

## **Lesson 9: Judging and Discernment**

**Lesson Themes:** Deciding between two choices. Wide and narrow gates. Warning about false prophets. By their fruit you will know them. True and false followers. Call to action.

**Text: Matthew 7:13-29**

### **The Narrow and Wide Gates**

<sup>13</sup> Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

### **A Tree and Its Fruit**

<sup>15</sup> Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" <sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

### **The Wise and Foolish Builders**

<sup>24</sup> "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. <sup>26</sup> But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

### **Jesus' teaching was different than that of the teachers of the law.**

<sup>28</sup> When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

## Introduction

In this last section of the Sermon, Jesus challenges the listeners to choose whether they will follow His way or another. It is very reminiscent of the challenge Moses placed before the children of Israel in his farewell sermon (Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, “**See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.**”) and that of Joshua (Joshua 24:15, “**Choose you this day, whom you will serve...**”).

Jesus illustrates the alternatives as the two ways (narrow and broad), the two teachers (false and true), the two trees (good and bad), the two followers (those He knows and those He doesn't know) and the two builders (different foundations).

As hearers we must make a choice – will we be part of the Kingdom of Satan or the Kingdom of God? Will we be part of the prevailing culture or be part of the Christian counter-culture?

### Matthew 7:13-14

We live in a consumer world full of choices. At the grocery store there is a whole shelf of different cereals or a whole row of laundry detergents. Sometimes, the choices seem endless. Too many competing choices can have a frustrating effect on us, leading us to want everything or leaving us incapable of making a decision. Jesus simplifies the options and offers us only two choices with no middle ground.

Jesus shows us the wide gate. The Easy-To-Read Version describes the wide gate as “plenty of room on the road” and “many people go that way.” Then he shows us the narrow gate with the boundaries clearly marked, but the way is “hard to follow.” He warns that few choose the narrow path.

**Discussion: What must you leave behind when you choose to enter at the narrow gate?**

### Matthew 7:15-20

When Jesus warns his people to “watch out for false prophets,” he does not suggest there *may* be false prophets; he implies that there *will be* false prophets. In the fable of Chicken Little, the little chick inferred the sky is falling when an acorn fell on his head. We shouldn't turn Jesus' admonition into catastrophic fear or paranoia, but we should take Jesus' warning to heart and develop a healthy watchfulness for false teachers.

**Discussion: Connect this warning with the wide and narrow gates. How might a false teacher dissuade a disciple from entering the narrow gate?**

**Discussion: How can we recognize false teachers? What are our fruits to which Jesus is referring? Fruits of the spirit, evangelistic fruits, something else? (Galatians 5:26-26, 1 Timothy 4).**

John Stott suggests three tests for false teachers:

1. **Conduct** of the teacher, that is, whether we see evidence of the fruits of the spirit in the life of the teacher. False teachers may feign piety, but over time their true character will appear.
2. **Sound doctrine** - whether the message being taught is supported by scripture. False teachers will try to distort or disguise the truth, but prayer and bible study will reveal the truth.
3. **Motives and Influence** - sometimes false prophets are deceitful enough that we do not immediately see the falsity in their conduct or teaching, but it becomes obvious only in the disastrous effect of their teaching on their followers. (*Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 200-202).

Stott writes: “The application of the ‘fruit’ test is not altogether simple or straightforward. For fruit takes time to grow and ripen. We have to wait for it patiently. We also need an opportunity to examine it closely, for it is not always possible to recognize a tree and its fruit from a distance. Indeed, even at close quarters we may at first miss the symptoms of disease in the tree or the presence of a maggot in the fruit. To apply this to a teacher, what is needed is not a superficial estimate of his standing in the church but a close and critical scrutiny of his character, conduct, message, motives and influence” (*Sermon on the Mount, Twelve Studies*, p. 77).

### **Matthew 7:21-23**

In the previous verses, Jesus warns against false teachers. In these verses, Jesus teaches that it is not only others that can lead us astray, but we ourselves. The test of true discipleship is not what we say but what we do. A more detailed discussion of this teaching is found in Jesus’ description of the Judgment Scene when there is a separation of the sheep and goats. **Matthew 25:31-46.**

**Discussion: In verse 22, Jesus describes people who are doing good deeds: “prophesy in your name” and “in your name drive out demons” and “in your name perform many miracles.” In spite of these deeds, Jesus condemns them. Why?**

The people in verse 22 confused religious activity with submitting to God and doing the will of the Father. James says “pure religion” is caring for the orphans and widows; thus, we know that doing good deeds is important (James 1:27). However, we cannot work our way into heaven with good deeds.

Verse 15 tells us to watch for false prophets, and verse 22 gives us one reason why it can be hard to spot false prophets. Jesus calls us to be watchful and use discernment. Ultimately, though, it is our Father who will be the judge, not us.

**Discussion: Jesus ends his sermon with a clear call to action. What is the call to action in verses 24 and 26?**

People will divide themselves into two groups based on their response to His message. Either you will hear the words of Jesus and put them into practice or you will hear His words but not put them into action.

### **Matthew 7:28-29**

In these concluding verses, we see the response of Jesus' followers.

**They were “amazed at His teaching because He taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.”**

**Discussion: What does it mean to teach with authority? Why was it amazing to his followers?**

One reason Jesus' teaching differed from the Jewish teachers is that the Jewish teachers depended on the traditions of Jewish scribes. Stott writes: “For the teachers of the law claimed no authority of their own. They conceived their duty in terms of faithfulness to the tradition they had received. So, they delved into commentaries, searching for precedents, claiming the support of famous names among the rabbis. Their only authority lay in the authorities they were constantly quoting” (*Sermon on the Mount, Twelve Studies*, p. 79) Jesus did not receive the kind of education that the scribes received. Instead, he spoke with a freshness of his own and with the assurance that he was doing his father's will.

### **Conclusion**

We began our study of the Sermon on the Mount by looking at the choices Jesus gives. On what will we build the foundation of our life? Will it be the solid foundation of His teachings or that of the shifting sands of cultural morays? Jesus' message is radical and counter-cultural. In this concluding lesson provides several illustrations involving choices. Our human tendency is to “want it both ways”. Jesus says that is not possible! “Choose you this day, who you will follow!”

John Stott says, “In applying this teaching to ourselves, we need to consider that the Bible is a dangerous book to read, and that the church is a dangerous society to join” (*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 210).

**Discussion: Why is the Bible a dangerous book to read? How will following Jesus' teachings lead you to live counter-culturally? How have you applied this sermon to your own life?**

For Additional Reading

Hunt, Gladys. *The Sermon on the Mount: A Radical Way of Being God's People*. Colorado Springs, Co.: WaterBrook Press, 1993.

Stott, John. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985.

Stott, John. *Sermon on the Mount: 12 Studies for Individuals or Groups*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Connect, 2000.