we choose the narrow path of following Jesus and his direction for our lives? Jesus is clear that the life-giving choice is following Him, not our culture, the whims of others or own desires.

In verses 15-19 Jesus warns about false prophets who outwardly appear to be sheep but inside are ferocious wolves. Jesus says these false prophets will be recognized, not by their appearance, but by the fruit of their lives. They try to project goodness, but the lack of obedience to God and his desires leads them to bear rotten fruit. Jesus goes on to say, *“Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”*

Jesus concludes this section by saying many will come to Him at the Day of Judgment claiming, *“Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?”* But his response to them will be, *“I never knew you.”* Their claim is based on the impressive things they did for Jesus—prophesying, driving out

demons and performing miracles—but Jesus highlights the lack of relationship when He says, “*I never knew you.*” As disciples, our lives will give evidence of who we are, but our relationship with Jesus is central—the fruit we produce flows out our relationship with Jesus. In John’s Gospel, Jesus elaborates on the connection between obedience and relationship with Jesus.

John 15:15-24 selected

If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching.

Jesus lays out a clear litmus test of our love for Him—“*anyone who loves me and walks in relationship with me obeys me.*” Jesus connects our love and obedience to having the Holy Spirit being with us and guiding us into further truth. There’s a shared understanding about obedience many saints have spoken of through the years. When we’re obedient to Jesus, the Holy Spirit draws closer to us and sensing his presence and obeying Him becomes more and more natural. When we disobey Jesus, we push the Holy Spirit away and discerning God’s will and obeying Him becomes increasingly difficult. I’ve recognized that truth in my own life and I’m sure many of you have as well. As we obey Jesus and follow his will, we gain momentum and knowing Jesus’ will for us and obeying it becomes increasingly natural. When we resist Jesus, knowing and doing his will becomes more and more difficult.

This past week I spent 3 days teaching a Core Course for pastors and leaders on the Brethren in Christ (BIC) licensing and ordination track. The course I teach is called, “*Leadership & Structure.*” On the first day of the course we explored the 10 BIC Core Values and talked about what we appreciate about them and how we’ve seen them lived out in our churches and in our denomination. Since I was in the process of writing this sermon while I taught the class, I was particularly struck by two of the values: *Following Jesus* and *Relying on God*. These values go hand in hand and they tie in with the theme of walking with God in obedience. The value *Following Jesus* described as, “*We value wholehearted obedience to Christ Jesus through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.*” The concept of obedience is closely tied to presence and empowering of the Holy Spirit. The second value I want to highlight is *Relying on God* and

that's described as, *"We confess our dependence on God for everything and seek to deepen our intimacy with Him by **Living Prayerfully**."* There is a lot packed into those few words, but the phrase that jumped out at me and that I've been ruminating on this week is *"living prayerfully."* It's a great phrase. Living prayerfully presupposes I'm walking in close connection with God and everything I encounter is vetted through dialogue and discernment with the Holy Spirit.

The phrase *"living prayerfully,"* helps explain the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 16-18, where we read: *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* Those words have been a stumbling block for many followers of Jesus. I remember hearing that phrase as a kid and wondering, *"How can anyone possibly pray continually or as some translations say, "without ceasing?" Is that even possible?"* I'm convinced the phrase *"living prayerfully"* captures the essence of what Paul is telling his 1st Century readers and us. *"Living prayerfully"* means we're attuned to the voice, nudges and direction of the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us. Living prayerfully is walking in obedience to Jesus. Living prayerfully is key to living as Jesus' disciple and allowing Him to continue his ongoing work of transforming us.

As we talk about obedience and discipleship, it's important for us to recognize that discipleship isn't limited to certain aspects of our lives. Discipleship goes beyond Sunday morning worship, meeting with brothers or sisters in Christ for accountability, participating in a Bible study or a small group, and it goes beyond our personal time or quiet time with God in Bible study, prayer and worship. Our entire lives are the arena in which we live and grow as disciples of Jesus—our marriages and families, our workplace, our interaction with people in our community and the places where we recreate. For Christians, every aspect of our lives is the crucible in which our discipleship is shaped.

If we've committed our lives to Jesus, his Holy Spirit lives in us and we're a disciple of his. The right question isn't, *"Am I a disciple?"* The appropriate question is, *"What kind of disciple am I?"* A good one or a bad one? A baby disciple or a mature one? A committed disciple or a complacent one? Your answer and my answer to that question is dependent on whether or not we're living prayerfully and walking in obedience to Jesus. As we quiet our hearts this morning and respond to Jesus' by singing to Him, I invite you to allow the Holy Spirit's spotlight

to scan your heart. **What is Jesus saying to you this morning about obedience to Him? Are there specific steps Jesus is inviting you to take so you might grow as his disciple?** As you consider those questions I encourage you to meditate on the Apostle Paul's words in Romans chapter 12 verse 2: *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."* The Apostle Paul highlights the difference between allowing the world to shape our sense of right and wrong and being transformed through our obedience to Jesus and his Word. In the language I've been using today, mature disciples are constantly being transformed by the renewing of their minds as they obey God's will, while immature disciples of Jesus are being molded to the culture around us—struggling to follow Jesus in obedience or to discern what his will is. **What kind of disciple am I? What kind of disciple are you?**