

Sermon Transcript
November 25, 2012



Kingdom Life is a Chosen Life
Two Ways to Live
Matthew 7:13-29

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 25, 2012, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286.

Scripture Text
Matthew 7:13-29

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. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

²¹ “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. ²² 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?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Introduction

Today we conclude our time in the Sermon on the Mount. I trust you have found these words of Jesus to be life giving. To the one who receives these words by faith, that is indeed what these words are. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, these words bring life to the soul. This is not just a finely crafted piece of literature to be simply admired for how it is constructed and for its pearls of wisdom. It is so much more than that for the person of faith. These words of Jesus, recorded and preserved for us are “alive and active.” These words breathe life into our inner being.

The first word of this sermon sets the tone for everything else that follows. This sermon begins with the word “*Blessed.*” Jesus stands before the crowd and his disciples, all of whom are astonished at this teaching, and he offers them a way of life that is truly blessed. In rather rapid succession, this sermon begins with the repetition of the word “*blessed.*” Nine times, in the introduction to this sermon the word “*blessed*” is used. These words of Jesus, set you on a path to a life of blessing. Don’t mistake what I am saying here for something else. It is not an easy life that is offered here. It is not a problem-free life that is being promised here. It is not a life of riches that is guaranteed here. But the life Jesus offers you here is a life that transcends all of that “stuff” and it is the way to a life that is blessed.

Do you know that God wants to bless you? Blessing has always been the offer on the table from God. It is what God offered Israel when they were set to enter the promised land. He gathered them together before they set one foot in the promised land and he said to them in Deuteronomy 30:15-16, “*See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.*”

It is the same offer we find at the beginning of the book of Psalms. Psalm 1 is to the book of Psalms what the Beatitudes are to the Sermon on the Mount. Psalm 1 is the introduction to the 150 Psalms that make up the book of Psalms and it sets the tone for the entire collection of Psalms. Like the Sermon on the Mount, the Psalms begin with the word “*Blessed.*” “*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of the sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the LORD and on his law he meditates day and night.*” Again, the offer is on the table. The offer from God to you is a pathway to blessing. God wants to bless you.

And so through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus keeps the offer on the table for you this morning. He offers you a pathway to blessing.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

So for the rest of this sermon, Jesus describes the kind of life that God blesses. He calls us to control our anger and to control our lust, to honor our marriage, to mark the words that come out of our mouths, to not retaliate when insulted, to go the extra mile for the one in need and to love our enemies. He tells us that we are to practice our religion in private, as we do in public and to let Jesus control our wallets and our worry, as we learn to trust God. We are also called not to judge others, to persist in prayer and to do to others what we want others to do to us. This is the life that leads to God's blessing. This is life in the kingdom of God.

And so Jesus comes to the end of this sermon, and just like God said to the people of Israel standing on the edge of the promised land, he looks at you and says, "the choice is yours." The offer is still on the table. A way of blessing is being offered to you this morning. You have to make a choice. You have to choose between two different paths you are going to walk down in life. You have to choose between two different voices you are going to listen to for guidance in life. You have to choose between two different kinds of confession. You have to choose between two opposing foundations upon which you will build your life. God offers you a pathway to blessing. But the choice is yours.

Let me say a couple things by way of introduction about the choice you have to make regarding Jesus. First of all, this is no small matter for you to decide. The stakes are high when it comes to deciding what you will do about Jesus. It is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of heaven and hell. In these four choices, what Jesus offers us at the end of this sermon, he lays out the consequences of not choosing blessing from the hand of God. In verse 13, the wrong path leads to "destruction." In verse 19, the wrong voice is "cut down and thrown into the fire." In verse 23, the wrong confession will lead to these words spoken on the day of judgment, "I never knew you, depart from me." In verse 27, a life that is built on the wrong foundation becomes a life that simply can not stand in the judgment. It will crumble like a house of cards. So this choice you must ponder this morning, is no small matter.

The second thing I would like to say by way of introduction is this. There is no middle ground between these two choices. There is no fence to sit on between these two decisions you need to make. There is not a third path to walk on or a third voice to listen to or a third foundation to build your life upon. It is one or the other. You are either living God's way or your not. There is no in between. There is no third alternative. So I plead with you this morning, "Choose life!" Choose the path of God's blessing. He wants to bless you. But it is your choice. No one can make the choice for you. It is yours to make. Jesus presents to you four choices to make.

Choose Between Two Gates

The first choice you need to make has to do with which gate you walk through to set you on a course for life. There are two gates to choose from. One gate is wide, many take it and it is relatively easy to take. All you have to do with this gate is "go with the flow." The other gate, is narrow and few go through it and it is hard. These two gates lead to very different ends. The wide gate leads to destruction and the narrow gate leads to life. Listen to Jesus put it in his own words starting in 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."*

The emphasis in these two verses is centered on "the gate." We have been diligent in this study on the Sermon on the Mount, to point out that through this sermon, Jesus is presenting to a way of life. And yet, there has not been a week gone by, where I have not come away from the message without a keen sense of ways I fall short in living the way of life God has called me to. Whether it be anger, or lust, or failure in my marriage, or the words that come from my mouth, or the mean thoughts I have for the person who cut me off while I was driving, or not reaching out to the one in need or for harboring anger towards my enemy; each week my sin and my daily failure has been dangling in front of my eyes. And so the Sermon on the Mount, while being a path of blessing I want to pursue, also presents an ideal that I will never fully live up to. By God's grace I strive for these things, but I will never fully live up to these words. So how can I possibly receive blessing from God if I can't fully live this way of life that leads to blessing?

There is a gate you need to walk through before you ever set foot on the path Jesus has laid out for you. Jesus says in John 10:9, *"I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture."* When Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that he came to *"fulfill the law,"* part of what he meant by that was that he lived what he preached. There is not one place where his life did not match his words. I can't say that about myself. I wish I could say that everything I have ever told you from

this pulpit I have fully lived. To my shame, I can't make that claim. But Jesus can. And so to enter the "narrow gate" where God's blessing awaits you is to come to faith in Jesus. It is a "narrow gate" because there is no other name under heaven by which one can be saved. It is a "narrow gate" because it requires one to be "poor in spirit" and therefore acknowledging that you have nothing in yourself to earn any favor before God. And when you come to that point and turn to Jesus by faith and walk through that gate, God puts the perfection and the righteousness of Jesus on you and opens you up to the floodgate of God's blessings in your life. Paul says in Ephesians 1, in response to the grace of God through Jesus, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

Given all that we have been talking about the past few months, one can readily understand why the following title to an article would grab my attention and cause me to read the article. Here is the title I saw on one of my favorite Christian websites: "Why People Hate the Sermon on the Mount."¹ Given that we have been making our way through this sermon ourselves, I thought I better read it. I sure don't want you to hate these words of Jesus. Who hates these words? Who hates the Sermon on the Mount?

Virginia Stem Owens was an English professor at Texas A&M and she assigned her freshman class to write a response paper to the Sermon on the Mount. It was a piece of literature included in their textbook and so she asked them to interact with these words of Jesus. Now let's keep in mind, this assignment was given in Texas. It was not an assignment given at Harvard, or in New England, or in New York City or California or San Francisco, where you might expect a condescending view towards anything of a Christian nature. This is Texas! This is an area considered to be on the edge of the Bible Belt. And yet the responses to the Sermon on the Mount caused Owens to put down her red pen and wonder about the trend she was seeing in their reaction to these words of Jesus. Not only were these students unfamiliar with this wonderful "body of literature" we call the Sermon on the Mount, but they hated it.

Here were a couple of the comments the students wrote:

"I did not like the essay 'Sermon on the Mount.' It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is."

"The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery? To be angry and insult someone is like murder? These are the most extreme, stupid, un-human statements I have ever heard."

Tim Keller was reflecting on this article and he made an astute observation. He said, when liberal theologians talk, often they will say that it is not so important what you believe or what doctrines you hold. What is really important is that you live the Sermon

on the Mount, it is so beautiful. Keller said, “They clearly have not read it!” He said, what Owens knew was that when her students read this sermon “they were desperately looking for cover.” “Because when you read the Sermon on the Mount, you know this is how you want people to live like around you. You just don’t think you can do it yourself. And all of a sudden you are forced to say, ‘Wait a minute, this is an arrow pointing at my heart.’”² Virginia Stem Owens, therefore concludes, “Finally, biblical illiteracy has come to the point where people are able to respond to Jesus without filtering it through 2000 years of cultural haze. Honest ignorant ears hear it as it is. And it is terrifying.”³ Keller concluded by saying, “it has been said if anyone read the Sermon on the Mount with an open mind, they would fall down and cry out, ‘God save me from the Sermon on the Mount!’”⁴

In this sermon, you hear words like this:

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

While on the one hand, these ideals sound attractive and good and would make for a world that would be ideal to live in, they don’t speak to our experience. And furthermore, week after week, these words penetrate our hearts because they are “sharper than a two-edged sword” and they lay bare the “thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Which leaves us with one of two responses. We either fall to our knees and cry out, “God save us from the Sermon on the Mount.” In essence, we turn to Jesus and ask that his blood cover over our sins, crying out, “God have mercy on me a sinner!” But if this sermon does not cause you to run to Jesus and cry out for God’s mercy, it will breed within you a resentment that causes these words to be offensive to your ears because no one can accept these words for what they are without seeing the ugliness that lives within each of us. And that, unfortunately, leaves you with only one option. These words simply become “the most extreme, stupid, un-human statements you have ever heard.” Consequently, you can’t help but hate the Sermon on the Mount.

Therein lies your first choice. Before you step onto the pathway Jesus is has for your life, you have to choose which gate you will enter to set the course for your life. What will you decide to do with Jesus? If you are here this morning, it is not too late get off the exit and enter the narrow gate. It is not too late to turn to Jesus, who lived and was crucified for you so that you can receive the blessings of God. It is your choice.

Choose Between Two Voices

Another important choice you need to make as you seek to live under the blessing of God, is that you need to determine who you are going to listen to. You need to choose between two voices. Here is how Jesus says it starting in verse 15, *“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 thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 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.”*

By warning us to be careful about false prophets, Jesus is calling us to be discerning about who we listen to. You have to choose what voice you will allow to shape the direction of your life. This is a very important choice you have to make.

In the context of this passage, Jesus is warning against certain “religious voices” that are vying for your attention, but in the end are leading people away from the blessing that is found in God. That is something that can even happen in the context of the church. It is a sobering thought to me that the pulpit can be a place that misleads people. It happens all the time. One of the ways you discern whether or not this a voice to listen to is not just by what you hear, but by what you see in the life of the person who is teaching you. Paul tells Timothy, a young leader in the church, *“set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity . . . Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers.”* Where there is good fruit, there is a voice to listen to.

When you go to the produce section of the store and you pick up a piece of fruit, you examine it to see if it is good fruit or bad fruit. As you try to discern what voice you are going to listen to, examine the fruit. Look at the life. D. A. Carson says, “The fruit the Lord Jesus looks for is a life in growing conformity to the norms of the kingdom: righteousness, transparent humility, purity, trusting and persistent prayerfulness, obedience to Jesus’ words, truthfulness, love, generosity, rejection of all that is hypocritical.”⁵ Let me tell you why I think you can choose to trust the voice you hear this morning to set you on a course for life. I am not so much referring to my singular voice this morning. Rather, I am referring to the collective voice that rises from this church family. The reason you can trust it to set you on a course for life is because we speak what we hear from God’s word and it is changing our lives. We heard story after story of this transformation last Sunday evening at our Thanksgiving service. We heard it from those who are new in faith and old in faith. There is fruit here. Inspect it! What voice are you going to listen to for the direction of your life? Are you going to listen to

the clamor you hear in our culture that “hypes a promise of life” only in the end to find that it is empty? The voice in our world tells us to ditch this old archaic book called the Bible and to get with the times. It tells us that we should let go of our inhibitions, ditch the biblical structures of family and church, we should grab the brass ring and pursue leisure and fame and pleasure at all costs. In its wake, are empty lives, unfulfilled promises, broken relationships, destroyed marriages and an aching hole in the heart with no idea as to how to fill it and stop the pain. And so we numb it with substance abuse, or by running from one weekend to the next, or by climbing the corporate ladder seeking for some sense of significance. That is the fruit of listening to a voice that draws you away from God.

If you think fame is the answer to life, look at all the heartache that comes to people in the limelight. There is nothing evil about the limelight itself. What is evil is the chasing of fame, thinking that it will solve your problems. The average life expectancy of an American is 77. For celebrities it is 59. And get this, the average rock-and-roll musician only lives until age 37.⁶ Littered in their obituaries is the cause for death such as suicide and alcohol and drug overdose or shot to death. This is not a rant against movies and rock music. It is just a rant against the voice that speaks loudly in our culture that says, “If you strike it big in this world with fame, you are blessed.” I just ask you to examine the fruit. What voice will you listen to?

God has spoken to us by his Son, Jesus. We hold in our laps the Word of God, inspired by the Spirit of God. May God give us ears to listen to his voice. This is your choice. God is calling. God is speaking. God wants to bless you. But blessing from God is only found in responding to his voice. It is your choice.

Choose Between Two Confessions

The third choice is a choice of confession. We subscribe to a confession. “We believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontus Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into Hades. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead. We believe in the Holy Spirit, holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” This is our confession. This is our creed.

But notice what Jesus says in verse 21. “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.*” If this doesn’t cause the average church goer in the pew to sit up and take notice, nothing will. “*Lord, Lord*” is a statement of confession.

But the mere statement of a confession is not the choice Jesus is seeking. It is possible to stand here and recite a confession and not really make the kind of confession Jesus wants from us.

Jesus says, “*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 then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’*” What is the confession that God is after? What is the confession that you need to choose if you want the blessing of God? It is a confession that leads to being the “*one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*” Jesus is not just after a confession of the mind. He is after a confession of the heart.

One of the things we have stressed, as we have made our way through the Sermon on the Mount, is that Jesus is not merely offering us a way of belief. Rather, as a rabbi interpreting Torah, Jesus is offering us a way of life. I would suggest that this third choice is aimed mostly to the church crowd. It is a call to examine your confession. It is simply a religious confession? Is it simply a confession of mind? Or have you chosen a confession of mind and heart? Have you chosen a confession faith that leads to works? Have you chosen a confession of a way of belief and a way of life.

Rich Mullins, a Christian singer who died a few years ago, sang a song that was basically the Apostle’s Creed put to music. In the song, was a chorus that he sang in the midst of this great confession of the faith. And here is how the chorus went. Speaking of the creed he said, “I believe what I believe, and it makes me what I am. I did not make it, no, its making me. It is the very truth of God, not the invention of any man.”

You have to choose your confession. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is calling us to a way of life. Is your confession shaping you and making you into a person who loves God and loves others? Has your confession made its way from your mind to your heart? I am not asking if you walked an aisle or raised a hand. I am asking you whether or not your confession is shaping your life? It is your choice.

Choose Between Two Foundations

So this brings us to the very end of this great sermon with one final and grand choice to make. What is the foundation upon which you will build your entire life? Jesus says, “*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, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.*”

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

By now, after posing four different ways of offering the choice before us, we should be able to plainly see what Jesus is saying here. He is saying that the choice you have before you this morning is whether or not you will build your life on Jesus or on something else. But Jesus is saying that choice you make has consequences because there is no other foundation upon which you can build that will be strong enough to stand the storms of life. And the storms will come.

Christianity is ultimately a religion of hope. We know how the story ends. We understand that while the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus at his first Advent, which we are about to celebrate in the coming month, we also know that we live in a time where it is not fully here yet. We live in a world where there are storms that touch both the religious and the secular, the godly and the ungodly. And yet we live with the assurance that God is at work in all things and that ultimately we can live through the mess of life with a measure of hope. Jesus is our rock. *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in the time of trouble.”* I can’t imagine how scary it is to face all the things that can go wrong if you don’t have this rock upon which you stand.

Make no mistake about it, the storms will come. I don’t know when. I just know they will. And furthermore, I think the ultimate reference that Jesus is referring to when he speaks of the floods and the wind is the final judgment. Just like in Psalm 1, we are reminded that the one who stands on his own with the blessing of Jesus, will not stand in the day of judgment. His house will crumble like a house of cards under the weight of God’s judgment for our sin. Only the one who stands in that final judgment with Jesus at his side, will stand on that day because he will be standing on that rock.

C. S. Lewis said this about one’s discovery of the biblical God. He said, “An impersonal God, we like that, well and good. A subjective God of love and goodness inside our heads, even better. A formless life force surging through everyone, which we can tap, best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other cord, approaching at infinite speed. The Hunter, the Covenant Lord, the Husband, that is quite another matter. There comes a moment that people dabbling in religion suddenly draw back, supposing they really found him. We never meant it to come to that. If there is a God, you are in a sense alone with him. You cannot put him off with speculation about the hypocrisy of your neighbor or minimize what you read in books—what will all that chatter and hearsay count, when the anesthetic fog we call the real world fades away and the divine presence, in which, we have always stood become palpable, immediate and

unavoidable.”⁷ I tell you, you must choose Jesus, or you will not stand on that day when that fog is gone and there you are in all your nakedness and sin and shame, standing before this holy God. “On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.” It is your choice.

Conclusion

Jesus comes in the Sermon on the Mount and as God in the flesh he comes with this wonderful message. He says to us, “the offer is still on the table.” God wants to bless us. But you have to make a choice.

Here is the choice:

- Which gate will you walk through? Jesus is the gate. Confess your sin, turn to Jesus who lived for you and died for you and rose for you. Through faith in Jesus, your sins are forgiven and you are promised eternal life.
- Which voice will you listen to? Only the words of Jesus will give you life.
- Which confession will you make? Confess faith in Jesus through mind and heart and allow your confession to shape your life.
- Which foundation will you build? Stand on Jesus and you will stand in this life and the life to come.

It is your choice!

Repent of your sin

Rely on Jesus

Submit to Jesus as the ruler of your life.

¹Andy Naselli “Why People Hate the Sermon on the Mount” www.andynaselli.com 11/13, 2012

²Tim Keller Sermon: On the Mountain: The Terrifying and Beckoning God

³Naselli

⁴Keller

⁵D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978) 129

⁶“The Price of Fame” in *Salvo* Issue 3, Summer 2007, p. 34

⁷Quoted in Keller Sermon