

Matthew 7:7 – 29

⁷ Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good [the Holy Spirit]¹ to those who ask Him! ¹² In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

¹³ Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴ For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵ Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹ Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness'

²⁴ Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell--and great was its fall.' ²⁸ When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching; ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Background

- Recall that in this section, called the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Mt.5:1 – 7:29), Jesus is laying out his transformation of the human heart. He has treated topics like anger vs. reconciliation, lust vs. faithfulness and integrity, vengefulness vs. love for enemies, motivation for recognition from people vs. the Father, greed and anxiety vs. trust in God's kingdom and mission, and judgmentalism vs. healing.

¹ Luke 11:13 supplies 'Holy Spirit' in place of Matthew's 'what is good.' Both were likely variants of an oft-repeated phrase of Jesus. In the Old Testament, the hope for God's Spirit to indwell people was another way of speaking of the hope that God would change human hearts (Ezk.36:26 – 36), speech (Num.11:25; Joel 2:28 – 29), lives (Isa.32:15; 44:3; Ezk.37:1 – 14) and forge a new, faith-filled humanity.

Questions

1. Let's take this step by step. How does the 'Holy Spirit' in 7:11 (who is the personal 'good' that God gives us) relate to the 'Golden Rule' of 7:12? Is the Holy Spirit necessary for us to live out the Golden Rule?
 - a. When we as followers of Jesus deal with our own sin seriously, it improves our friendships. Then we expect others to treat us in the same way. Our bar has been raised. Our standards get higher. So the disappointment can be greater when they don't. Or if they are not Christians and don't take gossip as seriously as we do, etc. That's one big reason why we need Jesus' Spirit. Jesus calls us to treat them as we would like to be treated, and how we'd like to be treated has been raised to a new level.
 - b. Think of what Jesus has just taught about in 5:1 – 7:6. To have someone care about the anger we feel and care about reconciling with us (5:21 – 26), the lust we struggle with (5:27 – 30), to keep their word with us (5:33 – 37), to love us even when we are pissy and enemy-like and unforgiving (5:38 – 48), to be served without having our gratitude and response demanded (6:1 – 18), to be valued above any monetary amount (6:19 – 34), to not be judged but helped and cheered for in our own healing (7:1 – 6). That is what Jesus assumes we *want*. Now he calls us to treat *others* that way.
 - c. We have obligations to others that we can't meet on our own, because the way we want to be treated exceeds our capacity to treat others in the same way. That's the deepest reason why we need Jesus' Spirit.
 - d. Leader illustrate either a moment of spiritual failure in loving others, or a moment of spiritual success when the Spirit did empower you and you followed.
2. How does that relate to the narrow gate of v.13 – 14?
 - a. Is the narrow gate the way to God? Or the way to being truly human? Both, but most Christians have usually heard about it being the way to God. Jesus' emphasis is on being truly human, according to his definition.
 - b. Jesus is the narrow gate because he is the only way to receive his own Spirit.
 - c. Why do few 'find' it? It's not because Jesus hides himself from some people. It's because some don't care to look that hard.
3. What's the difference between false prophets and true disciples, in v.15 – 23?
 - a. It's connected to a person's very being. A good tree produces good fruit. A bad tree bad fruit.
 - b. The bad fruit is not even really 'fruit'! It's just thorns and thistles. Where in Scripture do you see thorns and thistles? In Genesis 3, after the fall of humanity. It's not life-giving to others. That's what our sin is. But bearing real fruit for Jesus is life-giving to others.
 - c. What might it mean for me to be an imposter? To talk to others about Jesus without not allowing him to actually change my heart? I could tell others to give away their money, while hoarding money myself, or even taking theirs. In that case, there would be a deep inner hypocrisy that would eventually be seen in my bank account or expensive habits. I could tell others to seek their sense of self-worth from God, while feeding my hunger for approval from other people. In that case, I would become possessive about people, paranoid about their loyalty to me, and jealous if they are influenced by any other Christians.
 - d. Imposters are able to prophesy and teach in Jesus' name. They are able to cast out demons and perform miracles of healing in Jesus' name. I suppose Judas Iscariot was able to do these things, too. From an external point of view, their ministries could be quite 'successful.' They might be impressive and influential, at least for a season. Yet deep within these people is a hungry, evil place that they have not allowed Jesus to touch. They crave forms of approval, legitimacy, respect, comfort, and security. And rather than bring all that ravenousness to Jesus, they let those desires motivate them to a type of greatness.
 - e. When they meet Jesus, they will attempt to justify themselves. That much is apparent from v.22. They might also try to compare themselves to others, saying, 'We did greater things than other people did for you. Why don't you acknowledge us?'
 - f. Jesus will say that he never 'knew' them. It's not that Jesus did not know about them. He didn't experientially know them. That is, he didn't participate in them, because they never welcomed him into the very deepest places of their being. Now their own ravenous desires for approval, acclaim, and power show in the face of Jesus himself. They never yielded to his law; they 'who practice lawlessness.' Their own untamed nature is now incompatible with Jesus.
 - g. Allowing Jesus to transform our hearts is absolutely necessary.

4. What's the difference between a foolish man building his foundation on sand and a wise man building on a rock, in v.24 – 28?
 - a. It takes more up front work to build on rock! You have to dig deeper, and it takes more effort. That's what it's like to dig into your own heart and allow Jesus to go deep there. It's painful. But your faith will stand when adversity comes.
 - b. Building on sand is foolish because it's a façade of a structure, like a shallow spiritual life: it's a façade.
 - c. Application: What are your ways right now of internalizing Jesus' word and letting it go deep? Anything you want to make more frequent or reevaluate?
 - d. Application: If someone asks you, 'Can't we be good without Jesus?' then I would suggest you respond and say, 'The real question is whether I can be good without Jesus, and whether you can be good without Jesus. Can we read Matthew 5 – 7 together and look at what Jesus calls *good*, because I don't think anyone can do this without Jesus.'

If it comes up: Why do we need Jesus and his Spirit anyway? Can't we just be good on our own? Live the Golden Rule on our own?

- Reply #1: Read Matthew 5:1 – 7:6 again and tell me whether this is possible for you to do by yourself.
- Reply #2: You are mistaking Christian morality for the larger, grander purpose for which we were created: living in deep intimacy with God in Christ and by the Spirit. Yes, it is true that God Himself starts to change us from the inside as He cares for us and loves us and heals us. But it's also true, as we will see later in Matthew, that Jesus can be present in our lives in ways that are far beyond the 'moral' dimension, i.e. the miraculous, the missional, and the personal.
- Reply #3: Not really. Being 'good' on your own is not the same as receiving life from Jesus. Because not only will we lower Jesus' standards in order to meet something manageable, if we become relativists, we will also lose the foundation by which to influence others in a challenging moral direction.

An excerpt:

Some argue, 'What about better education? Okay. I get that human beings need to be changed. But why can't it just be a change in our education? Our mindset? Why do we need *Jesus*?' I hear those questions a lot, too. Working on college campuses in the liberal northeast of the U.S., I have to consider that. Certainly I'm in favor of good education. But I still think that we need Jesus to heal and transform us – all of us.

Take the campus itself. If the college campus is supposed to be so effective at moral education, then why do 10% to 25% of women in college get raped? In fact, 90% of the victims know the men who rape them.² Alcohol or drugs are frequently used to intoxicate women, especially in fraternity houses, to make them more susceptible to sexual coercion. Sadly, up to 40% of rape victims develop sexually transmitted diseases.³ Looking beyond the U.S., we find that 'rape is common worldwide, with relatively similar rates of incidence across countries, with 19%-28% of college women reporting rape or attempted rape in several countries.'⁴ That's not counting attempted rape, attempted coercion, verbal pestering, being stalked, and unwanted sexual contact more generally. The fact that Tufts University in 2009 had to make a residential life policy that you couldn't have sex in your room while your roommate was there, nor could you 'sexile' your roommate (exiling him or her so that you could have sex),⁵ means that respect and conflict resolution skills have been deteriorating. This is happening at the campus – the very institution that is supposed to be shaping people's moral lives for the better, the very place that notions of good and evil, right and wrong should be taking root in people's hearts and minds.

Furthermore, the campus is effective at producing careerists, but not at producing people who use their professions and lives for higher goals. For example, despite what pre-law students say about wanting to do pro-bono work or civil rights law, most go into corporate law. This is strongly suggested by Katchadourian and Boli,

² The 10% figure comes from U.S. Department of Justice, *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*, 2000 found at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf>; the 25% figure comes from Warshaw, *I Never Called it Rape*, 1994, referenced at http://www.crisisconnectioninc.org/sexualassault/college_campuses_and_rape.htm

³ American Association of University Women, <http://www.suite101.com/content/college-students-sexual-violence-a26356>

⁴ M.P. Koss, L. Hiese, and N. F. Russo. 'The Global Health Burden of Rape.' *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18 (1994): p.509 – 37, <http://www.oneinfourusa.org/statistics.php>

⁵ Laura Batchelor, 'Tufts University: no sex in room while roommate is present', *CNN*, September 30, 2009, see http://articles.cnn.com/2009-09-30/us/tufts.sex.roommate_1_roommate-sexual-activity-tufts-university?_s=PM:US

Cream of the Crop: The Impact of Elite Education in the Decade After College, in 1994, and by Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*, in 1990. Since college educations cost so much, and graduate school even more, and since people want to maximize their investment in themselves, the emotions that reign on campus are anxiety, fear, greed, and self-centeredness. Naturally, most students will work hard and then choose money-making ventures. Where is the university's moral case for calling students to live for more than themselves? How successful has their rhetoric been? Not very, and increasingly weaker. In an age of moral relativism, the secular university puts forward a weak moral case, if any at all.

Secular American culture has promoted 'reason' to shape behavior and curb human evil. But has it worked? 'As an alternative to tradition, the United States has proposed reason. Educate citizens and inform them, and they can be counted on to behave sensibly – this is the Jeffersonian-Enlightenment faith on which the United States was founded. It has not been fulfilled. Until recently the world's leader in education, the United States leads likewise in crime, delinquency, and divorce.'⁶

This gets to the heart of the problem. Education has, at times, become a handmaiden to evil and injustice. Because of the Enlightenment, Europeans thought they were smarter than everyone else in the world; that led to European imperialism. Smart people can help with some things. But are they 'the answer'?

Author William Golding offers an insight into human nature true to the Jewish prophets of old: "There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast... Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. 'You knew, didn't you? *I'm part of you?* Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go. Why things are what they are?'"⁷ And former Fed chairman Alan Greenspan delivered a depressing verdict on the economic crisis of 2008 – 09. 'It's *human nature*, unless somebody can find a way to change human nature, we will have more crises and none of them will look like this because no two crises have anything in common, except *human nature*.'⁸

⁶ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1958, p.163

⁷ William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*, p.130 – 131

⁸ Alan Greenspan, Market crisis 'will happen again', BBC, September 2009