

3. Jesus represented entrance into the kingdom of heaven in terms of a two-fold dynamic – not that there are two actual ways into it, but that, with their natural minds, men conceive of the heavenly kingdom and their passage into it in one way, while the truth is something else altogether. Men are instinctively drawn to a particular gate that opens onto its own path. This gate is an innate conception of the natural human mind, and this is the reason that it is the same for all people regardless of personal, cultural or religious sensibilities. In their fallen state, all men see only one gate into spiritual well-being; the true gate and true path elude them. Worse yet, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that their perception is legitimated and their confidence bolstered by a great cloud of witnesses who are, in reality, false prophets – wolves in sheep’s clothing.

But the reason men perceive and are drawn to a false gate is that their minds are darkened. They agree that righteousness is the credential for entrance into the kingdom of heaven (or, more generically, into the state of spiritual well-being, however that may be conceived), but they naturally and necessarily make the critical error of looking to themselves for that righteousness. And so, as there are two gates, two paths and two trees each bearing its own fruit, so there are two claims associated with the righteousness requirement for entrance into the kingdom of heaven (7:21-23).

- a. The first thing to note in examining this passage is that Jesus differentiated those two claims on the basis of their relationship to doing God’s will: All men have a claim (conscious or otherwise) concerning their right to the kingdom of heaven, but *doing*, rather than *saying*, is the actual criterion for entrance into it.

Jesus’ declaration immediately jumps out at the reader, and that, along with the fact that people are naturally given to self-righteous religion, makes it not at all surprising that Jesus’ meaning is widely misinterpreted. All human beings innately believe that personal righteousness ultimately secures their spiritual well-being, and Jesus seems here to be affirming that conviction: *The same natural-mindedness that causes men to see and move toward the wide gate also leads them to find in Jesus’ words an affirmation of the perspective and orientation He was confronting and condemning throughout the entire discourse.* Ironically, multitudes of Christian teachers whose sincere intent is to uphold and expound Jesus’ instruction in the Sermon on the Mount actually oppose it. They promote as the way into the kingdom the very approach Jesus was warning against.

This becomes more evident when Jesus’ words are carefully examined within their historical and salvation-historical context.

- Jesus was speaking to a group of people who found their confidence before God in their genealogy and conformity to the demands of the Law of Moses. The Israelites of Jesus’ day recognized that they would need a claim to enter Messiah’s kingdom when God was pleased to inaugurate it. In that day, they would indeed say to their Messiah, “*Lord, Lord.*” But their claim was their Abrahamic credential and history of obedience to the Law; their *doing* would be the substance of their *saying*.

- Now the day of Messiah had dawned in Israel, and Jesus knew that, while many would reject His messianic claims and evidences, many others would embrace Him as the One promised by the Law, Prophets, and Writings. They would embrace Him as their Messiah, *but from the vantage point of their natural-minded sensibilities and expectations.*
- Standing on that hillside at the outset of His self-presentation to Israel, Jesus knew that most of those who would receive Him as God's Messiah would do so based on their own definition and expectations of who and what Messiah would be. In this way, their embrace was no different from the scorn and rejection expressed by others: *Both groups were responding to a conception in their own minds.* Perhaps more than any of the gospel writers, John understood and addressed this dynamic and the danger of pseudo-faith (cf. John 1:9-11, 2:23-24, 3:1-12, 6:1-29, 8:31-47, etc.).

In context, Jesus was confronting in advance what He knew would be the false faith of the people of Israel. Many would marvel and "believe in Him" because of the power of His words and works, but they would frame their belief in terms of their own natural-minded conceptions and convictions regarding the Messiah and the nature and righteousness of His kingdom. *They would seek to sew a new patch on an old garment or put new wine into an old flask* (Matthew 9:14-33).

- Many would reject Him as an imposter as they increasingly found His words and actions to be confounding and at odds with their expectations.
- Others would recast what they heard and saw to fit their own sensibilities and convictions. The result was that they embraced, not the true Jesus, but a pseudo-messiah formed in their own image (Mark 8:1-33; John 6:1-15).
- Only a few in Israel came to recognize that the kingdom of heaven is radically different than what they conceived it to be, and even those individuals didn't fully understand until the Lord poured out His Spirit following His ascension and enthronement (John 16:1-18; Acts 1:1-8).

Jesus well knew how things would play out over the next three years, and it was with this understanding that He spoke to the multitude on the hillside. It wasn't that none listening to Him that day would go on to receive Him as the promised Messiah; He was aware that some would, along with multitudes of others in Israel. But most would believe in Him and embrace Him falsely, perceiving Him and His words and works through the flawed perspective of a natural mind.

- It's not that many of the sons of Israel (and, by extension, other men as well) wouldn't cry out to Him, "*Lord, Lord,*" on the last day.
- Neither would their plea be disingenuous; Jesus acknowledged that it will be bolstered by the valid claim of having acted *in His name* (7:22).

- Beyond that, their claim to have labored in Jesus' authority and for His sake will be substantiated by the nature and power of what they will have said and done. When they stand poised to enter His kingdom, men will be able to point to their zealous and orthodox proclamation as well their apparent triumph over demonic and natural forces by miraculous works.
- b. In all of these things, Jesus intentionally constructed a scenario that He knew would be regarded as constituting an air-tight claim to the kingdom of heaven.
- The Jews of Jesus' day had a saying that, if only two men entered the kingdom of God, one would be a Pharisee and the other a scribe. This conviction was grounded in the fact that these were the men of impeccable pedigree. They labored in study and teaching and were meticulous adherents to even the most minute demands of the Law and rabbinical tradition. Furthermore, it was at the hand of such holy men that demonic powers seemed to be successfully overcome (Matthew 12:27).
 - It's true that those Israelites who later came to embrace Jesus as the Christ recognized that these things don't constitute a legitimate claim on the kingdom of heaven. Outright rejection of Jesus would leave Israel's holy men outside the kingdom, whatever their scholarship and piety. But in their acknowledgement of Him as Messiah, most Israelites didn't depart from the fundamental convictions of those who rejected Him. They, too, believed that they would be received into the kingdom on the basis of personal righteousness, albeit in connection with their labors on Christ's behalf. Jesus' summary of their claim betrays the point of their confidence before Him: "*Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many powerful works?*"
- c. The Sermon on the Mount sets forth Jesus' gospel of His kingdom – the kingdom that He had already begun announcing to Israel as being "*at hand*" (4:17). The in-breaking presence of the kingdom indicated the inauguration of the messianic age, which was further attested by Jesus' works in the power of Spirit (Matthew 12:28; cf. Luke 9:1-2, 10:1-11, 11:14-20). The kingdom of heaven was already at hand as Jesus stood before the multitude that day in Galilee, but in this particular passage He was speaking of the kingdom in terms of its consummation when men will take their place in it after prevailing at the bar of His judgment (Matthew 8:10-12, 13:36-43, 25:31-34; cf. also Mark 14:23-25; Luke 13:23-30). It's at that time that many will submit to Jesus the self-confident claim of v. 7:22, and He wanted His hearers to understand in no uncertain terms that He will meet this claim with a pronouncement of condemnation: "*Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness; I never knew you*" (7:23).

This declaration brings the passage to its climax and provides its crucial interpretive content. Without verse 23, Jesus' opening statement (7:21) could easily be misconstrued; interpreted in light of it, His meaning becomes clear.

The first thing to keep in mind is that this passage is part of the larger context in which Jesus addressed entrance into the kingdom of heaven in terms of a series of contrasting pairs. Secondly, He began in verse 7:21 by insisting that this entrance is a matter of action and not words: The kingdom belongs to those who **do** the will of the Father in heaven. But now in closing, He was declaring that it is **knowledge** that determines who enters it, *and He importantly set that knowledge in contradistinction to both the words and works of those who act in His name*. At first glance, all of this may seem puzzling, but Jesus' meaning is profoundly simple and perfectly consistent with the broader context and overall discourse.

- Jesus insisted that knowledge is the core issue for entering His kingdom – not men's knowledge of Him, but *His knowledge of them*. In the end, it doesn't matter whether a person believes He knows Jesus and is serving Him; what matters is whether Jesus knows him. This is not to imply that knowing the Lord is irrelevant or that those who don't know Him enter His kingdom. By speaking in this way, Jesus wasn't saying that the sons of His kingdom don't know (or need to know) Him; He was emphasizing that their knowledge of Him is grounded in His knowing them.
- Key to understanding Jesus' meaning is the fact that He was referring to *relational* knowledge. If He had been speaking of cognitive, informational knowledge, His statement would be absurd, for the divine Son knows all men even as He knows all things. But though no person is exempt from His scrutiny, there are countless individuals whom He doesn't know relationally – multitudes who remain alienated from Him. Jesus comes to “know” men when they are reconciled and joined to Him by His Spirit; and in His knowledge of them, they also come to know Him.
- Furthermore, Jesus referred to those whom He doesn't know as “*workers of lawlessness*” (7:23). This statement is crucially important to the passage, but its meaning depends on the exact relationship between His knowledge of men and their lawlessness. In that regard, many see a “cause and effect” relationship in which Jesus' knowledge of a person is ultimately determined by that individual's conduct. In other words, the Lord has no relationship with evildoers, either because He refuses them or because they refuse Him.

Underlying this view is the unspoken presumption that *lawlessness* refers to evil behavior. “Workers of lawlessness” are therefore people who live immoral or ungodly lives, opposing God and His holy standard in both word and deed. But Jesus was defining these individuals in a very different way: *The lawless persons He was indicting as not known by Him are the very ones who had ministered in His name and for His sake*. He was not speaking of evil men who reject and oppose Him, but individuals who have embraced Him and labored in His service. It is such men who will hear His denunciation, “*Depart from Me, I never knew you.*”

The relationship between Christ's knowledge of men and their conformity to His law isn't one of cause and effect. One doesn't follow upon the other; each directly and necessarily implies the other: *Those whom Christ doesn't know – those who remain estranged from Him in their unbelief – are, in that fact alone, constituted lawless ones.*

Estrangement (with its unbelief) is itself lawlessness, for Christ's entrance into the world has made obedience to God and His Law synonymous with faith in His Son. With the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven, doing the will of God has become believing in the One whom He has sent (John 6:29), even as listening to and obeying the Law consists in coming to Christ in faith and finding one's life and righteousness in Him (Galatians 4:21-31, cf. 3:15-29; also Acts 17:30-31).

Jesus' Jewish audience understood "lawlessness" as failure to conform to the Law of Moses, and the Law – being the covenant that defined Israel's identity as "son of God" and prescribed how the nation was to live out its sonship – served a prophetic and pedagogical role, portraying and preparing for the True Israel and True Son. Now that the "ends of the ages" had come, the Law had fulfilled its function in salvation history: *Obedience to the Law's demand of sonship – fulfilled by Christ, the True Son, has, for men, become life as bona fide sons realized through union with and life in Him.* The One who stood before the multitude on the hillside hadn't come to abrogate the Law, but to fulfill it.

Thus, in this context Jesus was saying that authentic, intimate relationship with Him, not behavior, defines "doing the will of God" and determines who enters the kingdom of heaven. And inasmuch as the absence of that relationship amounts to human lawlessness, it follows that the failure and culpability with respect to relational knowledge between Christ and men lie with men themselves (cf. Isaiah 1:1-4 with 5:1-7; also Hosea 2:1-13 with 11:1-4). *It's not that Jesus holds them away; it's that they refuse to come* (John 5:39-40; cf. Matthew 21:33-44, 22:1-6, 23:37; Luke 14:16-24; Acts 7:35-53; etc.).

And as it was with the Jews of Jesus' generation, so it is with all men: Their refusal to entrust themselves to the Son in faith is grounded in their insistence upon establishing their own righteousness (Romans 9:30-10:4). Men intrinsically understand that the best way to avoid Jesus is to avoid sin. *They miss the narrow gate because their gaze is locked on the wide gate.* And having fixed their eyes upon it, they pass through it and eagerly set themselves on the broad path that lies beyond, fully confident of the claim they will present to the Lord who awaits them at the end of their journey. But, for all their confidence, those who will present to the King their words and deeds will receive, not a rich welcome, but condemnation and banishment.

But as there are two gates, two paths and two trees, so there are two claims. Not all will be driven away; some will be welcomed into the heavenly kingdom – now, in the present age, and later in the consummation to come. These will not claim their words and deeds, but the righteousness of the King Himself. These, as true children of Abraham, will take their place with him at the festal table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:22-30).