

Lessons from Matthew 7

By Clinton Wahlen

In Matthew 7, Jesus continues expounding on the ethics of the kingdom of heaven and includes some wonderful promises. But He also challenges us personally and individually regarding how we relate to God's law and His teachings. Our attitude toward judging, asking, and giving, culminating with the Golden Rule, reveals whether we have a right relation to God (vv. 1–12). Then, in view of the coming judgment, Jesus makes two personal appeals (vv. 13–23). He concludes this most famous sermon with the parable of the two builders (vv. 24–27), the first parable found in this Gospel. Matthew concludes this section with the impact of Jesus' teaching on the crowds who heard Him (vv. 28–29).

Interpretation of the Chapter

1. Verses 1–12

- Jesus' command not to judge others is well known but tends to be applied too broadly. It does not prohibit weighing the truthfulness of a person's teaching, the rightness of a person's actions, or gauging their openness to the gospel message, but does warn against judging a person's motives or whether they are saved or lost, for we cannot read the heart and "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Rom 14:10).
- It is often easier to see others' faults (the "speck") and be blinded to our own (the "beam"). That is why daily Bible reading, study of the life of Jesus, and prayer—all of which can help us see our own spiritual needs—are so important. Only then are we equipped to help a person who has fallen into temptation (Gal 6:1).
- Dogs and swine, which for Jews were the epitome of uncleanness, symbolize people who do not value the things of the kingdom nor desire freedom from slavery to sin and worldly enticements (cf. John 8:34–36). In fact, when backed by a godly life, the proclamation of the truth may provoke

violent attacks not unlike a wild boar attacking its prey (cf. Acts 9:1–2).

- Jesus, having encouraged us to pray directly to our heavenly Father who already knows our needs, now urges us to keep asking and not give up (cf. Luke 18:1). The command to "seek" also suggests effort and persistence, and "knock" underscores the need to wait on God to answer in His time and way.
- God, who alone is truly good (Matt 19:17), is more willing than human parents to give good gifts to their children; moreover, He gives the best gifts (Jas 1:17). But we must ask and believe that we will receive what we ask for (Jas 4:2–3; 1:6–7).
- Having received the good gifts promised, Jesus' followers are equipped in a similar way to give to others—doing for them what they themselves would like to receive. This "Golden Rule" goes beyond the standard Jewish maxim to refrain from doing to others what you would not want done to yourself by focusing on doing positive good to others. Thus it refocuses the attention we usually give to ourselves and to our own wants and uses it as a guide for how we should treat others. Love for others and seeking to be a blessing to them sums up the entire revealed will of God (cf. Matt 22:37–40) and exemplifies the law and lifestyle of heaven (PP 34–35).

2. Verses 13–23

- There are only two possible life journeys, and, contrary to worldly wisdom, only one leads to everlasting life.
- The wide gate, which is easier to enter, is the default option, which explains why many go through it, despite the fact that

it ends in destruction. By contrast, there are “few” who go by way of the narrow gate because worldliness won’t fit through it (cf. Heb 12:1–2).

- The way to life may seem hard and difficult because it requires the “more abundant” righteousness that can only be obtained from Jesus (Matt 5:20), but it is actually the easier way (Matt 11:28–30), despite the hardships and even persecution that may result (Matt 5:10–12).
- False prophecy is a particularly dangerous deception because counterfeit claims undermine the genuine gift of prophecy (Jer 27:9–17; Ezek 13:1–7).
- The biblical bases for judging the truthfulness of a prophet’s claim include:
 - i. its “fruits” (i.e., whether the effects of the person’s ministry are good or bad);
 - ii. its agreement with prior prophetic revelation (Isa 8:20; 1 Cor 14:32);
 - iii. the fulfillment of predictions (Deut 18:21–22);
 - iv. its proclamation of God’s message, however disturbing (1 Kgs 22:6–8);
 - v. the absence of materialistic motives (Mic 3:11–12);
 - vi. a clear affirmation of the divine-human nature of Christ (1 John 4:2–3);
 - vii. whether or not it fosters unity and clear biblical discernment among God’s people (Eph 4:13–14).
- Like the fruit of a good tree or a diseased one, the quality of our life witness testifies to the genuineness of our profession. The word translated “good” (*kalos*) means “excellent in every way.” It is the same word used of the “good seed” that symbolize the “sons of the kingdom” (Matt 13:27, 38) and of the “good soil” (those who

hear the word and understand it) that produces fruit in abundance (vv. 8, 23).

- Even calling Jesus “Lord” (which can simply mean “Sir,” but in Matthew is a recognition of Jesus as Messiah) is no proof of saving faith or genuine discipleship. Doing the will of the Father is what matters (cf. Gal 5:6).
- As with the gift of prophecy, even miracles are no evidence that God is at work (Matt 24:24; cf. 2 Thess 2:9). After all, the magicians of Egypt were able to simulate several of the signs done by Moses (Exod 7:11–12, 22; 8:7) and Revelation warns of false signs just before the second advent (Rev 13:13).
- Decisive in the judgment is having more than a superficial knowledge of who Jesus is (cf. Luke 13:25–27) and whether Jesus knows us—referring to the kind of knowledge that can only be gained by having a close relationship with someone over an extended period of time. To really know Jesus (and for Him to know us, v. 23) is to love and obey Him (John 14:15–17; 17:3; 1 Cor 8:3).

3. Verses 24–29

- Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with an appeal in the form of a parable that contrasts a wise man with a foolish one. Both hear the sayings of Jesus. But only the wise man puts them into practice.
- Putting Jesus’ teachings into practice is likened to building one’s “house” (one’s future security and destiny) on a rock (Gk. *petra*) rather than on sand. *Petra* refers not to a small stone but to a massive rock, including bedrock. The parallel passage describes putting forth great effort to dig deeply, which suggests reflecting on Jesus’ teachings and studying them thoroughly in order to understand and apply them (Luke 6:48).
- This first of five major blocks of Jesus’ teachings (each of

which ends with the same phrase, cf. Matt 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), reached a wide audience who seem to have recognized the inherent truthfulness and consequent authority of what Jesus said, in contrast to the teachings of the scribes whose tentative pronouncements and speculative ideas left people largely uncertain as to what God's Word meant (see DA 253).

Application of the Chapter

Important lessons contained in this chapter include:

1. Spiritual discernment is important in order that we can do the most good, because there will be things (or people) to distract, discourage, or dissuade us from doing the Lord's work and practicing what is right.
2. The gist of Jesus' teachings on asking and seeking suggests that some effort and persistence may be necessary in order for our prayers to be answered and that we should not simply expect what we need to float down to us from heaven.
3. As God's children, one evidence of our faith in God and His Word is a determination to ask only for that which is in accordance with His will (1 John 5:14) and a willingness to surrender our will to His (Matt 6:10; 26:42).
4. Since the storms of life are unpredictable and usually come suddenly, it is a mark of wisdom to make investments in our spiritual future before trouble strikes. Like the building of a house that will stand the test of time, this may require the substantial expenditure of time and energy, but will prove in the end to have been worth it all.

“It is impossible for any mind to comprehend all the richness and greatness of even one promise of God. One catches the glory of one point of view, another the beauty and grace from another point, and the soul is filled with heavenly light. In them He is speaking to us individually.... It is in these promises that Christ communicates to us His grace and power.”

Ellen G. White, *My Life Today* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 337.
