THE GENUINENESS OF CHRIST-FOLLOWERS

MATTHEW 7:13-23

MAIN IDEA
Jesus wants us to know who to trust as leaders and gives us a way to self-test the genuineness of our faith.

I. SIMPLE BUT NOT EASY (VS 13-14)
The formula for following Christ is simple; lay down your life, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus. That is no easy task.

A. GOD’S WISH FOR ALL OF US (13a)
B. TAKING THE EASY WAY (13b)
C. TAKING THE DIFFICULT WAY (14)

II. AUTHENTIC FRUIT NOT ROTTEN FRUIT (VS 15-20)
If we abide in Christ; the Holy Spirit will manifest beautiful fruit in our lives.

A. NOT WHAT THEY APPEAR TO BE (15-16)
B. BAD FRUIT (17-20)
C. GOOD FRUIT (17-20)

III. GENUINE LOVE NOT SELF-LOVE (VS 21-23)
Following Jesus as lord fills us with other-centered love; not self-love.

A. GENUINE LOVE (21)
B. SELF-LOVE (22)
C. NO LOVE (23)
The Genuineness of Christ-Followers

Matthew 7:13-23

Note: Everything I am preaching in this series on the Sermon on the Mount is taken directly from the following sources. There is not much that is original thinking on my part:

- The Gospel of Matthew by William Barclay
- Be Loyal by Warren Wiersbe
- The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard
- Celebration of Disciplines and Workbook by Richard Foster
- The Good and Beautiful Life by James Bryan Smith

Last time we were together; we were reminded by Jesus that we are not to be judgmental. In other words, we need to be approaching one another with love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. We are to love God and love one another with the same passion and loyalty that Jesus loves us. Jesus will present the reason we are not to judge in this morning’s passage. In verses 21 and 23, we will see that Jesus is the One Who judges.

On the other hand, Jesus is telling us to watch out for the false prophets who want to lead us astray. There were many people who were ready to take advantage of young believers. We tend to be naïve and trusting. Jesus warns us not to simply take things at face value. If we end up following a false teacher; they can end up ruining our lives. In using religious people as a frequent example; Jesus regularly pointed out that people can look really righteous on the outside; but in fact be evil on the inside. We know that people aren’t always what they seem to be; but the truth has a way of coming out sooner or later.

A famous Catholic Bishop was being honored at a banquet in Washington D.C. A prominent senator was to serve as the master of ceremonies but was being delayed at a senate hearing. So the toastmaster stepped in and proceeded without him. Person after person got up to extol praises on the Bishop. Then it was the Bishop’s turn to talk. He graciously received his tribute and delivered his speech. “Since confessions are private, I can only give you some of my impressions when I came to this town 25-years ago. Oh, I thought I had wandered into a terrible place. The very first man who entered my confessional told me a hair-raising tale of bribes, abuse of power, immorality, and corruption. It was like I had been assigned to Sodom and Gomorrah. But as the days went on I knew I’d entered a fine community of lovely people and it has indeed been an honor to have been among you for all these years.”

As he finished speaking, the senator arrived and rushed to the front. He took his place at the podium and began to speak, “I’ll never forget the first day our honored guest arrived at this parish. In fact, I have the honor of being the very first person to go to confession with him.

It’s the same in the religious community. People aren’t always who they seem to be. The main idea of this morning’s text is this. JESUS WANTS US TO KNOW WHO TO TRUST AS LEADERS AND
GIVES US A WAY TO SELF-TEST THE GENUINENESS OF OUR FAITH. Jesus is speaking primarily to us about our own faith journey. He will do this by describing 2 gates, 2 roads, and 2 final destinations; 2 trees, two fruits, and 2 destinations; and 2 kinds of relationships and again 2 final destinations. Since we studied through the Psalms last year, you will immediately recognize that Jesus is using the Hebrew Poetic technique of opposing parallelism in each section while using affirming parallelism between the couplets.

I. SIMPLE BUT NOT EASY (VS 13-14)

Jesus starts out this section in verses 13 and 14 by reminding us that living with Him as Lord is simple but not easy. THE FORMULA FOR FOLLOWING CHRIST IS SIMPLE; LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE, PICK UP YOUR CROSS, AND FOLLOW JESUS. THAT IS NO EASY TASK.

In the very first sentence, Jesus informs us as to God’s wish for all of us. God’s wish is that we enter into His Kingdom. Finding salvation in Christ is the narrow gate. There were no shortage of gods and religions to believe in in the ancient world. There were philosophies and schools of all kinds. I don’t think it is much different for us. Traditional Christianity has been marginalized in our educational institutions and in our culture at large. When people say they are “spiritual” today; they almost never mean they are a follower of Jesus Christ. The religious leaders in Israel during the time of Jesus were known as Pharisees and Scribes. They meticulously kept religious laws and customs; and they made sure not to be involved with ordinary people; especially those who were not Jewish. They were an exclusive group that looked down on the common person. Strangely the common person looked up to them as an elite religious group that must be being blessed by God. The common person felt locked out of a relationship with God.

Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount by throwing open the door to God’s Kingdom. Jesus said that whoever wanted to enter a relationship with God could do so and be welcomed into His family. However, Jesus then painted a picture of what kind of attitudes and behaviors He expected of those who chose to enter. Notice Jesus didn’t say people had to first be these kinds of people in order to enter the Kingdom; Jesus offered entrance into the relationship freely to everyone. Jesus only said that once we enter He expects us to be loving, humble, gentle, forgiving, gracious, merciful, generous, and encouraging. He expects those of us who live in His Kingdom to give up being angry and contemptuous. He expects us to give up all notions of retaliation. He wants us to live without the lust for money, power, notoriety, and pleasure. We are not to live to impress others; nor are we to judge others. As we learn to live in the abundance of God’s love, provision, and presence; we can then focus on loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love others as Jesus has loved us. That’s what Jesus meant by seeking first the Kingdom of God and all His righteousness.

God’s desire is that every human being enters His Kingdom and enjoys the abundant life He has for each one of us. Jesus offered that freely to the people He encountered in everyday life; and He has given us permission to freely offer that to the people we meet in our everyday lives. People today tell us there are many ways to God but Jesus said this:

... I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.

John 14:6 / New Living Translation
Jesus didn’t say there were many ways to God. Jesus said that He was the only way to God. Jesus said that unless we place our faith in Him and His death on the cross for us; we cannot be in a right relationship with God. When you look at the diversity of thought today in the world along with the anti-Christian sentiment throughout the world; entering the Kingdom of God is the narrow way.

During the time of Jesus and definitely in our day; most people are taking the easy way as described in the second half of verse 13. We live in a culture that gives us the freedom to think and the freedom to speak. We have the freedom to believe and worship as we like; for the most part. We are a democracy and each individual is to be respected. That’s one of the reasons it is so easy for people to miss God’s gracious offer of salvation. Each person has a right to believe what they choose; and every person has the right to be wrong. People want to live life without the interference of God. Almost every person thinks they are good if their lives were being weighed on some cosmic scale. And if that were the case I suppose they may be considered to be good.

Even people who call themselves Christians feel they have the right to define right and wrong for themselves. I heard an interview on Moody Radio last week and the person being interviewed said that in a recent survey, almost 50% of unmarried Christians were engaged in sex. I’m not quite sure of the statistic she gave but it staggered me. I think that if we are making up rules for our lives that are not consistent with the Bible; we need to worry about if Jesus is our Savior. If Jesus is not our Lord; then perhaps He is not our Savior.

People want to be spiritual but want to continue to live life the way they choose to live. I don’t know of any human example where that is true. If my boss says that my working hours are 9 to 5, and I decide I’d like to come to work at 10, you can be sure I will be fired because my boss is the one who makes the rules. If there is a God; then the primary question in our lives ought to be, “What does he expect of me?” Look, I can believe all I want that if I stick my finger in a live electrical socket, nothing will happen; and so I stick my finger into the socket. When I get shocked and my hair is standing on end; I may want to rethink what I believe. I may believe there is no such thing as gravity and jump off the top of a 10 story building. However, there will be no time to rethink that belief when I hit the pavement. The reason the wide road looks so good is that so many people are on it and encourage one another with these lies that they are all okay. They reinforce one another’s false thinking; telling each other how good they are.

Just because people think they are good people and they can live any way they choose to live is their right; they also have the right to be wrong. The Bible says that we are all sinners who are alienated from God. The only solution is to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead. Surrendering our life to Him is the only way to salvation. That is the difficult way described in verse 14. It is not easy to admit that we are basically evil and headed for an eternity in hell. Listen to the harsh picture the Bible paints of us:

10 As the Scriptures say, 'No one is righteous—not even one. 11 No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. 12 All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.’ 13 Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues are filled with lies. ’Snake venom drips from their lips.’ 14 Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.’ 15 They rush to commit murder. 16 Destruction and misery always follow them. 17 They don’t know where to find peace.’ 18 ‘They have no fear of God at all.’ 19 Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is
It’s hard to admit that about ourselves. It’s hard to admit that we are hopelessly and helplessly lost without Jesus. What does God expect of us? He expects us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love one another with the same kind of love Jesus loves us with.

Jesus says that many will follow the easy road to hell; while very few will find their way to eternal life; even though the way to eternal life is free and offered freely to everyone. The choice is ours to receive or reject. Jesus does not force or manipulate anyone into loving Him. However, I want to make it clear what we forfeit by rejecting Jesus’ love. We will miss all the love, peace, joy, contentment, power, and comfort He has for us in this life; and the unending joy of living with Him forever in the next. Jesus summed up our faith journey like this; “Lay down your life, pick up your cross, and follow Me.” Jesus never sugarcoats the true message. Christ’s way involves a great deal of love, courage, humility, hardship, and perseverance; but the rewards are great. FOLLOWING CHRIST IS SIMPLE; LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE, PICK UP YOUR CROSS, AND FOLLOW JESUS. THAT IS NO EASY TASK.

II. AUTHENTIC FRUIT NOT ROTTEN FRUIT (VS 15-20)

In verses 15-20 Jesus says that genuine believers produce authentic fruit not rotten fruit. IF WE ABIDE IN CHRIST; THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL MANIFEST BEAUTIFUL FRUIT IN OUR LIVES. The more time I spend in the Gospels the more I’m convinced that people we never expected to see in heaven will be there; and many people we thought were shoo-ins will not be there. God told the prophet Samuel this:

“... People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7 / New Living Translation

In verses 15-16, Jesus warns us that people may not be what they appear to be. To the people in Jesus’ day, the Pharisees and Scribes looked really holy. They did a lot of religious things; a lot like we evangelical Christians do today. They read, studied, and memorized the Bible. They fasted twice a week. They gave 10% of their income to the church and they gave to the poor. They went to church every day and they avoided getting involved with unbelievers. They were very careful to obey all the religious rules. If anyone were to make it to heaven; surely they would. I’m always a little suspicious of religious people. They do all the right stuff; but there seems to be something missing.

Jesus told us that as believers in this evil world; we must be wise as serpents but we must be harmless and innocent as doves. So even though we may look a little rough and unpolished on the outside; our hearts are soft, loving, humble, and gentle. On the other hands, false prophets are just the opposite. They look harmless, gentle, and humble on the outside; the look like lambs on the outside. However, their hearts are filled with pride, arrogance, and they lust for money, power, notoriety, and pleasure.
False prophets look good on the outside; but they are rotten on the inside. They can fool us because they look like the genuine thing. To reinforce that thought, Jesus uses two agricultural examples. Barclay points out that there is a type of thornbush known as Buckthorn. It produces little black berries that look like grapes from a distance. There is a type of thistle that produces flowers that resemble a fig tree from a distance. From a distance, a person may approach these bushes looking for grapes and figs; only to be disappointed when they get close and find out they are not the real deal. Here is how Barclay sums it up, “There may be a superficial resemblance between the true and the false prophet. The false prophet may wear the right clothes and use the right language; but you cannot sustain life with the berries of a buckthorn or the flowers of a thistle; and the life of the soul can never be sustained with the food which a false prophet offers. The real test of any teaching is: Does it strengthen a man to bear the burdens of life, and to walk in the way wherein he ought to go?”

Verses 17-20 go on to describe bad fruit. The principle is that bad trees cannot produce good fruit. Religious people who are driven by their own fears and pathology cannot produce fruit. Either they are legalists who are bent on enforcing their brand of legalism on everyone around them; or they are people who live immoral lifestyles while claiming to be Christians. Those who do not manifest fruit will be cut off.

Here I think it is appropriate to define what fruit is. Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit as these; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So when you come in contact with these false prophets, you will always feel judged and condemned. You will never feel genuine love, empathy, grace, and mercy from them because they don’t have it to give.

On the other hand, good fruit is also described in verses 17-20. Good fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit manifests itself only as we learn to abide in Christ. What does that mean to abide in Christ? Well Jesus explained that using another agricultural metaphor. He said this:

1 I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. 3 You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. 5 Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. 7 But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!

John 15:1-7 / New Living Translation

The point is that as a healthy branch, we must hold on to and focus on staying connected to the main trunk of the tree. We look to it to receive all our food, nourishment, and strength. The branch is not focused on the fruit. The trunk produces the fruit as the nourishment flows through the branch. We cannot fake the fruit of the Spirit. Remember, Jesus said that as we do our acts of righteousness in secret for Him; He will reward us. That reward is the fruit of the Spirit; which money cannot buy. Here is a good test to see if God is working in us. Are we able to see that we are becoming more loving, joyful, filled with peace, more patient, more kind, more interested in
the good spiritual things in life, more faithful in our walk with Jesus, more gentle and humble, and exercising more self-control? If we are, that’s a good sign because only God can make these qualities grow in us.

IF WE ABIDE IN CHRIST; THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL MANIFEST BEAUTIFUL FRUIT IN OUR LIVES. I would like to stop and repeat this one more time in our study through the whole Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said the living in the Kingdom is all about attitude. If we have the right attitudes, the right behaviors will follow. He said that Kingdom people have learned to live with being fearful or judgmental. They have learned to live without unresolved anger, the need to retaliate, and without being contemptuous of others. They have learned to live without lying and are not driven by their lust for money, power, notoriety, and pleasure. Kingdom people live to please God, to love God, and to love one another. That is what seeking the Kingdom of God and Kingdom righteousness look like.

III. GENUINE LOVE NOT SELF-LOVE (VS 21-23)

That’s important because Jesus ends this section by contrasting genuine love with self-love in verses 21-23. FOLLOWING JESUS AS LORD FILLS US WITH OTHER-CENTERED LOVE; NOT SELF-LOVE. These few verses are important to all of us who try to do the right thing and follow Jesus. In the last section, Jesus described the Spiritual fruit. He has been doing this all throughout His sermon. He said that these loving attitudes are what are important in determining whether or not we are His followers. In this section, He is going to point out where many of us end up getting confused. He is going to describe Spiritual gifts.

In verse 21 He defines genuine love. Jesus made it clear that if we want to enter the Kingdom of God we must live according to the way He is designed life to be in the Kingdom. We are not free to make up our own rules. We demonstrate our love for God by obeying Him. There is a difference between talking Christianity and living Christianity. Genuine love involves living with the attitudes Jesus has been laying down in the Sermon on the Mount.

Verse 22 describes self-love. People we say to Jesus, “We prophesied in Your Name, we cast out demons in Your Name, and we performed many miracles in Your Name.” These are all Spiritual gifts described in the New Testament. These are no small feats. These are pretty amazing accomplishments. Let’s add to them spiritual disciplines. People can say they do all sorts of religious good works like praying, giving, Bible study, preaching, teaching, fasting, etc. The list goes on. People keep a lot of religious rules. The key seems to be that these people are in love with their own goodness. People can still be lusting for money, power, notoriety, and pleasure even in the church. In fact the Corinthian church was being torn apart by these worldly attitudes in the Christian church. I think this is why this section comes right after Jesus commands us not to be judgmental. When we are judging others, we are saying that we are better than they are; we are more righteous than they are, and we need to change them.

As He points out in verse 23, self-love is no love in the Kingdom of God. Jesus will judge these people and tell them to get away from Him. Can you even begin to understand the confusion of these people? They will approach Jesus, address Him as Lord, and then present their great religious resumes; only to hear Jesus reject them, tell them He doesn’t recognize them, and that he doesn’t even know them? Christianity is not knowing a lot of religious stuff about God and doing a
lot of religious stuff. Christianity is about knowing God, loving God, and loving others. Let me share with you a couple of quick thoughts on this. In John 15:9 (NLT) Jesus said this, “9I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love.”

In John 13:34 (New Living Translation) He said,

34 So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.

Did you catch that? Just as God the Father loved God the Son, God the Son loves us. Just as God the Son loves us, we are to love one another. The logical conclusion of that is that we are to love as God loves.

The Apostle Paul summarizes this by reminding us that Spiritual gifts come secondary to Spiritual fruit. I'll read this slowly:

1 If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. 3 If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. 6 It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. 7 Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

I Corinthians 13:1-7 / New Living Translation

FOLLOWING JESUS AS LORD FILLS US WITH OTHER-CENTERED LOVE; NOT SELF-LOVE. I think you can easily see that living the Christian life the way Jesus defines it is not easy. It’s simple but it is certainly not easy. JESUS WANTS US TO KNOW WHO TO TRUST AS LEADERS AND GIVES US A WAY TO SELF-TEST THE GENUINENESS OF OUR FAITH.
The Spiritual Discipline this week is to spend time meditating on **Spiritual Fruit**.

- Read John 15:1-17 in the morning. Pay special attention to John 15:5 “… I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.” Spend the day thinking about the fact that we can only love God and others only by abiding in Jesus. Only He can produce this love in us.

- On another day read Galatians 5:16-26. Pay special attention to verses 22-23, “22But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!” Ask God to build and form these attitudes in you. Take time to write out what that would look like if each of these qualities were part of your nature.

- On another day read I Corinthians 13:1-13. Pay special attention to verses 4-7:

  4 Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud 5 or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. 6 It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. 7 Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.”

  You will notice that as you read these they include all the fruit of the spirit. Can you imagine how your life and the lives of others around you would change if you actually dared to live like this? Journal about that.

- At the end of the week, read John 15:9 and John 13:34

  9 I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love,”

  34 So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.

- Close the week by thinking about how much God the Father loves Jesus the Son. Think about the fact that Jesus loves you with that same love. Pray that God will work through you so that people around you will feel that same love coming from you.

**Lectio Divina - Love “ἀγάπη”**

- John 15:9 (New Living Translation)
- John 13:34 (New Living Translation)
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (New Living Translation)