

Sermon 47, Who Will Enter the Kingdom of Heaven?, Matthew 7:21-23

There are two signs of genuineness: doing the will of the Father and knowing Jesus. — Dan Doriani

“The *essential* characteristic of the true believer . . . is *obedience*.” — Don Carson

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Proposition: Jesus will make the final decision on whether you’re saved, and He will decide based on whether He knows you and whether you obey His Father.

As our Lord Jesus winds up this sermon, He drives home repeatedly the message that obedience is not optional. He contrasts two ways — the way of obedience and the way of disobedience — over and over. He speaks in terms of two ways, two trees, two destinies, and two builders. We’ve looked at the two ways and the two trees. This morning we come to the two destinies. These are (1) entering the Kingdom of Heaven or (2) being excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven. As you could know just by thinking about it, Jesus is the one who gets to make the final decision about who enters the Kingdom and who’s excluded from it. That’s really what He’s announcing here. He’s already talked about the two ways and the two trees. But now, He reveals that He is the final arbiter. He tells us what His criteria are, too. How will He decide who to let into His Kingdom and who to exclude? Strictly by evaluating whether He knows you and whether you obey His Father.

I. Jesus Will Decide Who’s Saved, vv. 21-23

The first thing we need to see in this text is Jesus’ announcement, for the first time in this sermon, that He is the final arbiter, the supreme judge, the one who will make the final decision regarding who gets into God’s kingdom and who’s excluded from it. Notice the picture He paints

here. People are coming up to Him and saying things, telling Him why they should be allowed into His Kingdom. He tells us that many of these people will be excluded, and in fact that He will personally exclude them.

So far, Jesus has preached about His Father. He's told us what the Father is like, what the Father does. But now He announces something about Himself. Notice that there is no appeal above and beyond His decisions. One can't go to the Father and say, "Jesus told me to leave. Can I stay?" No. It doesn't work that way. What Jesus decides, the Father agrees with. You will never get the Father to reverse one of Jesus' decisions. Indeed, Jesus tells us elsewhere that the Father has handed over all these decisions to Him. "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:22-23). So Jesus will make that final decision about whether you're in or out.

What is this "Kingdom of Heaven," though, in which you could be included or from which you may be excluded, depending on what Jesus decides? Is this best understood as a reference to what we call Heaven, that is the place of eternal bliss where God resides and to which believers will be welcomed at the moment of their death? Or is it best understood as "The Kingdom," that is, the domain in which God rules which is both present on Earth right now and coming in its consummate fullness at the end of history?

The words of v. 21 could apply to either Heaven or the The Kingdom. But the scenario pictured in vv. 22-23 can only apply to the last judgment, when Jesus finally and irrevocably rejects everyone who does not meet His criteria. Right now, in this world, it is perfectly true that merely saying "Lord, Lord," is not enough to make someone a Christian. But being lawless in this world does not lead to a final rejection and condemnation until the end. Yes, John says that the one who does not believe is condemned already. But this condemnation is clearly a provisional condemnation, barring repentance and salvation. If it were an ultimate condemnation, then no one who was not already a believer when John wrote those words could ever be saved — which is absurd. The finality with which Jesus pronounces His rejection of these workers of lawlessness indicates that the conversation described here will take place at the Last Judgment, and not before.

In sum, Jesus has announced that He will judge whether to accept or reject every human being. But more than that, He has already, in this passage, announced His criteria.

II. Jesus Has Announced His Criteria, vv. 21-23

How will Jesus decide whether to accept or reject any particular person? Well, He starts with the negative.

A. Profession of Faith Is Not Enough, v. 21a

He will reject people who profess outwardly but lack the inward reality. What does He mean by this "Lord, Lord"? Well, the central Christian confession is that Jesus is Lord. Paul tells us that this confession is absolutely necessary for salvation. Jesus rules. Jesus rules omnipotently. Jesus is the one we know as the LORD from the Old Testament — that is, He is the God of Israel, Yahweh come in the flesh. Unless you confess this, you cannot be saved.

(By the way, you may have heard of the debate in some Christian circles over the last thirty years regarding “Lordship salvation.” Those opposed to Lordship salvation said that you could have Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. Those in favor of Lordship salvation said that if Jesus is your Savior, then He is automatically and necessarily your Lord too. The Lordship salvation faction were and are right. To be saved, you must confess Jesus not only as Savior but as Lord.)

The people envisaged here are saying that Jesus is Lord, and they’re saying it to His face. More than that, they are doubling it. What does that mean? Paul doesn’t say that you have to confess that Jesus is “Lord, Lord”! Well, the other place in Scripture that we see this doubled naming of someone is in David’s lament over Absalom. “Then the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went, he said thus:

O my son Absalom—

My son, my son Absalom--

If only I had died in your place!

O Absalom my son, my son!” (2Sa 18:33)

What does this doubling of the name indicate? It means love, intimacy, attachment. That’s why David cries out “Absalom, Absalom!” That’s why William Faulkner took this exclamation from King David as the title of one of his books. Even today, across the three millennia that separate us from David, we hear the pain in this lament. We feel David’s mourning.

Well, that’s what’s going on in “Lord, Lord.” These people are trying to indicate love, intimacy, and closeness. They aren’t standoffish; they are intimate with Jesus! At least, they think they are. They talk like they love Jesus as much as David loved Absalom. In short, you can say that they make the central Christian confession, that Jesus is Lord, and they make it with the implication that they love Him and know Him intimately.

Now, the tricky part here is that such a confession is required for salvation, in normal cases where a person is able to speak and so on. Paul tells us that you have to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. The whole Bible tells us that we have to love Jesus and know Him intimately. And these people say both of those things — which tells us that verbal profession of submission and loyalty is not enough. Saying “I’m a Christian. Jesus is my Lord. I love Jesus” doesn’t necessarily prove anything. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions for salvation.

This is some scary teaching! As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, we would reject this out of hand unless it were Jesus Himself saying it. What it emphasizes is that Christianity is a heart religion. Unless you know and love Jesus from your heart (and not just with your mouth, like Judas, who kissed Jesus with his mouth!), you don’t have true salvation and genuine eternal life.

B. Obedience to the Father’s Commands Is Required, v. 21b

So Jesus tells us what’s required in addition to profession of love. This is obedience. You have to do the will of Jesus’ Father. You need to know what God the Father requires, and you have to do it.

Now, is this a sufficient condition for salvation? Yes, but only in an absolute sense. In other words, doing the Father's will is enough to save you only if you do nothing but the Father's will and do the Father's will all the time. Only if you have never violated the Father's will once is this condition sufficient for salvation. But if, like me, you find yourself in the position of having done at least one thing God said not to do, then obedience to the Father's commands is still required but is not, by itself, sufficient for salvation. It has what we call joint sufficiency with the other requirement mentioned in v. 23 — that is, the requirement that you be known by Jesus. If you now obey the Father's will and are known by Jesus, that's sufficient to save you no matter how many sins you have committed. But again, these are joint conditions. You must obey God's commands as well as profess submission to the Lordship of Jesus and intimacy with Jesus.

So this brings up the question: do you obey the Father's commands? Do you know what the Father requires, and do you have significant success in attempting to do it? If not, Jesus says, then you will not enter Heaven. Only a good person can stand before God.

C. Spiritual Activities Are Not Enough, v. 22

Well, in v. 22, Jesus returns to the discussion of what is insufficient for salvation. He lists four things that are insufficient for salvation.

1. Accurate Declaration of God's Word Doesn't Prove Salvation, v. 22a

The first of these is "prophesying." To prophesy is to speak forth words from God. It is to declare what God said to you. In a strong form, it is the declaration of new revelations directly from God, never told to anyone before. In a weak form, the form in which the church has it today, it is accurate exposition and proclamation of the already-revealed and written Word of God. Thus, if you can accurately describe the contents of this Sermon on the Mount, that doesn't necessarily prove anything about whether you're saved. You can fervently expound and proclaim the good word of God, but that doesn't save you.

2. Tremendous Victories Over Evil Don't Prove Salvation, v. 22b

The second thing that's insufficient is amazing victories over the forces of evil. You can drive back the darkness — even, Jesus says, cast out demons — and yet not actually be saved. How can Satan cast out Satan? I don't know. Perhaps Jesus is referencing the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, such as came on Saul and Balaam. You can have the Holy Spirit in you, but not in a saving way. You can have His spiritual power to defeat the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, and not be saved.

3. Displays of Spiritual Power Don't Prove Salvation, v. 22c

Indeed, displays of spiritual power don't prove salvation. Jesus gets vague here, speaking of "many mighty works." What sort of mighty works? Any sort. We're talking healings. Unexplained financial gifts arriving just in time to keep some Kingdom project going. Addictions cured. Thousands saved at mega-evangelism rallies. Those sorts of mighty works.

Are those things cool? Yes. Do they help people? Often they do. But are they enough to show that you're definitely saved, that you have found Jesus and that you're on your way to

Heaven? No. Mighty works are mighty works — cool, helpful, great, but not evidence of salvation either way.

Theologians account for this by talking about the gifts of the Spirit and the graces of the Spirit. By the gifts of the Spirit, they mean empowerment for any and every human skill. But the graces of the Spirit are how He changes your heart and applies the finished work of Jesus Christ to you for your salvation. The gifts are cool, but only the graces save. You can have major empowerment by the Holy Spirit and not be a Christian. That's what Jesus is warning us about right here in this verse.

4. Claiming Jesus' Name Doesn't Prove Salvation, v. 22

Notice that these people in v. 22 are still saying "Lord, Lord," and they are careful to specify that for everything they did, the credit went right back to Jesus. They healed in His name. They cast out demons in His name. They declared the word of God in His name. "In the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God, I tell you that the power of this addiction is broken!" And what's more, it really is! Yet Jesus says that's no proof of salvation. Giving all the credit to Jesus may be accurate, and is certainly right — but it is no certain evidence that someone is really and truly saved.

In short, Christianity is not ultimately about external power and works, or even external professions. Jesus says that doing amazing things is not sufficient for salvation, any more than saying correct things is sufficient for salvation.

D. Being Known By Jesus Is Essential, v. 23a

Instead, He tells us how He will judge. He judge based on whether you did His Father's will, and He will judge based on whether He knows you. That's it. Those are His two criteria. When you stand before God, you can't and mustn't plead anything other than these two jointly sufficient criteria: I did the Father's will, and Jesus knows me.

Which of these is more important? Whether Jesus knows you. The Bible is very clear that no human being except Jesus has ever done the Father's will perfectly. Thus, that condition is a relative condition. We're talking relatively good at keeping God's law versus relatively bad at keeping God's law. But being known by Jesus is an absolute condition. Either He knows you, or He doesn't. If He does, then He gives you ability to keep His Father's commandments. If He doesn't, then you will never keep the Father's commandments well enough to make up for the fact that Jesus doesn't know you.

So these two are jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for entrance into Heaven. Do you want to be sure you get in? Then you have to be known by Jesus.

How can you be sure that He knows you? By whether you keep His commands. That's what the Apostle John says.

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we

know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. (1Jo 2:3-6 NKJ)

This is John's verdict. You can attain to certainty that Jesus knows you if are obeying Him. You can know that you know Him, and you can know that this knowledge is reciprocal. It's not the obedience that earns the reward of being known by Jesus; no, you can only obey when He knows you and sends you His Spirit to empower your obedience.

E. Jesus Will Reject Lawbreakers, v. 23b

So you have to be known by Jesus, and you have to keep the Father's commandments. You can't keep the commandments unless Jesus knows you and helps you with His Holy Spirit. But if you don't keep the commandments, Jesus promises to utterly and finally reject you. Not only will He say that He doesn't know you, He'll say that He never knew you. The implication of this should comfort you: if Jesus knows you now, He will still know you at the final judgment. He will not reject you there; He will welcome you as one of His own.

What does being rejected by the most loving and gracious man who ever lived do to you? It stuns you. It is the greatest pain of Hell, to know that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is against you. Never mind that everyone whom Christ rejects has already decisively and definitively rejected Christ and preferred sin. The pain of being rejected is still immense, is still overpowering. This is not something you want to hear. This is not a rejection you want to experience. Don't be the person whom Jesus never knew!

How can you get to know Him? You have to ask Him in prayer to come and meet you. You have to read His word. You have to spend time with Him. You have to obey Him and His Father. That's how you get to know Jesus. And when you know Him, then you know eternal life. Then you have passed from death into life.

Seek Jesus. Know Jesus. And on that great day, He will recognize you. He will welcome you. Don't trust in your amazing displays of spiritual power. Trust in Jesus Christ, the one who came to save. Amen.