

Matthew 7:21-23 “The Most Sobering Passage in the Bible”**

Series: The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Living 101

Main Idea: Matthew 7:21-23 is perhaps the most sobering passage in the Bible. In this passage, Jesus reveals three sobering realities.

- I. The sobering inadequacy of a person’s confession (21)
 - A. Not everyone who says they are going to heaven will be there.
 - B. To go to heaven, we must do the will of the Father.
- II. The sobering deception of a person’s claims (22)
 - A. People will claim to know the Lord.
 - B. People will claim to have done things for the Lord.
 1. They preached in His name.
 2. They cast out demons in His name.
 3. They did mighty works in His name.
- III. The sobering announcement of Jesus the Judge (23)
 - A. He will declare, “I never knew you.”
 - B. He will declare, “Depart from me.”
 - C. He will declare, “You were a worker of lawlessness.”

Take Inventory: Two vital questions to ask ourselves...

1. Do I know the Lord?
2. Does the Lord know me?

We are nearing the end of Jesus’ sermon on the mount as we turn our attention this morning to Matthew 7. I’ve entitled today’s message, “*The Most Sobering Passage in the Bible.*” I know that’s subjective. There are other sobering texts in the Bible, but the one we are about to read and meditate on today has to be, in my opinion, near the top.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:21-23

Sobering. That’s the word that comes to my mind. This may well be the most sobering passage in the Bible. This may be the most sobering sentence, “**I never knew you.**” And this may be the most sobering word, “**Many.**”

After coming to this conclusion, I turned to the commentaries and found that I’m not alone. Martyn Lloyd-Jones had this to say, “These... are in many ways the most solemn and solemnizing words ever uttered in this world, not only by any man, but even by the Son of God Himself.”¹

To appreciate how sobering these words are, we need to hear them as the first hearers would have heard them. The context is one of tremendous hope. This is Jesus speaking. He’s been traveling throughout Galilee proclaiming the gospel, the good news of the kingdom (4:23). And what is this good news? The God who created us, against whose rule we have all rebelled, is a saving God. He has sent His own Son into the world to save lost sinners and give them a place in His eternal kingdom.

This is good news! It’s such good news that crowds are flocking to Jesus to hear more. And so He gives them more. He goes up on a mountain, says 5:1, sits down, and begins to speak to His disciples and to the onlooking throng.

About what subject? About the subject they’re longing for, the kingdom of God. They’re living under the oppression of Rome, and more personally, under the oppression of their own sinful hearts. Can it be different? Yes, says the King. For whom? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God (5:3).”

We have to see today’s sobering text in light of this joyful, hope-giving context. The King is offering sinners the privilege of participating in His forever kingdom. Just think! You can enjoy life with the King forever! This is His offer, it’s why He has come.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, p. 261.

But *many* will not. Many who think they will, will not. Many who think they are heading to the eternal joy of heaven's kingdom will one day hear the King Himself say, "I never knew you. Depart from Me."

How can this be?! Could there be any more shocking words for human ears to hear? And it's not just sobering for those who will hear them. Are not these words sobering for those who themselves will enter the kingdom, yet have loved ones who are in this number, who right now think they're heading for heaven, but are not, who are self-deceived?

Sobering indeed! And how did it happen? Again, to appreciate the warning Jesus is offering at the end of His sermon, we must put it in its proper context.

Jesus is talking to His followers in the sermon on the mount, to those who have made it clear they want to follow Him. He's not talking to the world, to those out there. He's talking to you and me. This is Kingdom Living 101.

He begins by telling us what we are to BE as His disciples. That's what the beatitudes essentially do. "Blessed *are* the..." Then He addresses what we are to DO as His disciples. That's what similitudes are all about. "You are the salt of the earth," and "the light of the world." So be salty, and let your light shine, so that people will see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Next Jesus confronts us with a series of choices, between two kinds of righteousness (that of the scribes and Pharisees, and that of true disciples), two kinds of treasures (one in heaven, the other on earth), two potential masters (God and money), and two potential ambitions (living for this life, or living for the kingdom of God).

By this point in the sermon, every person who is listening well must admit, "I fall short! What you are saying, Jesus, is right. And it's what I want, but I keep falling short. How can I ever enter Your kingdom?"

And here's the King's answer. Here is His invitation. *Ask*. So you lack righteousness? Then ask. So you're seeking the wrong treasures, but want to change? Then ask. So you are torn between two ambitions? Then ask! "Ask and it will be given to you," says this King in Matthew 7:7.

This is how we enter the kingdom of God. Not by our merit, but by His gracious gift. We ask, and He gives. To use the language of John's gospel, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

So what will we do with this astounding invitation from the King of kings? How will we respond? Here's how. The King Himself gives us the options. Jesus ends His sermon with a Kingdom Living 101 exam, which runs from Matthew 7:13 through Matthew 7:27. A mere emotional response won't do. The stakes are too high. He lays the options before us with a four part test.

He says there are: **two ways** (13-14, this shows us that kingdom living is not popular, nor easy); **two trees** (15-20, this shows us that in the kingdom, fruit is essential); **two claims** (21-23, this shows us that not everyone who thinks they're in the kingdom truly is); and **two builders** (24-27, this shows us that kingdom living is not superficial, but involves both hearing and doing).

Or to put it another way, part one of the exam (13-14) covers geography--"two ways". Part two (15-20) of the exam deals with biology--"wolves, trees, fruit". Part four, which we'll look at next time, the Lord willing, takes us to the construction site (24-27). Today we come to part three, which takes us into the courtroom (21-23).

As you can tell, this is a comprehensive exam. Why? Because the stakes are high. It's also a take-home exam of sorts. We can't actually take our test on kingdom

living right here in this room today. This exam happens in life. And the grading won't be done here either. As Jesus is about to tell us, the grading will be done at a predetermined date yet to come by the Judge Himself.

And so, I say it again. Matthew 7:21-23 is perhaps the most sobering passage in the Bible. In this passage, Jesus reveals three sobering realities.

I. The sobering inadequacy of a person's confession (21)

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."

In the previous passage, Jesus warned about people who lack fruit. Now He warns us about people who have fruit, or seem to, and yet also miss the mark. As we'll see, they preach, they cast out demons, they even do miracles. But something's terribly wrong. Something's missing.

It starts with their confession. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord.'" Jesus is identifying people who have come to Him, who have believed in Him, at least with a type of belief. They even talk with Him. We might say that these are praying people. And what they say is quite orthodox.

Lord! They use the correct title to address Jesus. They call Him what He is, Lord. He is the One who is in control. He is the Ruler of heaven and earth.

And not just, "Lord." They say, "Lord, Lord." And they say it directly to Him, as if they had a relationship with Him. There's intensity in their confession. There's no easy-believism here, or at least, so it seems. They're quite emphatic. They really believe this. They really believe in Him. Or so they say.

And notice the words, "Not everyone who says." What these individuals are saying isn't wrong. Indeed, it's what those who will enter heaven's kingdom also say. It's what we all *must* say, according to Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

So you must say these words, my friend, if you want to go to heaven. You must confess that Jesus is *Lord*. The problem isn't the confession, but the inadequacy of the confession made by this particular group of people.

Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' *will enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God in Genesis 3, this world came under the control of the evil one. This is kingdom of darkness. We're born into this kingdom, all of us. The kingdom of heaven is God's kingdom. God sent His Son, King Jesus, into this world rescue a people out of the kingdom of darkness into His kingdom.

Where is His kingdom? Wherever He is ruling. Right now, He's ruling in heaven. He's also ruling in the hearts of those who repent and receive His Son. One day when His Son returns, He will establish His kingdom on earth, and ultimately in a new heaven and earth, where righteousness dwells. He will be their God, and they will be His people.

That's what is coming. The King is coming. His kingdom is coming, heaven on earth, as it were, is coming! This is what our hearts long for. This is why Jesus came to earth, why He ultimately went to the cross, paid the penalty for sin, and conquered death. To rescue a people who will enjoy and serve Him forever in His kingdom!

But Jesus says there's a tragic reality, and we must face it now.

A. Not everyone who says they are going to heaven will be there. This is a sobering scene! Jesus transports us ahead to the coming judgment day, at which time

some will enter into the joys of heaven's kingdom, but others, specifically, others who thought, who even *said* they would be entering, will not enter.

This is not mere conjecture, my friend. This is not the conclusion of some judgmental preacher. This is the declaration of the One who knows the future and the hearts of all people, the omniscient Creator and King Himself. He says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven."

Who then will? Jesus tells in the very next phrase. "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.*"

B. To go to heaven, we must do the will of the Father.

Again, there's nothing wrong with the confession "Lord, Lord". It's a good confession. It's what a true Christian says. Indeed, those who do *not* say, "Lord, Lord," will not enter the kingdom of heaven either.

But the problem is that a person's confession may be inadequate. A confession alone does not guarantee that a saving relationship exists with Christ.

So here's the question. How can we tell if a confession is genuine and adequate? The answer Jesus gives might shock you. He talks about *doing* something. He says the one who *does* the will of my Father will enter the kingdom of His Father.

But doesn't the Bible teach that salvation is by faith and not by works? Yes, it does (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is God's gift to those who *ask*. Jesus is saying the same thing, but in a different way, a complementary way.

Who will enter into the kingdom of heaven? The answer? The one who does the Father's will. In Matthew 12:50 Jesus says, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

But the question is, what is the Father's will that a person must *do* in order to enter heaven's kingdom? That's the very question that Jesus has been answering in this sermon. The Father's will is that we admit our spiritual bankruptcy, mourn over our sin, hunger for righteousness, demonstrate true righteousness from the heart, and do all this by *asking* Him to give it to us, by His grace, through His Son.

Jesus answers this question very simply in John 6:40, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." So it's the Father's will that we believe on the name of His Son. Believe, and you are saved!

Or are you? Here's where the potential deception enters. James says that demons believe, yet tremble. If they believe, why aren't they saved? For the same reason these "unbelieving believers" won't be saved. For a couple of reasons.

One, their belief, their *faith*, was deficient. Saying you have faith doesn't mean you do. Saying you believe in Jesus doesn't necessarily mean you do. Apparently, according to Jesus, even telling Jesus you believe in Him doesn't necessarily mean you do. As we'll see in a moment, these particular "believers" really believed in *themselves*, in their own works. "Look what we did for you, Lord!" they will say on judgment day. So their faith was in Jesus *plus* self, Jesus *plus* their works. And whenever the object of our faith is Jesus *plus* something, it's not saving faith.

A second reason that these "believers" won't enter the kingdom is because their belief, their faith, is *intellectual*, but not *volitional*. They believed in Jesus with a sort of intellectual faith, but they didn't *treasure* Him, and treasuring Him is a vital part of saving faith. And because their faith was *merely intellectual*, that is, void of treasuring Christ, Christ didn't reproduce Himself in and through them, as He does with those He truly saves.

“Faith without works is dead,” says James. True faith works. True faith produces fruit. True faith always shows up in a delightful doing of the Father’s will. Or to say it more accurately, when faith is true, it’s placed in Christ and in His work alone, and when that happens, all by the grace of God, it’s Christ who then enables the person to do the will of the Father.

Paul confronts this problem in Romans 2:13, “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”

James confronts it in James 1:22, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

John confronts it in 1 John 3:18, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

So who is going to heaven? It’s the person who does the will of the Father. There’s a Christlike lifestyle, not just idle lip-service. The lifestyle verifies the sincerity of the lips. A genuine disciple delights in doing the Father's will. And specifically, according to the context (see 7:24), the "will of the Father" that Jesus has in mind here is the instruction on kingdom living just revealed in the sermon on the mount.

Friends, there are many reasons we might say, “Lord, Lord.” And not all of them are pleasing to the Lord. Even true believers can stumble at this point, as a great man of God, Robert Murray McCheyne, acknowledged. When he entered the pulpit, people used to fall down and weep. People felt that he had come straight from an audience with God, and they were humbled by his very appearance. This is what he said in his diary one day:

"Today, missed some fine opportunity of speaking a word for Christ. The Lord saw that I would have spoken as much for my own honor as for His, and therefore He shut my mouth. I see that a man cannot be a faithful, fervent minister until he preaches just for Christ's sake, until he gives up trying to attract people to himself, and seeks to attract them to Christ."²

So this is the first sobering reality Jesus calls on us to consider. Jesus says that in the day of judgment, there will be people who have said all the right words who will not enter His kingdom. Consider the sobering inadequacy of a person’s confession.

II. The sobering deception of a person’s claims (22)

“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?’”

Jesus continues to describe what will happen on judgment day. “On that day,” He says. There is coming a day when we will all stand before the Lord, an accounting day. According to Matthew 24:36, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” Paul has this to say about judgment day in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”

Jesus indicates that He will hear two specific claims on judgment day.

A. People will claim to know the Lord. “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord.’” Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He knows all things. He knows what we have said and done in the past. He also knows what we will say to Him on judgment day.

They will say *to me*, He says. This is a personal conversation, and everyone will have this personal interaction with the King of kings on judgment day.

² Lloyd-Jones, p. 266

“Lord, Lord,” they will say to the King. It’s as if they know Him. They’re convinced they do. They are quite orthodox in what they say. They call Him Lord, and so He is. They repeat the words, “Lord, Lord,” such is their religiosity, as they spout words that have rolled off their tongues all their lives.

And the most stunning word of all, at least to me, is that word *many*. “*Many* will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord.’” Oh, the tragedy of self-deception! To convince yourself that you are prepared for eternity when you are not. And *many*, says Jesus, are in this condition. He’s not talking about atheists here, or agnostics, or Muslims, or Buddhists. There are other passages that address those who believe in false gods. Here He is talking to those who claim to believe in *Him*, the true God and only Savior of mankind.

Have you ever talked with someone who said, “I’m ready to go. I’ve made my peace with God. I believe in Jesus.”? Friends, while that’s encouraging to hear, please know that’s what these people will say too. Yet they have what Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly calls, “False peace.” We hardly ever talk about the problem of false peace these days, but our spiritual ancestors did.

Lloyd-Jones explains, “Read the works of the Puritans and you will find that they devoted not only chapters but volumes to the question of ‘false peace.’ Indeed, this danger has been recognized throughout the centuries. There is the danger of trusting your faith instead of Christ, of trusting your belief without really becoming regenerate. It is a terrible possibility.”³

If you have grown up in a Christian home, it’s a possibility for you. You know the language. You agree with it. You use it. And if you use it long enough, you can convince yourself that you believe it, that you believe in Him, like others around you do, even though the truth is, you merely know *about* Him.

It’s a second-hand faith, a faith by association. And this kind of faith can take people right through life, and even help them face death with peace, and right into the presence of the Lord on judgment day.

This brings us to the second claim that Jesus says He will hear on judgment day.

B. People will claim to have done things for the Lord. What kind of things? Listen to the claims they will make on judgment day, “‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’”

Notice the repetition of “in your name.” They say it three times, in association with three activities.

1. *They preached in His name.*
2. *They cast out demons in His name.*
3. *They did mighty works in His name.*

What type of people is Jesus describing here? Religious people? More than that. These are self-professing Christian people. And they have proof for their profession, or so they think.

Their proof? They preach. Actually, they prophesy, they proclaim the truth of God. They cast out demons, and set people free from the evil one. They do mighty works (‘many miracles’ says the NIV). They make life better for hurting people. And they do it all in the name of Jesus.

Friends, these are respectable people we’re talking about, people who have done good “Christian” things for all to see. These are not blatant sinners. They are probably

³ Lloyd-Jones, p. 265.

not considered to be worldly people by those who know them. They certainly don't consider themselves to be worldly.

According to Matthew 10:1, Jesus commissioned His own disciples to do the very things that He here declares to be inadequate. In fact, He Himself did these things. And notice that Jesus never denies that the people actually did what they claimed.

They preached, and they drove out demons, and they helped people by performing miracles. And they did it all in the name of Jesus. Just think. These are people who helped others in commendable ways. They led people to Jesus. They did the messy work of setting people free from demonic possession. And they healed the sick, and did other mighty works.

In our day, we honor people like this. We name buildings after them. We establish endowment funds in their honor. And that's not necessarily wrong, for we're to honor those to whom honor is due. But know this. The day is coming when the One who knows everything, including the condition of the hearts of those who did those deeds, will have something to say. And what will He say? Here is what He will say to many.

III. The sobering announcement of Jesus the Judge (23)

Verse 23, "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" On that day, Jesus the Judge will make three declarations.

A. He will declare, "I never knew you." While they claimed to know Him, He will say, "I never knew you." They had works, but they didn't have Him. They had religion, but they didn't have a relationship with the Savior.

If you've had a loved one with Alzheimer's, you may have had the experience of hearing them say, "Who are you? I don't know you." Those are tragic words to hear. But to hear Jesus say, "I never knew you." There's nothing more tragic.

B. He will declare, "Depart from me." What's the result of not being known by Jesus? It's a simple equation. No relationship ("I never knew you"). No presence ("Depart from me").

Years ago I was talking with a family member who was struggling with life, and he said to me, "Maybe if I was more religious..." That's where nearly everyone turns when they're in trouble, to religion. I said to him, what I'll now say to you. My friend, there is a world of difference between having *religion* and having a saving *relationship* with Jesus Christ. People with religion do not enter the kingdom of heaven. People with religion will in fact one day hear Jesus Himself say to them, "Depart from me."

C. He will declare, "You were a worker of lawlessness." In the NIV Jesus says, "You evildoers." In the KJV, "Ye that work iniquity." So they did mighty works in Jesus' name. That was their assessment. They left this life on earth convinced they had done so much good for Jesus. But this is Jesus' assessment, and it's the only one that matters. You were a *worker of lawlessness*.

Sobering? Yes. There's nothing more sobering than knowing that many people are going to have this conversation with the Lord.

So... Better now than later. By that, I mean this. We will all have a conversation with Jesus, and He will make the truth known about where we will spend eternity. Is it difficult for you to say right now, "Search me, O Lord, and know my heart. See if there be any wicked way in me?"? Yes, it is, for all of us. It's very humbling, and the truth may be potentially painful. But better now than later.

If this soul-searching happens now, there is time to repent and make things right with Christ. But if we wait until the coming judgment day, it will be too late. Oh my friend, it's so much better now than later.

You say, “What will people think of me if the truth comes out and they learn that what they always thought to be true of me is *not* true? Won’t that be embarrassing?” Yes, but better to be embarrassed now before people than before the Lord then.

Listen to Paul’s application of this reality in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 (NIV). “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.”

A moment ago we heard the tragic words that Christ will declare to the religious lost. Thankfully, there’s another option. For those who are in relationship with Him, who know Him and more importantly, are known by Him, there will be an eternity with Him! They will not hear, “Depart from me,” but a very different message which is the longing of every truly redeemed heart. These words, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master (Matthew 25:21).”

Take Inventory: Two vital questions to ask ourselves...

1. *Do I know the Lord?*
2. *Does the Lord know me?*

Back in the 1800s Daniel Whittle penned the words we’ll sing in a moment. May we sing them in truth.

*I know not why God’s wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.
But I know Whom I have believèd,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I’ve committed
Unto Him against that day.*

Closing Song: #409 “I Know Whom I Have Believed” (all four verses)

Community Group Discussion:

1. This morning’s message from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was entitled, “*The Most Sobering Passage in the Bible.*” Take time as a group to re-read Matthew 7:21-23. What effect do the words of Jesus have on you as you hear them?
2. What do the words, “Lord, Lord,” in verses 21 & 22, indicate about the type of people Jesus has in mind in this warning?
3. In verse 21, Jesus says that the person who will enter the kingdom of heaven is “the one who does the will of my Father.” What does He mean? How does a person enter heaven, according to these words of Jesus?
4. What’s significant about the word “many” in verse 22? What will “many” be saying on judgment day? What do Jesus’ words in verse 23 teach us about what is missing from the lives of the people mentioned in verses 21-22?
6. What are some practical implications of this passage for our lives today? After sharing, spend some time as a group praying regarding these implications.