

6. Double Destinies

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[0 : 00] Well friends, welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk. It's good to have you back with us. We're coming to the end of our time in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount today.

Next week, Bob Fyre will be bringing God's Word to us, and also Bob's Word to us, looking at Psalm 18 for a few weeks, so that's something to look forward to. But for one last week, turn with me, if you will, to Matthew's Gospel, and to page 812 in the Visitor's Bibles.

Look into Matthew chapter 7, verse 13 to 29. And let me read from verse 13. 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. 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 thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

[1 : 21] 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. 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 I will declare to them, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

[2 : 44] And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

Well, let's ask for our Father's help. Father God, we thank you for these radical words spoken by your Son thousands of years ago in another culture, and yet which speak today with all the power and authority of heaven itself.

Help us, Lord, to recognize them as the only words on which to build a human life. Help us to listen with soft hearts and to be doers of what we hear.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder if you can imagine a more shocking way to end a sermon than those words we just read.

I've been trying hard to do that this week, and I could only think of one possible ending more terrifying. You see, with verse 12, Jesus has brought the Sermon on the Mount to its natural conclusion, hasn't he?

[4 : 00] He's told us what God's purpose for mankind is really all about. But just imagine how horrific it would have been if Jesus had simply finished with something like this.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, that brings our seminar for the day to its close. I do hope you've enjoyed yourselves. And as we go home, I pray each of us would apply these words to our own hearts.

Perhaps if he'd finished this sermon like that, it would be even more admired today than it is already. But I couldn't imagine a less loving thing to do.

You see, Jesus knows far too much about human nature, doesn't he? He knows that there's a great danger facing his listeners and possibly facing us too this afternoon. That everyone listening will assume he's talking to the person next to them.

To somebody else. You see, nobody deliberately walks down that wide, easy road to death, do they? Jesus was preaching in a religious age.

[5 : 10] They all think they're on the other road. No one knowingly stakes their future, their soul, on the advice of a fraud. Just like no one deliberately takes bad legal advice or trusts their life savings to a crook.

But Jesus sees a crowd of approving listeners making exactly that mistake. And he won't have it. He has no intention whatsoever of leaving us to apply this to ourselves. Instead, he ends this great sermon with all of the outraged love of a friend who actually cares about his listeners.

You see, they cannot unhear what they've heard. Neither can any of us. We've heard Jesus' words and whether we like it or not, they bring us to a fork in the road.

Time is up. And one day, how we responded will really matter. Not just for the Pharisees or the Jews or the atheists, but for every one of us in this hall.

[6 : 20] And Jesus' warning today is that we might be far less ready for that than we assume. So what will reveal on that last day?

Whether I've built my life on something real or on some terrible delusion. And what can I look for today to give me confidence that I'm following the right crowd?

Those are the questions which Jesus is pressing us to ask now. And he does that with a whole series of little pictures. We've got two gates, two roads, two types of prophets, two trees, two houses.

But there's really just one very simple choice facing us all the way through. The same one Jesus has been confronting us with all along.

And it's not so much about which gate we'll enter, but which guide we'll listen to. Will we go the way Christ has been calling us?

[7 : 25] Or will we be fooled down the road of half-hearted religious show and pretense? The answer to that seems so obvious, doesn't it?

But Jesus seems to think it is far easier to muck up that choice than we realize. And so he spells it out for us now very clearly.

First, he'll face us with the choice. Two guides on the road to judgment. That's verses 13 to 20. And once we've learned to recognize them both, we'll see their two claims on the judge.

Verse 21 to the end. And each time we'll get a warning followed by a little picture. Something that shows us how to spot the true from the false. So firstly then, verses 13 to 20.

Two guides on the road to judgment. It once took me, the best part of an hour, walking dutifully around the British Museum, as you do. Before I realized that, in fact, I was on a tour for Jehovah's Witnesses.

[8 : 31] You see, I'd been staring rather blankly at a guidebook. You know how it is, don't you, in these circumstances. Wondering where on earth to start. Feeling I ought to do something impressive. There I am in London in the British Museum.

And out of nowhere, up popped a group holding a sign saying, Bible Tour. It seemed too good to be true, really. In fact, the giveaway should have been that the men's shoes were far too well polished for Christian men.

But I didn't spot that. They were lovely people. And they valued their Bibles. The one thing that I almost didn't notice was that their guide wanted to lead me right away from Jesus Christ and right the way to hell.

That's how high the stakes are. How does a rational, sensible listener to Jesus end up on the road to destruction? Well, because they trust the wrong guide.

A false prophet, verse 15, is a teacher who always reassures and never warns. But because that's what we want to hear, we find it seriously convincing.

[9 : 43] Which is why these are such dangerous guides. We want to believe in them. And so Jesus does us the courtesy of speaking exceptionally plainly. First, the warning, followed by the picture to expose the fraud.

And the warning comes in verse 15. Don't be deceived. The guide beckoning you down the broad road is not what he looks. He talks your sort of talk.

He dresses just how you'd expect your sort of pastor to dress. He looks like a sheep. In fact, he does all sorts of things we find tremendously reassuring.

He's friends with the right people. He speaks at the right conferences. And his sermons fill you with the right feelings. He gathers a large, reassuring crowd, verse 13, into his wide, unrestricted church. But his motive is to fatten you up, verse 15, to feed his own ravenous ego. Just once or twice, working as a vet, I saw what it actually looks like when a dog gets its teeth into a young lamb.

[10:56] And the picture Jesus is trying to paint is not a gentle one. Because something which looks utterly affirming and comforting can turn out to be absolutely vicious.

So don't be deceived. You can sleepwalk all the way to the slaughterhouse in very good company, surrounded by encouraging Christian people in a thriving, popular church.

Remember, it's a religious crowd Jesus is talking to. And yet he warns them that it's their road, the one that many are walking on, which leads to death.

Popularity and large numbers are far less reassuring than we tend to find them. Notice there's nothing at all here about dodgy teaching.

We think, don't we, that we'll spot the wolf by his words. Notice, I for one, tend to be fairly self-confident about that. So I'll listen carefully through the sermon with my heresy antennae twitching carefully.

[12:07] The problem is, the false guide might seem thoroughly orthodox. The problem might not be what he says, but what he doesn't say. And I take it from what we saw a few weeks ago in chapter 6, that his religious activity is very convincing too.

He's admired by the sheep for his generosity, his prayer life, his humility. All of it's done for show, but it's very convincing. He's got all the right evangelical jargon and a reputation to match.

So it's not his appearance which is false or necessarily his teaching. It's him. It's the teacher. It's what he does to the sheep.

Don't be deceived. There's the warning. You can sleepwalk right to the end of the road, all the way in very good, sound company. So how will we spot him?

Well, the picture in verses 16 to 20 is blindingly simple, really, isn't it? And to make sure we get it, Jesus repeats the main point at the beginning and the end. You'll recognize them by their fruits.

[13:17] You'll know what kind of tree it is by the stuff it produces. Clearly, whatever he means, he wants us to be serious about looking for it.

Perhaps, by the way, that's one reason not to spend too much time listening to preachers from the other side of the world. We can do that, can't we, very easily in this day and age.

But it is much harder to know them as well as you know your own pastor. So what is fruit? Well, it's how the Bible repeatedly describes the stuff which grows up in a church or a people in response to grace.

You plant the gospel in people and fruit is what grows. A life changes, a congregation changes. Sometimes good fruit comes up and you know that the gospel has taken root.

And other times, rotten, stinking fruit is produced. And then you know there was something wrong with the planting. So do our teachers look like people whose own lives are still being restored and put back together by Jesus and his cross?

[14:32] Now, I don't think by that he's expecting us to try peering endlessly into the hearts of our pastors. None of us can see there, can we? And let me tell you, none of us would want to.

But at the very least, we need to ask whether there are obvious things which ought to warn us. Does he love his wife?

Is his lifestyle or wealth absurdly out of kilter with Christ? How does he behave around other women or other men for that matter?

Those things might seem blindingly obvious. But the truth is that around the world, thousands are taken in by impressive personalities whose lives ought to ring alarm bells.

Let me suggest, though, that closer to home, it's not only the life of the teacher we need to look at. It's the life of the church he produces.

[15:33] And of course, that will take a little while to show itself, won't it? But a guide who calls people through the narrow gate will produce a church with the flavor of real grace.

So what will a healthy church look like? Well, first off, not proud and showy. There's no room for that in the narrow gate, is there?

The way won't always be easy. And the sermons won't always be comfortable. And probably they'll be mocked a little and unpopular at times with the crowd.

Because ultimately, it's not the approval of the crowd which really matters to them. Haven't we seen that time and again through this sermon? But watch how they treat each other.

And how they add salt and light to their world. And you'll see the sort of real, loving righteousness which we've been hearing about from Jesus all along. Well, you'll recognize the wolf because if you look carefully, his life and the lives he influences just have a different taste.

[16:42] The difficult things are never said. The costly decisions are never made. Pride and bad behavior isn't challenged. Because what he wants to do is fatten up the sheep.

Not scare them away. The problem is that when it comes to gifted leaders, we often tend to overlook what to an outsider might seem ludicrously obvious.

If they speak well and flatter us and impress us with their teaching, well, we can make all manner of excuses for bad fruit, can't we?

It's just one of his quirks. It's the price of having a successful, driven man. Well, don't be daft, says Jesus.

And for pity's sake, don't be taken in. If he keeps sprouting thorns, he's probably a thorn bush. Well, there we are. Two guides to follow on the road to judgment.

[17:44] So don't be deceived. The way to recognize them is by their fruit. And then in verses 21 to 29 comes their two claims on the judge. And just like last time, we've got a warning followed by an illustration.

And the warning comes first in verse 21 to 23. Notice, first of all, that Jesus slips in there.

One of the most earth-shattering truths ever revealed to human beings. When it comes to the day of reckoning, it will be he, personally, who sits as judge over each one of us.

We cannot avoid meeting Jesus Christ. Both roads end at him. Both houses face the storm. And what's especially alarming is that the people walking through both gates thought they were ready to face him.

But they'll base their case on very different claims. One group will plead piety. They'll come before him with all the language of sincerity. Lord, Lord, they'll say, I'm one of yours.

[19:17] And the other group will plead what the Bible calls the obedience of faith. They did the will of their Father in heaven. Well, the first warning was about the people we listen to.

Don't be deceived. This time, it's about our own personal standing with Jesus Christ, the judge of mankind. Don't be deluded, he's saying.

Don't fool yourself. Don't be deluded, he's saying. Because here's the shocking thing. You can even do Jesus' work without ever truly knowing him.

Notice it's not that one group is doing more than the other. In fact, the Lord, Lord bunch are doing seriously impressive gospel work, aren't they? They're prophesying and casting out demons, verse 22.

All of it in Jesus' name. You can do all that work for Jesus without ever really knowing him. Isn't that shocking? And perhaps all those impressive achievements explain how they've got so far down the broad road without asking any questions.

[20:27] There's something deeply ingrained in us that Jesus puts his finger on time and again in this passage. And it's that we human beings have a chronic tendency to be reassured by all the wrong things.

It's certainly true of me. We're reassured by the crowd, aren't we? Surely we think they can't all be wrong. Don't we find it so reassuring when the right people believe what we believe?

Or when we find out they're behaving just like we behave? Surely that's why we all drive at just the same amount over the speed limit while we head down the motorway. We're reassured by each other.

We're reassured by our emotions. Sometimes we feel love and admiration for Jesus. Enough to call him Lord, Lord at least. And we feel surely we must be right with him.

And often the truth is we're reassured by all our own evangelical spin. Lord, Lord, we planted churches in your name.

[21:33] I went to an extra midweek service in your name. I listened to all those sermons. Jesus, Lord, I preach the gospel in your name. Well, bully for you, Rupert.

What did you do three weeks ago when I warned you about your anger and the way you treat your wife? What did you do two weeks ago when I warned you about acting up and putting on a show in front of others?

What about last week when I asked you if it was really me you served or your money? You preached the gospel. That's wonderful.

But do I know you? Show me what you did with my words. And so once again, he finishes with a little picture to expose the truth about these two rival claims.

Two men build houses. Both of them look just the same on the outside. And both of them are one day going to face an almighty storm. But when the rain beats down and the floods come up, only one of them will be left standing.

[22 : 48] Only when the storm comes will the truth about each claim be revealed. When the judge comes to give his verdict. Outwardly, both lies look the same until Jesus fast forwards the tape.

And shows us how each life meets its end. And that's when we find out what the wise man knew. He knew verse 21, didn't he?

He knew that only the one who does the will of the Father will enter his kingdom. And so although both of these men heard Jesus' words, only the wise man recognized them for what they are.

Do you notice how easily Jesus switches between the Father's will, verse 21, and my words, verse 24? They're the same thing.

Jesus Christ is both the judge and the king of heaven. To do the Father's will means to obey Christ's sermon on the mount.

[23 : 54] Beginning, right back at the beginning, with a broken, repentant spirit, which looks to him for everything. It means a life of hypocrisy-free, grace-driven, righteousness-hungering faith.

And in the end, that's what will expose whether my claim on Jesus Christ means anything at all. Whether his grace actually made any difference to me.

Well, as Jesus speaks, says Matthew, the crowds listen in astonished. Never before, verse 28, have they heard a teacher who can claim so much.

And so from over there on the broad, easy road, we can marvel at Jesus' words. What a wonderful teacher this man is. But what Matthew never tells us is whether a single one of them stopped walking down that road and turned around.

And battled against the tide until they found a fork in the ways. A place where on your knees you confess that you haven't really been traveling the way of the cross.

[25 : 15] Two ways, and only two. And the stakes are as high as they could possibly be. So don't be deceived. And don't delude yourselves, says Jesus.

The only words on which to build a human life are the disturbing, distinctive, gracious words of man's king.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that in this sermon of your sons, which so radically challenges our world, you've shown us again our savior, our master, our king, and our judge.

What a wonderful privilege to have learned so much about the Lord Jesus. And what a terrible thing it would be on that last day to hear the words, I never knew you from his lips.

[26 : 24] But how wonderful to hear, well done, good and faithful servant. So Lord, we ask that the love we have for your son would be seen by what we do with these words of his.

Help us to live truly as loving children of our heavenly father and obedient servants of our king. Amen. In his name we pray. Amen.