

**Matthew 7:15-23**

**Time to Do**

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Several years ago, I was invited to play flag football with a group of men in Vancouver. We called ourselves the KFL: Kitsilano Football League. We weren't allowed to tackle but blocking and swatting hands away from the flag were permissible. One spring afternoon in 2012, I was appointed to rush the quarterback. On one play as I rushed, the centre lineman moved over a few steps to block my path. To avoid crashing into a man twice my size, I abruptly stopped and my knee locked. In doing so, my hamstring muscle wrapped around my knee and disconnected itself from my glute. The consequence was that I effectively had lost all hamstring muscle power. I couldn't walk down stairs because my leg would collapse, there was nothing to support it. I couldn't step into the shower without falling. I couldn't descend a hill without my leg giving out. Somehow my hamstring had to reattach itself to my glute and my right leg had to get realigned hip, knee, and toe. I sought help from a physiotherapist who did some work on me and gave me some exercises with the strict command: you cannot play football or ultimate Frisbee for at least a month. I could only bike and practice my exercises. He told me that if I followed his instructions, I'd be well again. Like all good young athletes, I figured I knew my body better than the physiotherapist. So the next week I hopped on my bike and went to go play ultimate Frisbee. Anyone who knows the sport knows that ultimate Frisbee demands lots of sprinting, cutting – moving side to side and front to back, and if you're like me, diving on the ground. Basically it requires a lot of muscle power to sprint and stop and repeat for 3 hours. The game had barely begun before I was hobbling to the sideline in great pain.

I went back to the physiotherapist and complained I wasn't getting better. He asked me if I had done my exercises. I said yes. He asked if I had gone biking. I said yes. He asked about ultimate Frisbee and football. I replied that I hadn't played football but had only played ultimate Frisbee

about 20 minutes. With a shake of his head, he told me I needed to do everything he told me for me to get better. Since I had made myself worse, not better, he gave me a new set of exercises and commanded no ultimate Frisbee. Then he said that if he saw me again, he knew it would be because I had not followed his instructions.

This time I consented and agreed to follow his commands. About a month later, I was back playing ultimate and competing across the province. I had been given everything I needed to know and do to be healthy, to be able to run around again, to recover from my injury. But at first I had refused to fully obey his commands because I believed I knew my body better than the professional and I knew how to get better.

For many months we have been studying the Sermon on the Mount. We have been listening to Jesus' words that bring healing, wholeness and life. And now as we approach the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents us with a choice: to obey or not obey, to do what he has taught or not do what he has taught. Last week, Pastor Greg's sermon title was "time to choose". Indeed this last section of the sermon, from verse 13 onwards, presents us with a choice. So this morning I want us to listen and respond to the implicit question that Jesus asks of us: what will you do? Will you follow Jesus into God's Kingdom? Will you do the will of the Father? This is how Jesus closes his sermon on the mount: with a choice to do or not do. And it is time to do.

The choice that is before us is Jesus Christ, the Lord, Himself. So let us first consider who is teaching, who is preaching, who is asking us the question. Who is Jesus in this text? I'd like to highlight several points as we consider the preacher of the sermon on the mount.

First of all, let us remember that leading up to this passage, Jesus has announced his gospel message: “repent - turn around - for the Kingdom of God is near”. Jesus has shown us what happens when the Kingdom of God enters our lives: he has developed character traits and behavioural patterns, he has shown us what happens in the depths of our heart. He has, in essence, presented us the path to life. This is summed up in Matthew 7:13-14: “*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that **leads to life**, and there are few who find it.*” Jesus here is the preacher. He is not yet the crucified Messiah, he is not yet the resurrected Saviour, he is not yet the Son of God sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

With that in mind, I come to my second point about the identity of Jesus in this text. Jesus positions himself and identifies himself as the final judge. In verse 21, we come to the scene of judgment day, the scene of the last day. Notice the pronouns that Jesus uses to describe himself. Jesus says ‘many will say to **me** ‘Lord, Lord’ and **I** will say to them’’. Jesus speaks in the first person when discussing the day of judgment. Jesus is telling his audience – hearers who know nothing about the journey of suffering to the cross, hearers who can’t imagine that he will be resurrected and ascend into the heavens – Jesus tells his audience that on the last day, He is judge!

Thirdly, and related to this second point, is how Jesus speaks of God the Father. In verse 21, Jesus says “the will of **my** Father in Heaven.” This is the first time that Jesus calls God “my Father”, thereby positioning himself as the Son of God.

Fourthly, Jesus declares himself to be the Lord. He says ‘many will say to **me, ‘Lord, Lord’**. What does ‘Lord’ mean? The Greek word is ‘kurios’ and in the ancient first century, kurios means sir. It is a title that a servant uses for their master. In the Greco-Roman Empire, the emperor was called “Lord, Lord”, denoting his sovereign rule, his authority, his power. Contrast that with the Jewish world where Yahweh, which is the personal name of God, was never spoken. Instead, during the first century, the name given to Yahweh God was kurios – Lord. This is the name Jews gave to the sovereign ruler of the world, to the living God. In using ‘Lord, Lord’ to speak of himself, Jesus is effectively declaring that he is the ruler, the one with the final word over all the land. Jesus accepts his claim that he is the sovereign living God.

Now a first century rabbi (teacher) would never think to position himself as either the Judge on judgment day or refer to Yahweh God as ‘my Father’ or refer to himself as Lord Lord. We learn a lot about who Jesus thinks he is: he is the Judge, he is the Son of God the Father, he is the Living God. In this small section, we hear Jesus’ authority.

Here is the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount: judge, Son of God the Father, and Lord, Lord. This is the choice before us: do we trust and obey Jesus or not?

As Pastor Greg described last week, Jesus Christ presents us with two options: the wide gate or the narrow gate. Jesus describes the wide gate as the one which leads to destruction. The narrow gate, which is the way of Jesus, is the one which leads to life. In this we hear Jesus telling us that what he has taught us in the Sermon on the Mount is the way to life. His teachings are not an imposition or barrier to life. His teaching is actually an exposition of the true and full way to

experience life in all its depth and wonder and richness. As we continue to explore our text this morning, verses 15-23, we discover that Jesus teaches us that the way to experience life, not destruction, comes down to our choice of doing: what will we do?

So what is this narrow way that Jesus speaks of? The narrow way is the way of doing all that Jesus has taught. But since the first century, the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted very differently. Early Christians assumed that the teachings of the sermon on the mount applied to all Christians and that they were simply to be done with common sense being the guide. Over time, in different eras, cultural contexts and church practice other interpretations of what to do about Jesus' teaching came about. In the Middle Ages the Sermon on the Mount was viewed as something only for priests, monks and nuns; just for a few so other Christians shouldn't think **they** must do it. The post-reformation view believed the purpose of the sermon on the mount was to convict people. The ethical and moral standard presented in the Sermon on the Mount is so high it is impossible to achieve so people must go to Jesus and receive salvation by grace. Christians then don't actually need to **do** or obey the teaching. Soon after, the Sermon on the Mount was considered to be about attitude only; it's about directions and principles that govern our attitude and motivations. But it need not be done literally. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the view arose that the Sermon on the Mount is actually a description of the Kingdom of God that will happen after Jesus' return. It's not applicable to the first century hearers or for us today. The argument is that those who practice Jesus' teaching are out of step with God's timetable. Lastly, the view of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century considered the Sermon on the Mount necessary but only immediately before Jesus' imminent return.

For decades and centuries, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount has been explained away, considered irrelevant, the wrong time, or not literal. Yet when we consider Jesus' words, he actually seems to think that what he's taught us is workable and doable. He expects us to do it. We see that based on this passage and most especially through his identification as judge, son of God, and Lord, Lord. The theme in this passage is doing.

Let's consider the first part of our passage which warns of false prophets who are wolves in sheep's clothing. In this text, Jesus tells the hearers that the way to discern false from true prophets is through fruit, which is to say, through their doing.

What is the good fruit that Jesus speaks of? To answer that, we need to consider the context of Jesus' teaching. As we look back over the Sermon on the Mount, we see that Jesus has taught us about character traits, about behavioural patterns, about what happens in the depth of our heart and soul. He has described what happens to a person when the Kingdom of God breaks through. So the fruit that Jesus speaks of is precisely our doing the Sermon on the Mount: our humility, our faithfulness and chastity, our keeping our word, our love for enemies, our generosity. This is the good fruit of the true prophet.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian author Tertullian once said "you can judge the quality of their faith from the way they behave. Discipleship is an index to doctrine. They say (for example) that God is not to be 'feared'. So everything is free to them and unrestrained. But where is God not feared except where he is not present? Where God is not present, there is no truth either; and where there is no truth, discipleship like theirs is natural."

Jesus emphasizes doing in verses 15-20. Then we get to a somewhat confusing passage in verses 21-23. Jesus says that those who enter the kingdom of heaven are those who do the will of the Father in Heaven. It is not based on professing 'Lord, Lord' nor is it based on our miraculous works. There are two common objections to this text which I want to address this morning.

First, is not salvation based on a creedal affirmation, based on what we say and believe about Jesus? Consider for example texts like Romans 10:9-10 "*If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*" So is not the profession made in Matthew 7:21 good and right – "Lord, Lord"? This is the divine title of Jesus Christ, fervent and repeated. Is not salvation by faith and grace alone, not through works?

Yet Jesus seems to say that talk without truth, profession without practice really doesn't submit to his lordship. Psalm 1:1-3 says "*Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers*". Our deeds, our doing, our behaviour, our ethics are somehow part of entering into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' bold declaration is that those who enter the kingdom of heaven are those who do the will of the Father in Heaven. The second objection is this: are not prophecy in the name of Jesus,

casting out demons, and performing miracles the will of the Father? In other words, if prophesying in the name of Jesus, casting out demons and performing miracles aren't the will of the Father, then what is?

Jesus never says to us that doing these things are signs that a person belongs to Jesus. Just think about the prophetic word that was spoken through Balaam the prophet in the Old Testament. Balaam was not an Israelite yet God spoke through him. Or think of the role of the Persian King Cyrus under whom the Babylonian captivity ended and the temple could be rebuilt. God miraculously used Cyrus to do his work.

Jesus has harsh words for those who prophesy in his name, cast out demons, and perform miracles. Verse 23, in our English translations, says 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.' The Greek word that we translate as 'evildoers' also means lawlessness or disobedience. So Jesus is saying "Away from me, you doers of the very opposite of my teaching, you workers of lawlessness, you who are disobeying my commands".

What, then is Jesus actually telling us? Is Jesus telling us that being part of the Kingdom of God is not based on a creedal statement, or not based on miraculous signs and wonders and works?

I want to suggest to you this morning that, according to Jesus, entrance into the Kingdom of God is based on both confession and practice. A confession of Jesus as Lord is crucial but, it seems, not sufficient. The real test is whether we choose to do the will of the Father.

What does it mean to do the will of the Father, if not casting out demons or prophesying or miracles? Well, Luke 6:43-46 provides another angle: Jesus says *“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good person brings good things out of the good stores up in their heart, and the evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of one’s heart one’s mouth speaks. Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I say?”* Compare that last sentence, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say” with what Matthew records: “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.” It seems that the will of the Father in Heaven is precisely what Jesus says: Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say. In this context, the will of the Father in heaven is to actually do the sermon on the mount; to obey and follow the teachings of Jesus.

So proof that someone belongs to Jesus rests in how someone uses Jesus’ word. Has Jesus’ teachings produced fruit in us? Are we following the sermon on the mount? Are the beatitudes evident in our lives? In this last passage, we discover that the theme is doing. The will of God our Father in Heaven is not strictly something we hear or admire or think is good; it is a will to do. If we believe Jesus’ ethical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is only an ethic of posture or an ethic of disposition, or an ethic of attitude, then we have completely misunderstood the words of Jesus. Throughout the whole sermon we discover that Jesus actually wants our good deeds and our good works. Notice how often Jesus wants us to do something. So in evaluating the will of the Father we ask questions like: do we see any of the Beatitudes present in the ministry? Do we see poverty of spirit or dependence on the Triune of God? Do we see mourning

and meekness? Do we see a hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do we see mercy, purity of heart, peacemakers, and suffering because of persecution? Do we see humility, faithfulness, truth in speech, love towards others, generosity?

It can be difficult for us, 500 years after the reformation, to read Jesus' words without also listening to the apostle Paul. It can be difficult to reconcile Jesus' emphasis on doing with Paul's emphasis on grace. What do we do with the apparent contrast between Jesus' emphasis on doing with Paul's teaching of salvation by grace and faith alone? What are we to do with the Sermon on the Mount that asks us above all to do the good works of the commands of Jesus if we wish to inherit the Kingdom of God?

Well, to do what Jesus has commanded in the Sermon on the Mount in its fullness and depth and width is impossible without being in relationship to God the Father. To do requires faith in God.

How does the Sermon on the Mount begin? It starts with the Beatitudes. It starts with this declaration: *Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* It starts with complete and utter dependence on the Triune God. It starts with meekness, with a hunger and thirst for righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount starts with us on our knees before our Heavenly Father, recognizing our need for Him. The Beatitudes come first because it is the Beatitudes which enable obedience to the commandments. The commands we find in the Sermon on the Mount are so difficult, the bar set so high, the commands so completely encompassing of life that the commands cannot be kept without a continuous return to our Heavenly Father with a

cry of mercy for help, with a cry of poverty of spirit; a cry of mourning; a cry of meekness; a cry of hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is precisely what Paul calls faith.

But this cry of faith to God, this cry of our need for God is not the end in itself. We don't remain on our knees crying for mercy before God. We get up and we do. We do the Sermon on the Mount. It is this constant kneeling-walking-running-kneeling-walking-running motion. The Sermon on the Mount points toward our doing, but doing only happens through the gift of faith. Where Paul carefully separates faith from deeds, Jesus commands such impossible deeds that we are driven to faith in God. We can only properly do the commands of Jesus' teaching as people who rely on God in faith.

You see, the Sermon on the Mount carries enough grace and mercy inside it to protect us from the works-righteousness attitude; the attitude that says my salvation is because of my works. But Jesus wants us to take his words so seriously because it is his words which bring us true life.

Just as I am prone to not obey wholeheartedly and fully what the physiotherapist tells me in order to heal my body, I am also prone to not wholeheartedly and fully obey Jesus' teaching. What Jesus calls me to is difficult, it is hard, it is not easy, it sometimes feels impossible and useless. It is counter-cultural. It is in the minority. It certainly isn't popular among many of my friends.

So as I come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount with its impossible call to action and to obedience and to doing, I find myself actually going to the beginning of the Sermon on the

Mount. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. I find myself going to my knees.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for sending you Son, Jesus Christ into the world so he could teach us the way to experience life, the way of salvation. We thank you that your will for us is both faith and doing: relying completely and wholly on you and doing good deeds of humility, generosity, faithfulness. We know that we cannot fully obey all of these commands without you. We confess that we have tried so hard on our own to do your will, to follow your commands and we have failed because we have forgotten to trust you, to depend on you, to turn to you. So we come to you this morning on our knees, with a poverty of spirit, with meekness, with mourning, with a hunger and thirst for righteousness. We believe in you and we trust you and we know that your Spirit which lives in us brings good fruit and works in us.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, the final judge, the Son of God, and Lord Lord.

Amen.