

**The More Things Change, The More Jesus Stays the Same
Formation: Thinking, Speaking, and Living Biblically
Matthew 7:13-29**

Today, immediately after the service we will be holding what will be, in 2020, a monthly Discovery Lunch. If you are new, here, this will be an opportunity for you to meet some of the elders and staff and families, here at GCC. You will be able to ask questions in an informal setting to give you a better understanding of who we are, what we believe, and how we function as a body of believers. Our Grace Connection Class, which will be held Saturday and Sunday mornings, January 25 and 26, will go into greater detail about our beliefs, our leadership structure, and available opportunities for you to use your spiritual gifts in service to the body of Christ, if this is where the Lord leads you to covenant together with this church as we seek to follow Jesus' lead as the head of the church. Sign up!

If that sounds like we take this stuff seriously, we do. Well, we try not to take ourselves too seriously, but we do take God's Word seriously. That is important to know if you are seeking to determine whether this is the place or not. Perhaps the outline of our New Year's series will give you an idea of our focus. Were you as convicted by last week's sermon as I was? Holiness is not our natural inclination, and the instant we seek to obey Scripture in our daily walk, we are easily tempted to self-righteousness, and Jesus' harshest words were reserved for the self-righteous!

Maybe one of our biggest challenges as followers of Jesus is to understand how we are formed spiritually. The key is how we are *formed*. We are incapable of forming ourselves, but it is vital for us to put ourselves in the right place for spiritual formation to occur. The question is, will we be formed by Scripture and the covenant community in which God has placed us, or will the culture have its wish and shape us according to its designs, even if we play at

Christianity? Our text is Matthew 7:13-29. Several thoughts will come from Kevin Vanhoozer's excellent book, *Hearers and Doers*. Dr. Vanhoozer was David Calvert's primary reader in his PhD studies, and there is some evidence in the book that Dr. Calvert's dissertation made an impression on Dr. Vanhoozer's thinking.

If you have been here for a few months, you will know that when I ask a question about a text, as in, "Do you think it is A or B?" the answer is often "Yes." Those questions involve truth in Scripture that indicates God is much bigger than we are. For instance, Philippians 4:5 says, "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand." Does that mean God is close by and sees all that we do, or does it mean that his return is near? YES! There is no need to limit the meaning when it could well mean either. Both are biblical concepts. It is "both/and" truth.

There is plenty of "either/or" truth in Scripture, though, especially with the most important doctrines, and today's text is a perfect example of God's way versus our attempt to do the work of God in our own way. Pay attention to four sets of "either/or" truths that Jesus uses to close *The Sermon on the Mount*. All four metaphors for life's biggest decisions point to the same truth – either you are in or you are out, and if you are in, you are all the way in. Your decisions will make all the difference in how you think, speak, and live. Most of the message will be application to the truth found here rather than an exposition of the text. Matthew 7:13-29. Would you please stand for the reading of Scripture? ESV

**13 "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.
14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.**

15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

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. 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?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

If you encounter the verses that we have just read without the greater context, you may think that Jesus is saying, “Make sure you are good enough to go to heaven.” But, if you read the entire *Sermon on the Mount*, you will notice that everything follows the Beatitudes,

in Matthew 5:3-12, where blessing is conferred on those who mourn over sin and who are poor in spirit and who trust the Lord and hunger after the righteousness that his word assures those who believe. For us, that means we who believe the gospel, or, the good news that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. When we repent of our sins and when we acknowledge with our heart and our lips that Jesus died in our place, we are saved and belong to the category of those who will enter the kingdom of heaven, not because of how good we have been but because of Jesus' righteousness.

In Matthew 7:13, Jesus encourages all who hear to believe, and the kind of belief he is talking about is a whole-hearted, whole-life belief. Question – is the gate at the beginning of the Christian life or is at the end, just as we are entering heaven? You could make a good case for either position. It is clear, though, that the “way” and the “gate” are connected, indicating that when one makes a profession of faith, his or her life will affirm the profession. It is another way of saying, “Faith without works is dead,” although the gospel is clear that whether we enter heaven or not is dependent upon what Jesus has done, not our good works.

By the time we reach the end of *The Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew 7, we have no trouble agreeing that the way, or, the path that leads to eternal life is hard. It is not the path of least resistance, nor is it what we want to make it to be by thinking and saying, “Well, I just believe.” Indeed, such thinking, encouraged by an over-emphasis on the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, has gotten us into much of the trouble we are in today. Too many times when someone says, “I just believe this or that,” their beliefs have been reduced to culturally acceptable religious views. The problem with culturally acceptable religion is that it will be different tomorrow than it is today. There is a fundamental difference between Christianity and the secular world in which we find ourselves living as elect exiles. When we follow Jesus, we are

building our lives on the rock, where consistency and stability thrive.

Notice, it is *not* the one who hears Jesus' words that is wise, but the one who hears *and obeys* Jesus' words. Immediately following these verses, the metaphor is completed by the contrasting disaster awaiting the foolish man's house when the storms come. Don Carson had this to say about verses 24-27, quote:

“A wise person represents those who put Jesus' words into practice. Those who pretend to have faith, who have a mere intellectual commitment, or who enjoy Jesus in small doses, are foolish builders. When the storms of life come, their structures fool no one, above all not God.” Close quote.

With Jesus' words from Matthew 7 ringing in our ears, this is a good place to make application for today's theme of Formation, beginning with:

1. Make up your mind about authority – Jesus or self

It is difficult for us to understand how astonished the people who first heard Jesus would have been. They were used to rabbis saying, “As Rabbi Hillel has said about the words of the Prophet Isaiah . . .” much as I quoted Don Carson. Jesus, on the other hand, taught with authority. Earlier in the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus had this to say:

**Matthew 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’
22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”**

Jesus was saying it is not about keeping the letter of the law but living by the spirit of the law. Who says that? Only God. If we cannot keep the law that was written in the OT, what hope do we have of never being angry with our brothers and sisters? My goodness, it is a good thing God looks at Jesus' righteousness instead of ours! Nonetheless, if we hear and obey Jesus' words, we are building our houses on the rock.

I do not need to inform you of the number of messages you receive every day that identify you as the most important person in the world. "You can be anybody you want to be. Follow your dreams, follow your heart because you deserve the best! Nobody should tell you who you should be. You deserve to be happy and if anyone tells you otherwise, you deserve to remove that person from your life. And then Jesus says in Luke 14:26, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Jesus was using hyperbole, of course, not saying that we should hate others, but that our love for him should be so great that other relationships are secondary. This call to discipleship is an extreme call, so it is time for you to decide, who is going to be the boss this year – Jesus or you? I will give you a few moments. Speaking of disciples, the second point is:

2. Remember, disciples are formed by God's word in covenant community

Do not be fooled by those who tell you they care nothing about what others think, and that they are simply trying to make their own way in the world. We all need community and we will all find it one way or another. God has designed the church to be the called-out assembly of his people – his covenant community.

I do not think I could do better for this point than to read Colossians 3:12-17. Look at how God has designed the church family to grow, even giving us the opportunity to forgive one another:

Colossians 3:12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Third:

3. Employ biblical principles and metaphors to assist the shaping of the ways in which you understand and live in the world

In his classic work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor coined the term “social imaginary,” which functions much like we use the term “worldview,” although it is a bit broader and adds a biblical imagination to beliefs and values. I will address that in a moment. You want your children to have a biblical worldview, right? Maybe more so than yourself, but it rarely works that way. It is unlikely your children will be “more Christian” than you are, so tighten up! Kevin Vanhoozer appreciated Taylor’s work and calls the church to develop a healthy, biblical social imaginary in which we see the world and culture through biblical lenses. How do cultures develop their own social imaginary, or, imagination? Vanhoozer says, quote:

“A social imaginary is not taught in universities but by cultures, insofar as it is ‘carried in images, stories, and legends’ (Taylor, *A Secular Age*). People become secular not by taking classes in Secularity 101 but simply by participating in a society that no longer refers to God the way it used to. ‘God’ makes only rare appearances in contemporary literature, art, and television. Social imaginaries, then, are the metaphors and stories by which we live, the images and narratives that indirectly indoctrinate us.”

What can we do about the condition of the world? Not much, directly. But we can do much about the condition of the church, and, good news – that is what we are called to do! That is the way, in fact, that we will impact the world, a topic we will engage next week. The social imaginary is related to the imagination, and the imagination can get us into trouble – unless it is tied to Scripture. Biblically informed and directed imaginations will take us much further in our understanding of God’s transcendence and his ways in the world than we could go with simple reading and study, although a biblically informed imagination is the result of understanding the great story that is in Scripture, and we understand God’s story through – reading and study. More in HG!

Vanhoozer argues for a robust Christian social imaginary that develops by using the language of Scripture. After all, we will not listen to the voice of another, but, rather, we only listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, right? Uh oh . . . When our hearts and minds are not being formed by God’s truth, we are especially prone to Satan’s deception and temptation to the good life. By then, we are especially attuned to cultural metaphors, such as, “Time is money,” and “If you don’t take care of yourself, ain’t nobody else gonna take care of you.” What if, instead, we spoke of “taking up our crosses daily,” and we said, “Esteem others above yourself,” and “You need to go the extra mile, bro”? What would happen if we started speaking to one another with biblical metaphors about dying to self

and loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds? The Word of God shapes the people of God according to the plan of God as the Spirit of God exalts the Son of God in the church of God. Last:

- 4. Live as those who must give an account, but also live as those who will find joy in Jesus' return**

Think, for a moment, about the days that are coming, whether you want them to or not. A visit to the doctor. April 15. Your baby leaving for college. If you have prepared well, none of these visits must, of necessity, be unpleasant. Oh, things go wrong and sometimes there is nothing you can do to prepare, but we can surely prepare to see Jesus. By living, well? Yes, but more importantly, by believing well! It is not our holiness that saves us, but Jesus' holiness, and if his holiness does not work through us now, it is difficult to be confident about the day when we will see him. If we believe in Jesus, and if we fully immerse ourselves in the culture of the covenant community he has established, we will look for his return with joy. By no means am I proposing perfection! One of the beautiful gifts God gives to his children is the gift of repentance when we have sinned. He forgives us over and over and over. His desire for us, though, is to build our lives on the rock, and a wonderful motivation to do so is to visualize Jesus' Second Coming.

The liturgies from *Every Moment Holy*, that I have mentioned here several times, have helped in my own spiritual formation, and I have heard the same from some of you. There are three liturgies for the hours of the day – Daybreak, Midday, and Nightfall. Although we will have a more formal benediction in a few minutes, I will close the message with the benediction from the liturgy of Daybreak:

**Now you who are loved of God,
step forward into this new day**

**appointed by him, that you might
journey through its hours
in the peace and the grace
and the love of your Lord.**

**Lead us this day, Lord Christ,
that we might walk its paths
in the light of the hope of our
coming redemption.**

Amen

Let's pray.