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INTERNATIONAL

TEACHING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

Matthew - Lesson 7D

Chapter 7:13-27

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- Tonight, we reach the end of Jesus' sermon on true righteousness, often called His Sermon on the Mount
 - We pick up in v.12, which serves as a summary of Jesus' teaching on righteousness and a transition into the final section

Matt. 7:12 “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

- That statement is a brief summary of all Jesus has taught on righteousness
 - And it's also a concise summary of the first 11 verses of the chapter
 - We have come to call this standard “the Golden Rule”, named such by an unbelieving Roman Emperor, Alexander Severus
 - He was reportedly so impressed by Jesus' maxim, that he had it engraved in gold on the walls of his palace
 - Thus, it became known throughout the Empire as “the Golden Rule”
 - Aside from its unique name, this rule of thumb is well-known for its power to produce good behavior
 - Parents tell their kids to live by this rule
 - Teachers tell students to follow this rule
 - Employers tell employees to use it
 - Everyone appreciates its brilliance
 - The maxim says that in any particular situation, you can determine what righteousness requires through a simple thought experiment
 - In your mind, trade places with the other person...put yourself in their place and put them in your place
 - Then consider how you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed?
 - And then whatever you decide, that's what you should do for them
 - This is such an elegant solution for knowing how to act in any given situation... assuming you conduct the experiment sincerely
 - We can't play games with our answer, or else we won't land on the righteous response
 - For example, when trying to decide whether to offer someone your opinion on their choice of outfit, you can't say to yourself, “Well, if I were her, I would want to know that my dress is ugly.”
 - That's not answering honestly...the truth is, you wouldn't want to be embarrassed or insulted, and that insight should guide your response to them
- But when used properly, this is a very powerful tool, and it isn't limited to just some situations
 - Jesus says this standard will guide you into righteousness “in everything”
 - So no matter who is involved, or what your situation may be, trade places with the other person, and you'll see the proper course

- Examples of this rule at work are literally endless...
 - When you drive in traffic, do the thing that you want the other drivers to do for your sake
 - Like use your turn signal, don't tailgate, don't drive aggressively, don't cut someone off in traffic
 - Let someone else have that good parking spot by the door
 - If you hit someone's car in the parking lot, leave your contact info
 - At home, consider what you would want from your family members living with you and then do that for them
 - Husbands, offer your wife the TV remote, do the dishes voluntarily, and put the seat down
 - Wives, say "no thank you" to your husband when he offers you the remote, help him do the dishes and put the seat up
 - Parents, enforce rules consistently with your kids, but have grace for their mistakes and never make your love for them conditional on good behavior
 - Children, obey your parents consistently, accept their judgments when you fail, and never make your respect for their authority conditional on getting your own way
 - And so on...
- Now notice, the rule didn't tell us to imagine what we think is best for the other person...
 - Jesus didn't ask us to take a position of judging another person so we could decide what we think is best for them
 - Rather, the rule says do what *you would prefer* be done to you
 - We must become them for a moment in our mind
 - So that as we act selfishly, we're putting our selfishness to work for their sake
 - And that's the secret for why this rule works so well
 - This method harnesses the part of you most responsible for your sin – your pride and ego – and puts them to work for the other person's benefit
 - Pride always acts in its own interest...it's always looking out for #1, it's always seeking to maximize its own outcomes
 - So by putting pride to work for the other person, we naturally arrive at the most selfless response possible
 - Because it's so powerful, I think the Golden Rule is the perfect name for this Scripture
 - Because by following this rule, you can increase your obedience and thereby your potential for reward in the Kingdom
 - Less selfishness and greater selflessness equals more opportunity for the Lord to bless you in eternity
- Before we move on, let's take a second look at the end of v.12, as Jesus mentions the "Law and Prophets"

- That statement should remind us of something He said earlier
 - If we glance back to the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Chapter 5, we find Jesus making a similar statement

Matt. 5:17 “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

- So as He began His teaching, Jesus declared that He was not an enemy of the Word of God
- And now, here He is again, claiming that His teaching is in line with God's Word
- In Scripture, we call this matching of beginning and end an *inclusio*
 - It's an indication to the reader that everything in between these bookends is related under a common theme or subject
 - So in this case, Jesus is indicating that all His teaching between these two statements was consistent with the Word of God
- Why does Jesus want to emphasize that point? Because His teaching, no doubt, sounded radical to His audience
 - He was teaching concepts that were very different from what a typical Jew had heard about the Kingdom and righteousness
 - But His teaching wasn't radical because it contradicted Scripture...
 - It was radical because it contradicted the Pharisees' teaching
- So Jesus knew that the Pharisees would soon come after Him, accusing Him of trying to abolish the Law and of teaching against Moses, *etc.*
 - Which is why He pre-empted their attack here by defending His teaching as true to the Word
 - More importantly, Jesus wanted His disciples to know how to find and verify spiritual truth...
 - And you discover spiritual truth (and weed out the lies) by comparing what you hear to the Law and the Prophets (the Word of God)
 - Remember, Israel in Jesus' day – like the Church today – was a largely biblically illiterate culture
 - Despite their reverence for the Old Testament, the average Jew understood little of it
 - They relied on the Pharisees to teach them about God
 - And the Pharisees, for their part, preferred to teach people the rules in their Mishnah, rather than teaching Scripture
 - So for the remainder of the chapter, Jesus gives more rules of thumb for discerning between truth and error, between true teachers and false
 - This final section of His sermon is organized as a series of four pairs
 - Each pair features a contrast between spiritual truth and spiritual lies, and the outcomes they produce

- So let's begin with the first pair

Matt. 7:13 “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.

Matt. 7:14 “For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

- His first contrast is between a narrow gate and a wide gate
 - For a first century Jew, this analogy would have been easy to appreciate
 - Cities in that day were walled for protection, and they had gates in the wall for entry and exit
 - A large city, like Jerusalem, would typically have half a dozen or more gates of various sizes and purposes
 - These gates were designed to support the commerce of the city
 - So wider, more heavily trafficked roads led to larger gates
 - Naturally, the larger gates were the preferred entrance for most people who traveled on these roads
 - There were also smaller, narrow gates located in out-of-the-way places in the wall, away from major roads, facing fields or valleys
 - They typically led to narrow dirt paths that shepherds used to lead flocks into the field, or to valleys where refuse could be dumped
 - So Jesus compares finding spiritual truth to entering a city by way of a narrow gate and path
 - He's saying that finding spiritual truth requires going against the crowd and going out of your way
 - While conventional wisdom would tell us to stay on the wide, easy road and enter the large, more appealing entrance
 - To follow the crowd
- But Jesus says when it comes to entering into spiritual truth, to finding the way to the Kingdom, we can't rely on conventional wisdom or crowds
 - In other words, the Kingdom won't be found by following the majority or by listening to the so-called religious experts
 - In Jesus' day, conventional wisdom held that all Jews were saved simply because they were Jewish
 - The Pharisees taught that God's promises to Israel in the covenants assured every Jew a place in Heaven
 - There was even a story told of Abraham standing at the gate of Hades, watching for any Jew who might be sent there by mistake
 - Should a Jew end up at the gates of Hell, Abraham would intercept him and send him back to Heaven
 - So the Jewish people were taught they were assured the Kingdom
 - That's equivalent to following the wide path and entering by the wide gate...

following conventional wisdom with the crowds

- But Jesus says the masses of Israel – and the world in general – are on a path to destruction
 - When Jesus says destruction, he’s talking specifically about the Lake of Fire, the Second Death, eternal separation from God
 - We know Jesus means Hell, because He contrasts “destruction” with “life” in v.14, meaning eternal life
 - So it’s eternal life on the narrow path, and eternal destruction on the wide path
 - So if someone expected to be in the Kingdom merely because they were Jewish, that was taking the wide path, and it wasn’t going to end well
- This same kind of thinking still exists today...I call it the safety-in-numbers myth
 - People generally assume if they are a part of something large, in the majority, then that affirms their point of view
 - That’s why businesses tell us they are the largest company in their particular field
 - The largest bank, largest insurance company, largest car maker, largest online store, *etc.*
 - Because if something is big and popular, that means it must be doing something right, we think
 - And that same mentality also guides many people in their search for God and religion
 - We assume that if a particular religious perspective has a large following, or is popular, then it means that religion is onto something
 - And that if a church has an impressive building, a large congregation, a nationally-known pastor, *etc.*, then it’s right
 - And we all want to be associated with success, because success and popularity equals “truth”, doesn’t it?
 - But Jesus says that is not how you find truth
 - That in fact, the truth about God and Heaven is a lot harder to find than most people realize
 - It’s not usually found with the majority, because Jesus says in v.14, that few ever find it
 - Which means that if your strategy for Heaven is to follow the crowds, assuming they’re onto something, you should think again
- In Jesus’ day, the crowds were following the Pharisees and their teaching
 - While Jesus was the narrow path, a way that few elected to take
 - The Pharisees taught the conventional wisdom of the day, the traditional view, long-accepted and time honored
 - While Jesus was saying things that weren’t familiar
 - And in many cases, Jesus taught literally the opposite of what the Pharisees taught

- So only a few, only those who were willing to listen closely and consider what He said, found His path – and it led them to the truth
 - That’s still the truth today...when it comes to spiritual truth, the crowds are usually wrong
 - First and foremost, the world is generally made up of unbelievers
 - There are far more lost than saved in the world, so the road to Heaven is very narrow in that sense
 - But even in the Church, we should be careful about accepting conventional wisdom when it comes to understanding God or the Bible
 - Because the more I study the Bible, the more I find that much of the popular teaching of our day is wrong, or at least incomplete
 - On the other hand, a teaching about God or Heaven isn’t automatically right simply because it’s unconventional
 - The key to knowing what is truth and what isn’t, is to compare what you hear to what the Bible actually says (not what someone told you it says)
 - Jesus validated His own teaching by testifying that it was the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, the Word of God
 - Therefore, we should use the same standard
- So we don’t accept teaching because it’s the common perspective, nor do we reject it out of hand simply because it’s new or different
 - In all cases, you should consider what you hear in light of what the Bible says on the matter
 - And if the teacher can’t back up their teaching with Scripture, then you have good reason to be suspicious
 - And if they cite Scripture that doesn’t support their conclusions, then you should reject the teaching, even if it’s conventional wisdom and popular
 - But if what they teach lines up with Scripture and is supported by Scripture, then you can accept it, even if it’s not the prevailing view
 - And as you do, you will look around and realize that you’re not in the majority anymore...but that’s OK. It’s always been that way
 - This technique is especially important today, when the Church overall is largely biblically illiterate
 - Most Christians know little or nothing of what’s in their Bibles, and so how do they decide what’s true? They follow the crowds
 - That’s a recipe for false teaching and false teachers filling stadiums around the world with deceived people
- Speaking of false teachers, that takes us to the next contrast

Matt. 7:15 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Matt. 7:16 “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?”

Matt. 7:17 “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

Matt. 7:18 “A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

Matt. 7:19 “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matt. 7:20 “So then, you will know them by their fruits.

- I could preach a whole sermon on this passage, but for today, we only need to focus on the contrast Jesus is emphasizing
 - And the contrast is between the fruit of two trees
 - At the very beginning, Jesus explains that the “trees” represent teachers or spiritual leaders
 - So immediately, we understand that Jesus’ point is that we must choose our teachers carefully if we are to find the narrow path
 - We are to watch out for false prophets, but this will be very challenging for us because these people will look the part while inwardly, they are something else
 - Jesus says they will look like sheep on the outside, as if one of the flock
 - But inside they are actually wolves, which in this context, implies being unbelievers who desire to harm the flock
 - Simply put, false teachers are unbelievers masquerading as believers for nefarious reasons, usually personal gain
 - Clearly, we don’t want to take our spiritual instruction from men who do not even possess what they claim to be offering...godliness
 - Peter also warns us of such men

2 Pet. 2:1 **But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.**

- But this presents a problem...how can we spot these wolves if they are dressed up as sheep?
 - In Jesus’ day, Pharisees were the wolves, but to the untrained eye, a Pharisee seemed like the epitome of a godly teacher
 - And in fact, some Pharisees *were* godly, like Nicodemus
 - So how do we tell them apart?
 - Jesus says you look at the fruit...we need to judge the tree by what it produces
 - In this case, the product (fruit) of a false teacher is the spiritual impact of their teaching ministry
 - What comes from them spiritually? Are people under their influence growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus?

- Does their teaching lead people away from following their sinful flesh and toward obedience to God's Word?
 - Do they cause men and women to act more godly?
 - Or does their teaching appeal to the lusts of the flesh and encourage a love for this world and leave people spiritually malnourished?
 - You can spot false teachers fairly easily using this rule, and when you do, Jesus says you should reject their teaching
 - Not just the bad parts...all of it...because there will be no good parts
 - If the source is bad, then all the fruit is bad...even if it looks good or sounds good
 - So that, even if our favorite preacher or favorite author occasionally says something worthwhile, if they are a bad tree, then we must reject them 100% of the time
- Which leads to the third contrast...because not all who claim to represent God are truly His

Matt. 7:21 “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.

Matt. 7:22 “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?’

Matt. 7:23 “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’

- I've heard people quote this passage frequently, and many have asked me what this means...because it's such a provocative statement
 - But notice in the context, Jesus is still talking about false prophets, those who claim to know God and speak for God, yet do neither
 - This is not a test for individual Christians...so it was not intended to cause us to doubt what we know we have by our faith in Jesus
 - It's supposed to alert us to the reality that not all leaders and teachers are legitimate
 - In fact, Jesus focuses on their works, including prophesying in Jesus' name, casting out demons in His name and performing other miracles
 - In this contrast, Jesus doesn't challenge the truthfulness of their assertions, so we should take them at face value
 - These false teachers possessed power, demonic power, to perform signs and wonders before the people
 - And yet, those signs were not evidence that these people knew God or could speak on His behalf
 - When the judgment day comes, Jesus says they will be rejected because Jesus never knew them
 - He quotes from Psalm 6:8, which is David declaring that God will put those

- who are enemies of David far from him at the judgment
 - That's a not-so-subtle way of saying that the Pharisees were not on the side of David and the prophets...they were God's enemies
 - Simply put, they never had a personal relationship with Jesus, and that's what's required for access to Heaven
- This contrast serves as the counterpoint to Jesus' earlier contrast of fruit
 - As Jesus said in the earlier contrast, we are to look at the fruit of a man's ministry, to see if He is truly who he claims to be
 - But now, Jesus adds that the fruit we inspect does *not* include looking at their miraculous signs and wonders
 - Such displays are not proof of anything by themselves
 - And the reason why that's true is because the enemy, Satan, can counterfeit signs and wonders
 - He can grant people the power to do supernatural things at times
 - Later, in Chapter 8, we'll study more of the power and practices of demons
 - But for now, just understand that demons can be clever imitators of God, using miraculous signs and wonders to fool us
 - But the one thing Satan can't counterfeit is godliness
 - So if a false teacher is working with Satan's power, instead of God's power, then though he may have many miraculous signs...
 - His ministry won't be able to produce godliness in those who follow after his teaching
 - That's the fruit we want to inspect, to know if someone is true
 - And in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were clearly not godly, loving, charitable, forgiving, compassionate men...they had no fruit
 - And in our day, we need to do our homework
 - We need to understand that just because someone has a large following on TV or elsewhere, tells us nothing about whether they are true
 - Nor can we assume a man is speaking on behalf of God because he displays special powers
 - We just quietly compare his teaching to the Bible, and we take note of its effect in the hearts of those who follow him
- Finally, Jesus turns His attention to His followers for His final contrast

Matt. 7:24 “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.

Matt. 7:25 “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.

Matt. 7:26 “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.

Matt. 7:27 “The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell — and great was its fall.”

- With the word “therefore”, Jesus begins to make His final conclusion, using a contrast of two builders
 - Notice in v.24 & v.26, the builders each represent those who hear Jesus’ teaching
 - First, there are those who hear what Jesus says, know it to be true, and act on them
 - These are the few who find the narrow path
 - These are the ones who look at the results of Jesus’ ministry and recognize it to be fruitful
 - Jesus says these people are building wisely, placing their eternal dwelling on rock
 - And when that dwelling is tested by the elements, it will pass the test
 - It will still be standing when it’s over
 - On the other hand, those who hear Jesus’ teaching, but reject it in favor of more conventional or preferred views, are fools
 - He’s built his house on sand, which is ridiculous because when the storm comes, the house will certainly be washed away
 - It will fail the test
- It should be obvious to all of us what Jesus is implying by His final contrast
 - In fact, there’s an interesting progression across all four of these contrasts, if you stitch them together
 - If we want to enter Heaven, the Kingdom, we must select the right way to get there
 - Because not all ways lead to Heaven...only one, narrow path will lead us there
 - That’s placing your trust in Jesus Christ, relying on His death to pay for your sin and accepting His righteousness by faith
 - Now even after you have begun down that narrow way, you still must beware false teachers who may try to stumble you and lead you astray
 - So as we go along, we pay attention to the fruit of these men
 - We need to be fed to have strength for the journey, so to speak, and we want to select good fruit, good teaching
 - And even if these men should try to impress us with their large followings or their displays of miracles, we ignore such things
 - We only consider the product of their teaching and make our choices accordingly
 - Finally, if we take this path, having heard Jesus’ Words and acted on them (that is, having accepted them and placed our faith in them), then we will be prepared for the final test
 - When the judgment day arrives, we will stand for judgment without fear and without destruction, having passed the test

- We pass it, not because of our accomplishments or wisdom
- But simply because we believed the truth that we heard from Jesus
- While those on the wide path will face utter destruction on that coming day...they choose to dwell in a house of lies and it will come crashing down in a moment...so choose wisely