

This is the third chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. It consists of a number of short sayings that Matthew strung together in no particular order. However, each one provides an important insight concerning Christian faith and life.

In verses 1-5, Jesus warns against becoming judgmental. Obviously, Christians are to have a keen sense of right and wrong. However, persons who find it easy to point out the flaws of others are more than likely out of touch with their own flaws, or perhaps living in denial of them. There is really only one way to gain insight with respect to moral failure--by becoming aware of your own. Anyone who has had to deal with the need to honestly face his/her own role in conflicts or failures, and who faced up to the need for forgiveness and repentance will see himself as no better than anyone else in this regard. Judgmentalism therefore often marks an inability to admit to one's own sin.

Therefore, Jesus warns people to indulge first in self-examination before picking apart the sins of others. Moral clarity comes not from taking on the role of a judge of others. Rather, it comes from having first honestly judged oneself. This alone will give us clarity in these matters. Moreover, it will punch holes in our false pride and give us empathy with respect to the failures of others. This in fact, is a big part of the challenge to love your neighbor. The more we see ourselves in need of forgiveness and mercy, the more we will be able to forgive and show mercy. Pride is a defense against openly acknowledging one's own sinfulness. Honesty in this regard will lead to humility, and humility will lead to a feeling of solidarity with others.

In verse 6, Jesus warns against those he refers to as "dogs" or "swine." Not everyone is a candidate for receiving the Gospel message. In fact, enemies of Christian faith will use your witness against you in an attempt to degrade you personally. This is true in all sorts of endeavors. Whether it's politics, religion, or some other concern, there are those who will not just disagree with you. They will hurl personal attacks as well. These folks are incapable of receiving any kind of message that challenges or represents a call to change. It is best to avoid these gremlins.

In verses 7-11, Jesus assures us that anyone who seeks the joy of a relationship with God will receive it. Fellowship with God is not something we can accomplish through our own efforts. Only God can create fellowship with himself. Communion with God comes through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who comes to us through our faith in Jesus Christ is our access to God. Otherwise God remains hidden and entirely unavailable. Jesus wants us to know that God will respond favorably to those seekers who are truly willing to come before him with a sincere and open heart. In fact, that is the extent of what we can do when it comes to communion with God.

Why would we do this? Why would we come before God, willing to let go of anything that our hearts cling to in order to cling to God instead? For one simple reason. The desire for God is built into us. Our hearts will either seek the living God, or they will create idols.

The desire to commune with God is the same thing as our pursuit of happiness. Because our souls are disconnected from God—their source and creator—they lack the very thing that gives peace, joy, and love. Therefore, we are vulnerable to seeking these things in other ways. But this won't work for the simple reason that any created object cannot give us what we seek.

Pleasure seeking is one common substitute. But this results in going from one thing to the next. Nothing gives unending pleasure. We become bored and so need to find something else. This is a complete waste of one's life because at the end of the day, the only thing left is emptiness, boredom, or dissatisfaction. It's as if your whole life goes up in smoke.

"Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you," said St. Augustine. Why is fellowship with God the only road to life, joy and love? Because that is what God is. God does not have goodness. He is goodness. God does not have love. He is love. God does not have wisdom. He is wisdom. And he is everlasting life.

Therefore, only God can give what our hearts seek. Why then do so many people look elsewhere for their soul's delight? Why do so many choose idols, that is, seek life and meaning in mere objects of this world?

Jesus addresses this in verses 13-14. "Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction..." The road to God is narrow because seeking God requires willing one thing above all others. In the context of a world that offers an abundance of things to choose—things may create an immediate but false sense of fulfillment and joy. The wide road is the road that includes whatever the world offers—a wide array of things in which to lose oneself. Many take this road because it is easy, quick, and promises immediate relief from our restlessness, anxiety, and our creeping sense of depression. It is hard to fast when there is a buffet of delicious food in front of you.

The road to God is hard because it requires a pure heart, a heart that seeks what it needs only in God Himself. God has made himself available in Jesus Christ. He has opened the door, and he has poured out the Spirit to guide us. Here then is goodness, life, love, and unending joyful worship. Attaining fellowship with God requires a single-minded and unending quest. God wants our whole being. He is not willing to share us with those things that take up the lions' share of our energy on a day-to-day basis. Paul said, "Pray without ceasing."

This does not mean we have to give up everything else and become a monk. But it does mean that seeking God becomes our highest priority. And it also means that if anything gets in the way of this, if our hearts need to let go of anything that has become an idol, then that is what we do. The road to God is also hard because it is an inward journey. God cannot be found in the external world. Aside from the means of grace, the word and sacraments through which the Spirit come to us, the external world is a place of distraction and idol making. The Holy Spirit, source of love and life, lives within.

So while the gate to life is narrow and hard, Jesus assures us that those who seek will find. It does not happen quickly, or even finally in this life. We have no control over the Spirit of God. In fact, sometimes we will experience the Spirit's presence when we ask for it, and sometimes we won't. But there is growth over time. Remember that with God, a thousand years is as second to us. Therefore, as Jesus promised in the parable of the unjust judge, God will quickly answer our prayers for the Holy Spirit. And with the Spirit come joy, love, and everlasting life.

In verse 12, Jesus offers the simplest way to fulfill all the law and all the prophets. That is a vast amount of material. It includes the moral law (the Ten Commandments) and the witness of many prophets whom God sent to warn his people against disobedience and to encourage them to do the right thing. Nevertheless, while all of this looks complex on the face of it, these instructions boil down to what has been called "The Golden Rule."

In verses 5-20, Jesus warns his disciples that they will encounter people he describes as "false prophets." A false prophet is a person who claims to offer the word of God. However, some of these "prophets" are not motivated by concern with the truth, nor are they calling people to an authentic faith in Jesus Christ. Some may want to collect disciples for the purpose of creating a cult with the leader as a god-like substitute for Christ. Some may be interested in creating their own little empire and collecting as much wealth for themselves in the process. Yet others may be concerned to promote a political or cultural movement using the Gospel as a mask for their real goals.

For the discerning person--a person who is not vulnerable to a charismatic leader who has the power to mystify them in their immature and needy state of mind—these "wolves in sheep's clothing" will be easy to identify. Their goals will be the exact opposite of our freedom in Christ. Rather, they will seek to enslave and control their followers, to bend the will of others to their own, and thereby manipulate people for the sake of things that have nothing to do with a Christ-centered spirituality. Do they seek unquestioned obedience to their will? Do they identify all outsiders as evil? Do they endeavor to create a separatist group, a group that is insulated from the larger society and world? If so, they are ministers of the devil with a message that will rob their followers of freedom and dignity, to say nothing of their life in Christ.

Jesus uses a familiar image to make this warning clear. Good trees bear healthy fruit. If you see a tree that bears unhealthy fruit, the tree is diseased. Persons who proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ so that their hearers will experience the love, joy, and life that comes to those who receive this word from God are people who can be described as "good trees." The "good fruit" are people who worship Christ and only him. Those who twist and distort the word of God to serve their own purposes will create communities of people who are enslaved to them or to their ideology. They will worship and serve something or someone other than Christ. This is the "bad fruit" that leads to disease and death. Beware. There are times in life when need, suffering, or immaturity will make people vulnerable to these "wolves" who desire to devour their sheep rather than care for them.

In verses 24-27 Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a promise and a warning after the fashion of the prophets who were sent to the people of ancient Israel. Again, he was an image that makes his message easy to comprehend. Jesus always does this because he is not speaking to the sophisticated Greek philosophers who were gathered at the famous "Areopagus" in Athens. There people schooled in the philosophy of ancient Greece gathered to debate the latest fashionable ideas. This place was something like the forums sponsored by think tanks or other cultured organizations where folk can come and hear the latest wisdom from the progressive cultured elite. While such forums can be very informative, often what you hear are adult versions of snot-nosed kids who think they are smarter than those people who typically make up the "lower classes" in our society. (See Acts 17:16-34)

Jesus is decidedly not speaking to the educated and cultured elite. His disciples, and most of the people he interacted with, were common Galileans—fishermen, farmers, artisans, day laborers, not to mention "sinners and tax collectors." And yet his wisdom cuts through any form of intellectualism and the complexity it often presents. The truth is simple, not complex. This is true wisdom, not years of book learning. Ecclesiastes warned his readers that of the writing of books, there is no end. Time has confirmed the truth of this observation.

Jesus' promise is this: if we hear and act on his words, we will be the wise man who built his house on a foundation that was strong enough to withstand storms. Those who hear but do not act are like a fool who built his house on a foundation of sand. While he may have had a great view when the weather was calm, a strong coastal storm washed the house away and left him with nothing.

An act requires that we will to do something. But what is Jesus saying in this regard? Is he saying that if we act according to his teachings on the law that this will result in our ability to withstand the storms of life—those times when we are vulnerable and under a threat of some kind? The symbolism is pretty clear to me. The storms represent events that make us vulnerable to a loss of faith. We are the house that represents our lives, our sense of well-being, our hopes, and our ability to move on after the storm has passed. The sand is anything other than Jesus, for only in him do we have hope, strength, new life, and the assurance of a future that has no end. Putting our faith and the trust of our hearts in anything from the world is by definition sand, for all temporal things eventually pass out of being.

So the answer to the above question is both yes and no. The answer is *yes* so long as we understand that we can do what he says only after having received the gift of faith. He is the rock. Our lives are built on the rock when the faith of our hearts is centered on him. The answer is *no* if we think that our doing is somehow an act based on our own ability and power to do as he says.

The better answer to the question is what he means when he says we must act on the basis of what we hear is that he is referring to the will to believe. Faith is an act of the will. While we cannot produce faith on the basis of our own ability to act, nevertheless,

the gift of faith that comes from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit still involves an act of the will. (See Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles Creed.) The Holy Spirit doesn't force us to believe. Rather, the Holy Spirit frees our will from its bondage to sin so that we are freed to believe. We still make what Kierkegaard called "a leap of faith, even though the Spirit, not "our own power and ability" makes it possible. (Luther)

So, yes, we are required to act on what we hear. When the Holy Spirit sees fit to free us from our bondage to the idols of this world, we act by taking steps to believe in Jesus Christ instead. This is how salvation is actualized in our lives, and therefore this is how we receive the gifts of forgiveness, love, and new life in Christ. The storms of life cannot rob us of Christ. He is for us like California's rocky shoreline. The waves of the Pacific beat against it day in and day out; nevertheless it remains in all of its stark beauty.

Matthew ends the chapter by observing that those who heard Jesus were "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

The Son of God does not teach on the basis of what others have said. His words are self-evident to those who have ears to hear.

*Thus endeth Chapter 7*