

Scripture Reading

Matthew 7:13-29

¹³"enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

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

²⁰thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹"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.

²²many 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?'

²³then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

²⁴"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. ²⁵the 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. ²⁶but 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. ²⁷the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

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

John 15:5-8

⁵"i am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶if anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸this is to my father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Message

“The Good and Beautiful life: Living Day by Day in the Kingdom”

This morning, I have come to the end of a series of summer messages highlighting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. And as I mentioned last Sunday, throughout his teachings Jesus is calling his followers to participate in something greater than trying to keep the letter of the law; something greater than the "religion" of their day, so that their character, their influence, their righteousness, their piety and ambition all give glory to God: that is, that God is made manifest/"made real" to the world through Jesus' followers.

To state this more succinctly, Jesus is inviting his disciples to follow his teachings by living in a relationship with God, a relationship so real that their lives are forever changed, and their new lives bear witness to God's love and salvation. Just as Jesus' resurrection from the dead offered us a physical witness to our Heavenly Father's power to save those who trust in him, so too our transformed lives bear witness to the power of God at work through us as well.

I have titled this morning's message "Living Day by Day in the Kingdom" because this is what it means to live in a relationship with God; for the Kingdom of God is the rule of God in the hearts and minds of his children. **To “live in relationship with God” is to live in such a way as to hear, understand and obey his will.**

It is to be like Mary, Lazarus' sister who, instead of busying herself with earthly tasks expected of her, once chose to sit at Jesus feet to listen

to his teaching. Her sister Martha complained to Jesus about Mary's decision,

Luke 10:40b

*"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?
Tell her to help me!"*

But rather than caving into the expectation of his day, Jesus lifts up Mary's decision by declaring

Luke 10:42b

*Mary has chosen what is better,
And it will not be taken away from her."*

It was in the very crucible of daily tasks and expectations and distractions that Mary saw something of great worth. Though it was very "unconventional" for a woman to sit at the feet of a rabbi as if she was a chosen disciple, Mary chose relationship over worldly expectations, and Jesus affirmed that she had chosen what was better.

This morning, through Jesus final teaching in his Sermon on the Mount, I want to highlight Jesus calling for us to live in a relationship with God.

I will do this today by touching upon three critical elements of relationships. The first of which is

1. Commitment

To live in relationship with God is to make a conscious decision to make God the priority in your life. It is not all that different, in principle, from making a decision to have a true & healthy relationship with another person. After all, is it simply enough to say "I want a relationship", or to expect the other person to do everything needed for relationship, for a relationship to exist? **A relationship is a two-way street**, is it not? To have a relationship between two people, two people must be committed to it.

Jesus says there has to be a commitment made, because a relationship with God is going to be challenging. Jesus instructed:

*¹³"enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life,
And only a few find it.*

God is the author of life. As proverbs **8:35a** records:

*.... Whoever **finds me finds life***

Seeking after God is not for the faint of heart. It requires a commitment to "small gates and narrow roads", and such a commitment leads to life.

Perhaps you read our morning's "thought before worship":

What makes life splendid is the constant awareness of God. What transforms the spirit into God's likeness is intimate fellowship with God. We are saved--from our pettiness and earthiness and selfishness and sin—

By conscious communion with God's greatness

And love and holiness.

Albert Edward Day, *A Guide to Prayer*, edited by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck.

Similar to relationships here on earth, relationship with God begins with sincere commitment. But such a relationship also requires

2. Communication

Can we be honest? Are you a good communicator? Some people are, others are not. Are you an active listener in your current relationships with a spouse or friends or coworkers? Are you able to keep your focus upon what they say when they are talking, or do you quickly lose track of their words as you formulate a response to their initial words?

I remember back in my young twenties, being extremely busy, overwhelmed in fact; perhaps even burned out because of my nutrition work with the adolescent health program in Minnesota. One evening my roommate Erik and I had a bunch of friends over for dinner and a televised ballgame. I vaguely remember sitting around the TV hearing these four other guys talking when suddenly I chimed in to their conversation by saying, "yeah I'm taking an experimental foods class over on the St. Paul campus."

It was one of those moments what all the noise in the room suddenly stopped; I don't even remember the sound of the TV being on. Four pairs of eyes were looking at me as if to say "what do you say?"

I look back what I have come to call my "experimental foods" moment, and realize that while I wanted to become a part of the conversation, I had not been listening at all what the others was talking

about. My mind was so distracted by work and school demands that I couldn't even throw out a statement that indicated that I was "with them" in any sort of relational way.

Communication with others is easily shut down when we become distracted by lesser thing. But **if we are committed to a relationship, we do what is necessary to listen well and communicate honestly.**

It is wonderful how the bible gives us hundreds of examples of people communicating with God; of hearing his words and sharing their thoughts through prayers, poetry, hymns, laments, even conversations. It is wonderful to notice just how open and honest people's conversations with God have been. The biblical story reminds us that it's okay to ask a question, to note a complaint, or to simply ask "why?" because when we are in relationship with God, God will respond and will guide us so that we can get back on track, and connect even stronger with Jesus (as vines are connected to branches) and as the result our lives produce fruit in keeping with those living in relationship with God.

I so appreciate what the evangelist and speaker John Guest, wrote:

Just as husband and wife live out their lives against the backdrop of being married, so do we live out the entirety of our lives against the backdrop of a constant relationship with God? He is always there, always loving us, always ready to listen to us. As we recognize his unwavering commitment to us, we are able to live in the day to day adventure and challenge of his presence. We enjoy the dialogue.

It's as if we say, "Oh, I must talk to him about this!"

John Guest

Is that how you feel as you walk in relationship God?

In the late 19th century pastor Elisha Hoffman visited a very discouraged parishioner. And when asked when she was to do with all her anxieties, the pastor paraphrased 1 Peter 5:7 saying:

*“You cannot do better than to take all of your sorrows to Jesus.
You must tell Jesus.”*

That evening Elisha Hoffman wrote what would become a very famous hymn, "I must tell Jesus", whose first verse reads:

*I must tell Jesus all of my trials,
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
in my distress he kindly will help me,
he ever loves and cares for his own.*

This is relational language describing the important aspect of communication. Is your relationship with God such that you go to him not only with your burdens with your joys as well? Are you as excited to talk with God about the joys and sorrows of your day, as you are to talk to your spouse or best friend?

Jesus invites us into a relationship with God which begins with commitment, that place where we put our faith in him. It is a relationship characterized by good communication; a connectedness that becomes evident in the fruits of our lives, fruits of the spirit described in

Galatians 5: 22-23

... The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

In this morning's teaching, Jesus warns us about "false prophets", people who claim to hear God's word but really don't:

¹⁵"watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶by their fruit you will recognize them.

This is such a crucial word for us today, for many people are claiming to speak in the name of God, but one look at their personal lives reveal just how unconnected they are to Jesus. While the fruit of their lives may be admirable from worldly standards, from biblical definitions they are wolves in sheep clothing. They may communicate well with you through dynamic preaching, radio and TV productions, but look beyond the image they place before you; look at their lives to see if they are in relationship with God.

A third and final essential element of living in relationship with God is....

3. Love

A very popular book which has touched people in our own congregation is called The Five Love Languages. In it, marriage counselor Gary Chapman identifies five general pathways in which people receive love. His thesis is that any relationship is made stronger when each person understands and utilizes the "love language" of the other.

The pathways he identified were:

Words of affirmation

Quality time

Receiving gifts

Acts of service

and

Physical touch.

Gary Chapman is found that in marriage, for whatever reason, couples usually don't have the same "love language", which means that for one person to communicate their love to the other person they need to understand and "speak"/utilize what the other's "love language" is.

Now consider this:

Knowing our greatest need, to be freed from our sin so that we might discover life in a relationship with him, God spoke his love to us in Jesus Christ.

Talk about:

Words of affirmation

Quality time

Receiving gifts

Acts of service

And physical touch

.. Jesus spoke all our love languages. And then he even taught us how we could love him, he said.

John 14:15

"If you love me, you will obey what I command.

God has communicated his love to us. How well are we communicating our love to him? Are we living in obedience to him?

It is in that light we understand Jesus' teaching today even more clearly:

²¹"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.

²²Many 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?'

*²³Then I will tell them plainly,
"I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"*

Jesus then goes on to reinforce that teaching by lifting up a person's life that is built upon the solid rock of *hearing Jesus word and putting them into practice (obedience).*

In a world only growing in pretense, where people lie about grades in order to get into universities, and lie about training in order to get jobs, it is not a stretch to imagine people pretending to be Christians; people lacking a relationship with God defined by commitment, communication and love.

Like the wheat and weeds growing in the same field (matt. 13:24-30) only God knows who's who, and according to our Lord many people who have called Jesus "Lord", and has acted in his name, are going to be surprised in heaven Jesus says "I never knew you".

Is that something one person says to another if they are in relationship with one another? Of course not. Jesus is declaring to those

individuals that they never took him up on his invitation to live in relationship with God.

- Oh, they might have done things on earth in Jesus' name,
But they weren't doing so in obedience to his word.
- Oh, they may even have been brave and spoken powerful words of warning on God's behalf, when in fact it was their words of condemnation and frustration against their enemies.

Outwardly they acted like Christians, but without commitment to God and his will, without daily connection with Jesus, and without a love that is obedient to God and God alone, Jesus won't know them because they didn't live in relationship with him.

As I stated earlier, my goal was to highlight Jesus' calling to living in relationship with God. But as I conclude this message a greater goal emerges; to challenge you and me to decide right now that this is how we will live out our faith.

- rather than doing our thing in Jesus' name,
we will commit ourselves to hearing God's word and doing God's thing.
- rather than letting our relationships with one another define the work of community covenant, to let our relationships with God define who we are and what we are about.

* If you come here today, as many do, out of a sense of "religious duty"; in other words, because this is what a Christian does on Sunday mornings, let me reiterate Jesus' challenge, to recognize something greater than worldly expectations, to recognize that life is only found by living in a relationship with God. Are you willing to enter into such a relationship?

God desires that relationship. God has come to us in the flesh: Jesus Christ, so that such a relationship with God is easier for us to comprehend. And while in the flesh, Jesus' life demonstrated how we can live in relationship with our Heavenly Father. God desires that relationship.

In the Apostle John's Book of Revelation, we are given this vision of the risen and ascended Jesus saying;

Revelation 3: 20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Will you open the door today to a relationship with God?

God won't pull the rug out from under you. He won't be like that teenage girl or boy you so desperately wanted a relationship with in high school who, when you got up enough courage to ask "do you want to be friends?", or "do you want to go out?", they looked at you as if you were crazy and just walked away. God desires a relationship with you.

Jesus says "if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and he with me", so don't be afraid to say "yes" to God.

Will you open the door today, will you tell God today that you want something more than religion, more than cultural Christianity; you want a relationship and are willing to work at that relationship?

* Now others are here today too, people who have begun relationships with God years ago, but have gotten sidetracked by "life" as defined by our world. Perhaps you once saw a vision, or tasted a morsel of the life only God can offer to those who live in relationship with him, but you've lost that connection you once had. Once you were attached to Jesus, as a branch is connected to the vine, and you experienced his nourishment in your life and you even produced the fruit of God's love and grace.

But now you feel dry and disconnected. That narrow and difficult road you once chose to travel on has become wide and easy, and yet surprisingly unfulfilling. The fruit you're producing, if indeed there is some these days, is not "good"; it is not the fruit of living in God's kingdom.

Well guess what. Jesus is still standing in your door and is still knocking, because he wants a renewed relationship with you. He has never gone away.

Again, from Albert Edward day, whose words gave us our "Thought before Worship";

God is not real to most of us because of the condition of our consciousness. God is closer to our minds every moment than our own thoughts. God is nearer to our hearts than our own feelings. God is more intimate with our wills than our most vigorous decisions. If we are not aware of God, it is not because God is not with us. It is, in part, because our consciousness is so under the sway of other interests that it cannot turn to God with the loving attention which might soon discern God.

Albert Edward Day, *A Guide to Prayer*, edited by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck.

This morning, I ask you to begin a renewed relationship with God? Are you willing to work at it, to try again, to push aside everything that distracts you from perceiving God's word and loving him through a radical obedience to his will? Are you willing to invite Jesus in again, to share a meal and celebrate friendship; to talk with him, to look upon his face, and to be motivated by his love to love Him in return?

Life is all about relationship, but not only “horizontal” relationships with one another, but that “vertical” relationship with God. So, whether for the first time or the second or the third or the fourth, are you willing today to give your heart to Jesus and live your life in relationship with God?

This is the most important question you will ever answer, if you are searching for a good and beautiful life. Jesus offers us this life through a renewed relationship with God. Will you say “yes” today?

Let us bow in pray with that question before us...

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