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“Choose Wisely”

July 12, 2020

Matthew 7:13-23

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The words of Robert Frost echo in my head every time I read or hear this passage from Matthew’s Gospel: “Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.” Jesus presents for us a binary choice – either the wide way or the narrow way. There is no other option. And though it may be the case that “long I stood/And looked down one as far as I could,” we all must eventually make a choice.

At this point of the Sermon on the Mount, the content of the teaching is complete. Jesus has moved beyond the phases of “what” and “how” to “why.” The path he described of faithful, kingdom living was a difficult one, a “narrow gate” that would be challenging to navigate; so challenging, in fact, that many would simply choose not to attempt it. But Jesus said the narrow gate leads to life, while the wide gate leads to destruction.

The outcome is not immediately apparent; otherwise, the choice would be simple. Think about it: if you were hiking a trail in the Metroparks and came to a fork, with one trail labeled “certain death,” it wouldn’t make any difference what the first steps of that path looked like. No amount of shade or inviting scenery or solid, level footing would persuade you to take that path. Likewise, no matter how rocky, steep, or precarious the head of the other trail, you would take it. I mean, if the choices are *destruction* or *life*, it’s not hard to choose.

But the choice we’re given isn’t always so apparent. Some paths appear to lead to happiness and prosperity. And for a while, they might: *Don’t make waves. Build the life you want. Look out for number one. Climb the ladder. Follow the curve.* On the other hand, there is a path that pays few dividends: *Think of others before yourself. Love your enemies and pray for those who hurt you. Turn the other cheek. Store up treasures in heaven instead of on earth.* Nobody gets ahead *that way*. We can’t *really* be expected to act against our own self-interest, can we? G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”¹

It’s important not only to choose the right path, but also to follow the right leader. There are many would-be leaders who look out for themselves, not the people they serve. In Matthew’s day, they were religious leaders jockeying for position in the new movement of Jesus-followers: Zealots, Judaizers, Greek populists, and a few enterprising tricksters eager to make a buck off Jesus’s name. Today, they take other forms: self-promoting televangelists, pandering politicians, unqualified bloggers who just like to hear the sound of their own advice. “They come to you dressed like sheep, but inside they are vicious wolves.” False prophets can be very enticing, appearing to be sincere and interested in doing the right thing, saying things that sound as though they *could* be true – especially things *we would like* to be true. How can we tell who is genuine and who is not? “You will know them by their fruit,” Jesus says. Or, as *The Message* paraphrases: “Don’t be impressed with charisma; look for character.”

One of the things that galls me the most as a minister of the Gospel is when people use Christ and his Church as pawns to advance a political agenda. We’ve seen that increasingly played out over the last 40 years as political leaders have sought to capitalize on polarity within Christian movements, leveraging influence with powerful voting blocs to advance their candidacy or their agenda. A case in point right now is the response to the novel coronavirus. I cannot for the life of me understand why social distancing and mask-wearing has become a political issue, except that we seem to be hell-bent on finding every opportunity to fight with each other and point out one another’s deep ideological flaws. In March, some churches were slow to close and make other adaptations to their plans as shelter-in-place orders were being instituted. A few outliers with strong political affiliations refused entirely to comply, claiming religious liberty or, inexplicably, immunity from infection because of their faith. As more data has become available and as the number of cases across the country has once again risen to alarmingly high levels, many faith communities are *still* defying public orders and challenging health experts. I am a supporter of the Establishment Clause and a firm believer in religious liberty. There are many cultural currents we as faithful Christians need to resist. *But protecting our neighbors and the most vulnerable in our communities are not among them.* I have no doubt whatsoever that if Jesus were here today, he

¹ G. K. Chesterton. *What’s Wrong with the World?* Mineola, NY: Dover Books (2007), 29.

would wear a mask and tell us to wear one, too, because he said we should love our neighbors *at least as much* as we love ourselves. And in the words of Mennonite pastor Isaac Villegas, “The witness of Jesus calls us to lay down our lives for others, but not for a meeting (or) for an economy.”² As much as we long to be together and return to normal, we honor Christ *more* by worshiping remotely and wearing our masks.

But lest we pat ourselves on the back for being more enlightened and more “right,” we would do well to recognize that Jesus’ words were not a measuring stick to use against “those people,” but to hold up against *ourselves* and *our* actions. What we believe *is* important, but only inasmuch as it translates to faithful action. We need to bear good fruit. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, that means living into the world as Jesus imagined it.

Claiming the name of Jesus isn’t enough. We won’t win favor in God’s eyes simply because we joined the right church or prayed the right prayers sent in our offering every week. “Not everybody who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter.”

Picture a scene: many people arriving at the door of heaven, waiting to be admitted. A voice from the other side asks, “Do I know you?”

“Sure! We ate and drank with you. We sang songs to you. We had t-shirts and bumper stickers that had your name on them. We talked about you all the time. We did everything just the way we knew you’d want – we made sure the right people got in and we kept the wrong people out. Well, we’d let *some* of them in, but only if they promised to behave just like us.

“We did some impressive things. People around town knew who we were. They saw our signs, our social media posts, our live-streamed services. We took good care of our building and our people, and we kept a little something back in case someone might need it.

“We knew you wanted us to be united, so we were careful not to say or do things that would upset people and make them leave. We made sure we were a place where everyone could be comfortable, and people were always nice to each other. Oh, and we made a point to say that *everyone* was welcome.

“Yep, Jesus, we did a lot of good stuff in your name. And we’re sure looking forward to putting our feet up and enjoying your kingdom.”

After a pause, from the other side of the door comes a deep sigh. “I don’t know you. In fact, I don’t even recognize you. Go away.”

We have invested much time in reading the Sermon on the Mount and reflecting on Jesus’s words. What now will we do with what we have learned? Will we tuck Jesus’s teaching away on a shelf between other volumes of interest? Will we set it aside, intending to revisit it later when we are ready to give it more thought? Or will we choose to respond? Jesus presents us a choice. The gate is narrow and the way is difficult. Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is not about defining Christians versus everybody else. It is a message that differentiates *faithful* Christians from those who are Christians in name only. If we know, we have to act; because it’s not about *being* right – it’s about *doing* right.

If you’ve never made a conscious choice to follow the way of Jesus, I want to invite you to make that decision now. If you’ve been a lifelong believer but haven’t taken the step of moving from belief to action, now is the time to start. If you’ve committed your life to Christ but know there’s a lot still to be perfected in you, let this be a time of renewal, of fresh resolve for his teaching to take root in your heart and bear fruit in your life.

Let us pray: *God, we want to honor you in everything we do. We study your Word and are challenged by it. We don’t want to settle for being Christians in name only, but to be people who live the faith you planted in us. Help us to see your way clearly and have the courage to follow it. Help us not to prioritize appearance over action. Help us never to make reputation more important than faithfulness. Take our hearts, O God, and make them more like yours. We pray these things in the name of Christ, who sees us and meets us, who challenges us and believes in us, who showed us the way and gave his life that we might attain it. Amen.*

² Isaac Villegas. “A Pastor’s Pandemic Diary.” In *The Christian Century*. Vol. 137, No. 12. June 3, 2020.