

Matthew 7:13-29

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Well, this evening we come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, and what we discover there is! that Jesus concludes everything that He has been saying by calling us to respond to what He has taught.

! And He does this by laying out a series of options, three options in total, and urging us to choose. This evening you have to make a choice about what you're going to do with what the Lord Jesus has been teaching us through Matthew 5 to 7. The idea of choice is a really significant thing in our culture, isn't it? It's in our discourse, we talk about it a lot, and it's something that we think is absolutely key to any flourishing society. In his book titled, *The Paradox of Choice, Why More is Less*, Barry Schwartz, you may have come across Barry Schwartz, he did a TED talk on this as well, you might have read the book. But he describes what he calls the official dogma of Western industrial societies. Quote, if we are interested in maximizing the welfare of our citizens, the way to do that is to maximize individual freedom. And the way to maximize freedom is to maximize choice. The more choice people have, the more freedom they have. And the more freedom they have, the more welfare they have. This is so deeply embedded in the water supply that it wouldn't occur to anyone to question it." End quote. We highly value ideas of freedom and choice, and everyone considers them to be good things. We don't need to argue for the goodness of freedom and choice. But what Schwartz shows in his book, and what we actually know from our own experience, is that the more choice we have doesn't actually lead to more freedom, or more happiness, actually. Schwartz again, quote, "...one effect, paradoxically, is that it produces paralysis rather than liberation. With so many options to choose from, people find it very difficult to choose at all." The philosopher Renata Salacho has written a book called *The Tyranny of Choice*. Even the title gets at the point, because she understands what happens if we've got all these choices in front of us. Anxiety comes upon us, fear, and, well, all kinds of emotions. Negative emotions are associated with the sense of confusion and paralysis. If we choose here, we might miss out on something over here.

Then more choices we have doesn't actually lead to more freedom. We love freedom, and we want to be able to have options. But by choosing one of those options, we, by definition, are ruling out others, and we just get kind of anxious about that. What if we make a mistake? What if that was the better one, and I've chosen this? It doesn't matter how good it was. This one over here could have been better. And that sense of uncertainty leaves us feeling unsettled and unhappy. So when Jesus tells us that we need to choose, we don't immediately think, great! That's easy. That's awesome. He has made it clear all the way through the sermon that we can't remain neutral in relation to what he's been saying. We can't take the Sermon on the Mount and keep it at arm's length. We can't take the Sermon on the Mount and think, that's just talking points for me and my friends. We can keep it in the realm of ideas out there.

[3 : 44] It's not like that. We can't do that with what Jesus says. We have to respond. But this will mean choosing. And it'll mean choosing one way at the expense of others, and that makes us anxious.

We like open options. But those open options, as we've just said, can paralyze us. So what I want us to see this evening is, as Jesus puts this choice before us, and there are three choices. Well, there's one choice, I think, and it's expressed in three different ways.

But what I want us to see is that Jesus wants to persuade us to make the right choice. He doesn't say, well, look, I'm concluding this sermon, and I'm saying, you can have my kingdom, take it or leave it.

It's up to you. He doesn't say that. He's not saying, my kingdom is one choice on a menu of equally valid choices, equally good options. You know, you go to the restaurant, and you could have one of

many choices on the menu. And, you know, you may prefer one over the other, but they're all basically okay. They're all basically good. And whether you have pepperoni or you don't, it doesn't really matter. It's not like that with the kingdom. He's not saying, take it or leave it, one of many equally valid options. No, but Jesus wants us to make the right choice, and he does it by showing us the future. He shows us the future. In effect, what he says here in this section is, I want you to follow your options to their conclusion, to see where they lead, consider the consequences, both good and bad, and then make your choice. He's not saying, take it or leave it.

He really wants you to make a particular choice, and he's trying to persuade you accordingly. So, choice number one. He says, choose the right path. Choose the right path.

[5 : 41] 13 and 14. 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. Gates and ways are different images making the same point. He's saying, choose which path through life you're going to take, and there are two options.

And this two paths kind of illustration is a common Bible thing. Think of Psalm 1 and the contrast there between the way of the wicked and the path of flourishing. And that idea, there is one path that goes one way. There's another path that goes the other way. Jesus takes it here and develops it, and he urges his followers to choose the more difficult path. That's what we're being called to if we're going to follow Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. We're going to choose a more difficult path. Narrow here translates literally as troubled or difficult. Choose the troubled or difficult path, but know that it's the right path. There is a wide path, says Jesus, an easy path, a popular path, but it doesn't go where you want it to go.

Now, in the church, I think we often think of the wide gate, the easy way, as, well, it's often depicted as a path of wild living. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll. That's the wide path, the easy path. That's the way of the culture. But I think we should see in context that it's more appropriate to see it as the way of the Pharisees, actually. Now, that might sound strange to us, but remember, the whole way through the sermon, Jesus has set the wholeness that he is calling for, wholehearted, deep, whole person, all the way down to the heart-type righteousness, type discipleship. He has set that up against the scribes and the Pharisees, who pursue external righteousness. And so it would seem strange that he's changing course now.

He's introducing a whole new category of people. I don't think that's what he's doing. So what I think we need to see here is that the contrast is between the path of righteousness that's merely external—not murdering, not committing adultery, doing religious things—and the true righteousness that goes deeper than mere behavior all the way down, putting its roots into our hearts.

Opening your heart to the work of God, surrendering your desires to Him is much harder than turning up the church, praying a bit, and being a moral citizen. Plus, let's not forget that the narrow path is also the way of persecution for Jesus' sake. Chapter 5, verse 10, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. That is the path of rejection.

[8 : 41] Surrendering the very center of your heart to the Lord Jesus, and choosing to do that when you are going to be rejected precisely because you do that is hard. You can see the appeal of the wide path.

You can see why many go that way. But Jesus says, look at the destination. Look where it leads. Yes, the road is narrow. It's difficult. But it's the same path that Jesus walked. And the path to life with Jesus, that is, life that is truly life, is beset by those same trials and temptations that He faced. But it is the only path to life, life that is truly life, eternal life, life in relationship with the One who made you for Himself. If we want His life and glory, we have to walk His path. If we want to follow Christ to glory and to triumph, we have to walk the path of rejection that He walked to get there. Easier said than done, right? Choosing the narrow way, the difficult way, and making that choice every day, that's what we're called to, is so tough. We look at those who reject Christ. We look at those who just don't seem to care at all, don't even give Him a second thought, and their lives look fine. They even seem to prosper. Yet here we are, praying for God to help us, to hear us in our struggles, to listen when we cry out to Him in our pain, and our words seem to go no higher than the ceiling. We look over there, and they are loving life. And here we are. We want a spouse, and there's no suitable Christians. We want a child, and it's just not happening. We want a job to provide for our family, and we keep missing out. All good things that godly people desire. But it feels like

God doesn't hear. It feels like God doesn't care. Meanwhile, the people on the broad road, it's one brilliant thing after another for them. Asaph struggled with this in Psalm 73. He struggled with exactly this thing. He saw how those on the wide road prospered, healthier and wealthier than the godly, and he cried out, Surely in vain I have left my heart pure. Do you know what that feels like? Is that a cry that you can make? I am submitting my heart to you. I am choosing the narrow path. [11:40] It feels like a waste of time, God. But what does Asaph do? He goes where Jesus is taking us here, to the destination, and he says, I thought I was wasting my time doing this. Then I understood their final destiny. He saw that the end of the ungodly was ruin.

It's a hard path, but it's the only path that leads to life. So can I encourage you to stay on it? Stay on it. Those of you who are persevering, and it feels like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling, stay on the narrow path. Young people, let me speak to you for a moment. Choosing the difficult path, that is genuinely submitting your life to God rather than just faking it until you leave home. Doing that is hard.

Especially when you look at your friends who seem to have a much better time. When you find yourself going, ah, remind yourself of their final destiny. Remind yourself of their final destiny. Flying down the road with a smile on your face is only something to envy if there's no cliff at the end of the road. But that is where the wide road leads, Jesus says.

Whatever you look at, young people, in your friends' lives who don't know Christ, whatever you look at in them and you think, I wish I had that. Why am I bothering with all of this effort to submit my life to the Lord Jesus?

Remember where the wide road leads. And perhaps warn them of that. Don't envy them. Warn them. Call them to Christ.

[13:44] Only on the narrow road do we receive the kingdom of heaven. Only here is there comfort from God. Only on this path do we inherit the earth, receive mercy, and see God. It is only on this hard road that we meet God as our Father.

St. Ferguson has a lovely illustration comparing what Jesus says here about the kingdom to Dr. Who's TARDIS. Might be a little dated. I don't know if Dr. Who still goes. Is Dr. Who still a thing? Yeah? Okay. Still got a TARDIS? Great. It's maybe not outdated after all. Ferguson says this, Dr. Ferguson, from the outside, the TARDIS looks like an old-fashioned British police box. But on the inside, the TARDIS is the setting for a whole world of excitement and adventure.

The paradoxical nature of the TARDIS bears a striking similarity to what Jesus tells us about the kingdom of God. Everything depends on whether you experience it from the outside or the inside. On the inside, we see that the road that at first appeared so narrow is the only one that leads to life. I wonder if you're here this evening and you haven't yet made the decision to submit your life to the Lord Jesus. Because you look at the narrow road and you think to yourself, I don't want that. But there's something in your heart that knows that it's true and knows that it's right.

I want to invite you, as it were, into the TARDIS. I want you to come to this side of the line, submit your life to the Lord Jesus, and step across that line and view the Christian life from the other side. The road is narrow, but what you see down that road is life. Life that you are meant to have.

[15:40] Life that is truly life. Settle in your heart to choose and keep choosing the right path. Number two, choose the right teachers. 15 to 23, choose the right teachers. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You'll recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thorn bushes? So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 19, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. The prophet explained and applied the word of God to the people of God. The prophet was God's spokesman calling his people to the terms of the covenant. And Jesus is picking up here then a familiar warning that you see in the prophets.

Beware. It's a warning that runs through the Bible about false prophets. And again, I think he has the scribes and the Pharisees in view here, which means he's warning. The warning isn't just about those who don't say the right things and who teach error, but those who appear outwardly holy and yet lack this whole person righteousness that marks out citizens of God's kingdom. So in order to tell the true from the false, we don't just consider their teaching, but look at their lives as well. That requires discernment, obviously, because false prophets aren't immediately obvious. Do you see verse 15?

They come in sheep's clothing. They could look like one of God's flock and may even sound like they are followers of the good shepherd. But Jesus says, actually, they are wolves in disguise. So how can we know? How can we know which teachers to avoid? Well, I want to suggest three things. First of all, three things to look for. First of all, look at their attitude towards God's people. Look at their attitude towards God's people. Whatever their appearance, whatever their chat, do they follow the example of the good shepherd and lay down their life for the sheep? Or do they devour the flock like ravenous wolves? Verse 15.

Here are questions you can ask. Does the teacher carry their leadership as a right or a responsibility? Do they see it as something to be stewarded? Or do they see it as a right that they have and that you should recognize that? Do they promote peace and unity in their leadership? Or do they cultivate division and turn the flock on each other? Do they clearly love those entrusted to their care? Or do they lord it over the church? Lay six feet above contradiction. That attitude will reveal a lot about the integrity of the teacher. Look at their attitude towards God's people. Secondly, look at the fruit of their teaching. 16. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thorn bushes? So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

[18:58] Look at the fruit of their teaching. It is generally true that as the leader goes, so go those who are led. Whether a teacher is faithful or false will be seen not just in their character, but in the character of those that they teach. As you look at those under the leader's care, are they growing in Christlikeness? If you go to a church and you speak to the minister and he seems perfectly decent and his teaching seems biblical, but after a while you find the congregation are actually fairly unpleasant. They're proud and they're cliquy and they're mean-spirited.

The qualities that marked out the Pharisees as it happens. You should ask questions about why that is. And there's a decent chance that it is trickled down from the leaders and these are teachers to avoid. Look at the fruit of their teaching. And then thirdly, look at their character, not just their gifts. Look at their character, not just their gifts. There are some teachers who have been used by God even to do remarkable things, but who are not truly his. Verse 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. 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 I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

I can tell you standing here, those are chilling words. It is possible to preach so that people are brought to Christ. It is even possible to exercise supernatural gifts or see sincere manifestations of the work of God and yet be a stranger to God's grace. The magicians in Egypt performed some of the same miracles that Moses did. The Apostle Paul tells us, is it possible to have an appearance of godliness without its true power, without a sincere relationship with the living God? The things that people can do in public ministry are no sure sign of their righteousness.

The false teacher places his confidence in what he has been able to do. Verse 22, Lord, Lord, did we not do these things in your name? But gifts are given by God to be used for the sake of others, not for the sake of the gifted individual. So we can never point to gifts alone as a mark of God's favor on our lives. When we confuse gifts with grace, gifts with character like this, we push people forward in ministry because they've got gifts, but they haven't yet been appropriately shaped by the grace of God, and their character is lagging miles behind. That creates problems of all sorts, not least that they might not even know the purpose of God. Let us know the purpose of God. Let us know the purpose of God. Let us know the purpose of God.

Powerful preaching says nothing about the preacher. Miraculous activity says nothing about the heart of the one doing these things. Look past the teacher's gifts to their character in order to discern what they're really like.

[22:27] Hold your ministers at this church to these standards. Choose the right teachers. And Jesus moves to conclude.

Not just this section, but the whole sermon. He's bringing the whole sermon into land with one final choice, and it's this. He says, choose the right foundation.

Choose the right foundation. The first two sections he gives us a command. Enter, beware. Here the exhortation is more implicit, but he employs the most vivid image of all.

Do you see? 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.

[23 : 28] And great was the fall of it. So in light of the whole sermon, as Jesus brings us to a conclusion, he is saying, there are two possible ways to live.

One is wise, verse 24. The other is foolish, verse 26. In fact, the word is strong. It's the word that we get our word moron from.

And he's saying, the destination of each of these reveals why one is wise and the other is foolish. One leads to flourishing, the other destruction.

So he says, build your life on the right foundation. And the imagery of foundations fits well with Jesus' consistent call to heart-level righteousness.

The difference between the wisely built house and the moronic one isn't immediately apparent. You think about it? It can have lots of the same features. The difference lies in what is initially hidden.

[24 : 30] And that which is initially hidden only emerges when the storms hit. This is true when it comes to those who follow Jesus. Two people may look very similar.

Their commitment to the things of Christ outwardly may look identical. But the sincerity of their faith, the foundations upon which they have built, will show when the storms hit. This may be the storms of life that challenge our faith.

The trials that test and refine us under God's providential ordering of things. If our righteousness, if our Christianity is only external. Are we going to keep going?

Really? Can you? All right. Thanks, Yuki.

Where were we? Foundations. You can look externally. Two people can look exactly the same. But what is hidden only comes into view or only becomes apparent when the storms hit.

[25 : 52] And it may be the storms of life that challenge our faith. Maybe the things that come our way because God has providentially ordered it that way. The things that he wants to use to refine us.

Things that he wants to use to expose the reality, the quality of our faith. And the truth is that if our righteousness, if our Christian faith is only external, when that happens, we'll be blown over.

We'll be thrown into disarray. If you're putting it on. If you're putting on your Christian faith. If you are behaving as a religious person, but your heart isn't really in it.

When the slightest bit of pressure comes, you will fold like a deck chair. And if for some reason you don't, you manage to fake it all the way to the end.

Jesus has here an eye on the storm of God's final judgment. When the sincerity of all of our hearts will be revealed. And on that day when those who have not embraced a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

[26 : 52] That goes beyond merely external religion. Merely performing in a religious way. We'll be blown away. So Jesus is saying choose the right foundation.

Choose heart level righteousness that doesn't just hear the words of Jesus. But puts them into practice. Doesn't just merely listen on a Sunday or at home group and then leave unchanged. But lives it out. One commentator has said this. Perhaps no passage in the New Testament expresses more concisely and more sharply. That the essence of discipleship is found not in words. Nor in religiosity. Not even in the performance of spectacular deeds in the name of Jesus. But only in the manifestation of true righteousness. I.e. The doing the will of the Father as now interpreted through the teaching of Jesus.

No words or good deeds. No words or good deeds. Can substitute for the full picture of righteousness the evangelist has given in the sermon. No words or good deeds.

[28 : 00] Nothing that you put on at a merely external level. Can substitute for the full picture of righteousness. The heart level righteousness. That the evangelist has given in the sermon.

So the sermon on the mount. Is a call. To cultivate. Wholeness of heart. And life. It is a call to humble ourselves before Jesus.

To listen to his teaching and to follow it wherever it leads us. However unpopular it may seem to the cool kids. And tonight.

He is calling us to choose to do this. He is calling you to choose to do this. Have you surrendered your heart? To Christ.

He is calling you this evening to choose the way of wisdom. And that is the narrow path. He is calling you to choose to reject false teaching and embrace the truth.

[29 : 03] And to make that truth the foundation of your whole life. And whilst choosing to follow Jesus means we are choosing not to do other things.

We are restricting ourselves. The outcome of those choices show why choosing him makes perfect sense. And why we would be morons to do anything else. He is.

He is not one equally valid option among many. All the others lead to destruction. Only Jesus is the way of life.

And blessing. For eternity. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.