



THE INESCAPABLE CHOICE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1100

Matthew 7:13-20

22nd Message

Gary Vanderet

September 28th, 1997

Christianity is not a philosophy, it is founded upon a person, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is central to everything Christians believe. Trying to take Jesus from Christianity would be like trying to take numbers from mathematics. It cannot be done. Other major religions center on certain beliefs, but Christianity centers on a person, an astonishing, marvelous, beautiful person.

There are a great many impressions of Christ going around today, but most of them are far removed from the biblical picture of Jesus. Listen to what Dorothy Sayers writes of him:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe. . . He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites. He referred to King Herod as “that fox”; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a “gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners”; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people’s pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth and social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb. Jesus was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime. If he was God, there can be nothing dull about God, either. But He had “a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly,” and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

Jesus is the most radical, the most revolutionary character in human history. More books have been written about him, more music has been composed to him, more portraits have been painted of him than any other person who has ever lived.

As we come to chapter 7 in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount, today we find that the main body of Jesus’ teaching is completed, and our Lord now begins his conclusion or application. He has finished his mani-

fest. He has explained what his kingdom is about and what its citizens will look like. He has contrasted two kinds of righteousness, two treasures, two masters, and two ambitions. Now the time for a decision has come. Which will we choose, the prevailing culture or the authentic Christian counter-culture he has been describing? Will it be the kingdom of Satan or the Kingdom of God?

In these verses notice that Jesus mentions two ways, two paths, two routes. Each has a gate, a road, and a destination, and a group of people are traveling on that road. Chapter 7, verse 13:

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. (Matt 7:13-14, NASB)

What is immediately striking about these verses is the absolute nature of the choice set before us. We would prefer to have more choices than one, many more. Better yet, we would like to fuse them all into a blended religion; then we wouldn’t need to make a choice. As John Stott writes: “But Jesus cuts across our easygoing syncretism. He will not allow us the comfortable solutions we propose. Instead, he insists that ultimately there is only one choice, because there are only two possibilities to choose from.”

What a blow to our politically correct generation! Supposing you were in at the San Jose Arena for the Billy Graham Crusade last night and you were trying to get into the building. Together with thousands of others you were inching your way along, trying to press through the gates. While you were standing there, someone moved in alongside of you. He told you he was an official, and said that you were in the wrong line. No one in your line realized this, but all of you were going to end up in the parking lot, not the arena. The way to get into the arena, he said, was through a little door, which he pointed to. You looked and saw that the door indeed wasn’t very big, and you could not see any markings on it. You did see a few people going through it, but the overwhelming majority of people were in your line. You asked yourself, “Can all these people be wrong? Can I really believe that the little door which the man pointed to was the way into the arena?” That is the tension we are faced with when the Lord says “enter by the narrow gate”— because the whole world is going in the other direction! Their phi-

losophy of life is that you can do it all by yourself.

Jesus says that there are only two ways because there are only two choices. That has been true since the very beginning. We can either choose to subject ourselves to God and do things his way, or we can choose to go our own way, live our own life and make our own decisions. The choice that Adam faced is our choice as well. That is what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolized in the Garden. It wasn't the fruit itself that poisoned the man (there was nothing inherently evil about the fruit), it represented the choice that man has to make. He could either let God tell him everything, what is good and what is evil, or he could go his own way and learn for himself the nature of good and evil. He could experiment with life. He could try things out, live his own life, determine his own code of conduct.

The broad way is the world's way. It says you don't need anybody. It's crazy to give up your rights to serve anyone. After all, according to the marketers, you "only go through life once," you have got to "grab the brass ring," and "go for the gusto." We are assured that we have everything it takes to live life the way it ought to be lived. But Jesus says no, that is absolutely wrong. You don't have what it takes, because the righteousness that is expected of people is a supernatural righteousness. The only way to really be a man or a woman is to count on Jesus. It all depends on him! Jesus says, in effect, "You have to decide. Are you going to go with the crowd, or are you going to go through the narrow gate?"

The broad way is the easy way because nothing is required. We can take everything through that wide gate; we don't have to leave anything behind. The narrow way is hard, because it requires you to humble yourself, to admit your needs and confess your sins. You have to admit that you are spiritually bankrupt, that you have nothing to offer to God. You have to give up hoping for justice and plead for mercy. To enter this gate you have to leave some things behind: your pride, your selfish ambition, sometimes even your family and friends.

Not only are there two ways, two gates, and two groups, as a result, there are only two destinations. We see that in Psalm 1, where "prospering and perishing" are the two alternatives. Moses made it clearer still. He said, "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil,...a blessing and a curse; therefore choose life." Humanity was made to be mastered. We will either be mastered by God or by sin. But we like to think there is a neutral position, that we can run our own lives and live independently. But that is a false view. We are either going to let God master our hearts, and be ruled by him, or sin will control us and conquer us. And destruction is the result of the latter way. Jesus says the broad way leads to destruction. The broad road is a suicide road.

One thing that complicates our decision is that most of the opinion formers, the leading thinkers, the movers

and shakers are telling us that the broad gate is the way to go. You have what it takes, we are assured. That is why Jesus says, in vv 15-20:

"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (7:15-20)

This paragraph is not encouraging us to have a here-sy-hunting mentality. We already have too many self-appointed fruit inspectors running around, asking everyone to lift their leaves so that they can inspect their fruit. The Christian life is a full-time operation, taking care of your own fruit. In fact, Jesus has already warned about a critical and judgmental spirit. But he does not want us to be naive; he doesn't want us to be blind-sided.

In warning us to beware of false prophets, Jesus is assuming that there is an objective standard of truth from which the falsehood of false prophets is to be distinguished. Truth and falsehood naturally exclude one another.

There is an enemy, his name is Satan, and he is out to get you! There are invisible realities, both good and bad, governing and controlling human life. There is an evil one, a hater of men, working behind the scenes. He is a murderer who wants to destroy human beings. His goal is destruction, his process is deception. All this began in the garden when he deceived Eve with his lies, and the sin that resulted brought death to every living human being throughout history.

That lie that Satan whispered to Eve is still believed today. It says that God is not telling us the truth, that he is holding out on us. It says we are sufficient in ourselves to know good from evil, that we can become like God. That is a lie. We are human. We don't know all there is to know. We desperately need the revelation that comes from God alone. No one else can supply it. It can come from no other book.

Jesus has in mind here primarily the religious leaders of his day. "False prophets," he called them, "blind leaders of the blind." They were religious prophets. We can apply this today to anyone who puts himself in a position of prophecy, of proclaiming truth. We can apply it to the philosophers, the theologians, the psychiatrists, the marriage counselors, the economists, the politicians, the anthropologists, the social scientists, the movie producers, the people who form public opinion, who tell us what is right, who set the standard and say, "If you live this way you will find life!" But Jesus says, "Beware of what they tell you. It will not lead you to life. It will lead to destruction. And you will know them

by their fruit.”

The metaphor that Jesus uses to describe these false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves, reminds us that they are both dangerous and deceptive. The danger is that in reality they are wolves. In first century Palestine, wolves were the natural enemy of sheep. Sheep were defenseless against this vicious prey, thus a good shepherd was always on the lookout, protecting his sheep. In his parting words to the Ephesian elders, shortly before his death, Paul said: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

One of the main characteristics of false prophets in the Old Testament was their amoral optimism, their denial that God was the God of judgment as well as loyal love and mercy. Jeremiah accused such prophets of filling people with vain hopes. He said: “They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you.’ God says of them: ‘They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace, when there is no peace.’” This kind of teaching gives people a false sense of security. It lulls them to sleep in their sins. It fails to warn them of the impending judgment of God or tell them how to escape it.

False prophets do the same today. They are adept at blurring the issue of salvation. They distort the gospel so much, they make it difficult to find the narrow gate. Some say the narrow way is much broader than Jesus implied. And perhaps most dangerous of all, some say the broad road does not lead to destruction, that all roads lead to God. That is why Jesus compared false teachers to ravenous wolves. It is not because they are greedy for gain or power, but because they are extremely dangerous. They are responsible for leading some people to the very destruction which they claim does not exist.

So Jesus tells us to beware, to be on our guard. We must pray for discernment and use our minds. Don’t be dazzled by a person’s outward clothing, his charm, his learning, his degrees or honors. Students: Don’t be enamored by your professor’s personality, his knowledge or his oratorical skills. Look beneath the appearance to the reality and determine whether he is a sheep or wolf.

To help us do that, Jesus changes the metaphor. Although it may be possible to mistake a sheep for a wolf, a tree cannot hide its identity forever. Sooner or later it betrays itself by its fruit. Look at your teacher’s character. Is he humble and loving? Does he display kindness, goodness and self control? Or does he manifest enmity and selfishness, jealousy and self indulgence? Not only that, examine his message. Does it match up with the apostles’ teaching? Is there a clear understanding of Jesus’ deity and humanity? Finally, look at his influence. What effect does his teaching have on his followers?

False teaching promotes ungodliness and causes division. Sound teaching produces faith, love, and godliness.

The world is devastated by the exclusivity of the gospel, by its claim that there is only one way to salvation. Of course, that is an audacious claim— unless it is true. That is why read we read in Acts 4, “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” And that is why Jesus said in John 14: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” We are not all climbing a mountain, each of us in our respective religions ascending in a slightly different way, yet all headed to the same destination. Going God’s way cannot be decided upon by an appeal to majority opinion. Salvation is not a popularity contest. You don’t vote on which way to be saved.

If you are planning to go heaven, you have to go God’s way. But doesn’t everyone have the right to his own opinion? you say. That is absolutely correct! But that does not mean that every opinion is right.

If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior, and you can see that you are on the broad road that leads to destruction, I cannot think of a better time or place or group of people for you to come to faith. The thrilling thing about the gospel is that by simple faith you can invite the Lord Jesus to come into your life. You can pass from darkness into his wonderful eternal light and receive the righteousness which God demands, which you could never provide, but which has been provided in the death of Jesus Christ.

At the San Jose Arena last night I was privileged to watch as hundreds of people stood up and admitted they did not have what it takes to live life. They left their seats and went down to the podium to receive Christ. The Christian life is not just difficult, it’s impossible, because it is a supernatural life. Christians are people who have admitted their inadequacy and have invited Christ to take control of their lives and be their Lord and Savior.

A few years ago I came across an article called the “The Art of Being a Big Shot,” by Howard Butts, which speaks very well to this issue. He writes:

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It is appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, and go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can’t go it alone. I have to get help from other people. I can’t ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, and limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not

man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

If you have never before admitted your deep need, I invite you now to confess your inadequacy to God. Let today be the day that you are set free from the inner turmoil and restlessness that has characterized your life. You have been looking for something but all you have found is emptiness and despair. I pray that today will be the day when you agree to give all this up and submit to God and be mastered by him.

© 1997 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino