

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL DISTINCTIVE (Matthew 7:13-29)

2.28.21

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1964, my mom took my brother and I on a trip to the East Coast. We went by Greyhound bus. The reason for the trip? For my mom to visit old friends (she was originally from Brooklyn) and, while we were there, to tour the sites of New York City and, best of all, see the New York World's Fair. Now while there are so many things that I remember from that trip (including leaving New York for Washington DC and visiting the sites there), one of the most lasting memories for me was simply the car ride to the Fair. Why was that so special after all these years? We rode on the biggest freeway I had ever seen in my young life. It was like eight lanes of freeway on each side of the median! I was living in south Minneapolis at the time, where 35W was the biggest road I'd ever seen. But what I saw riding to the Fair, well, I never got over that picture. I think we made three visits to the Fair, and I'm pretty sure I spent all the drive time just constantly counting how many lanes of freeway I saw. I still remember that like it was yesterday! So OK, I was nine years old, and obviously very easily impressed. But whenever I think about a broad way, I'm not thinking about New York's theater district. I think back to that drive - how broad, how wide that freeway was.

Speaking of driving, in our day and age, one of the handy pieces of technology we probably all use is a GPS - "global positioning system." I've noticed with the one I have on my phone is that it gives me three options to get to wherever it is I'm trying to go - one labeled "fastest" and then another two just for options. It underscores a truth: When trying to determine where we want to get, there are most likely many, many ways to get there. One destination, many options.

We're going to want to hold on to those two thoughts because our text today is a look at one of the most distinctive aspects of the Christian faith - the singular, one-and-only path to God and heaven: Jesus Christ. So, as we take this critically important journey, let's **let our first step be in a moment of prayer!**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Matthew 7:13-29)

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:13-14.

From the introduction of the Ten Commandments to that very moment in which they were listening to Jesus, His followers would have been very aware of some absolutes, some clear distinctives of their faith, starting with:

1. ***"You shall have no other gods before Me" - God speaking, Exodus 20:3.*** Now the word "before" actually translates in the Hebrew with the context of "besides" - "no other gods besides Me" - which points to God's absolute distinct uniqueness.
2. God later expanded on His "only-ness" through the prophet Isaiah: ***"I am the first and I am the last; apart from Me there is no God... Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one" - God speaking, Isaiah 44:6b, 8.***

Along with the singularity of there being only one true God, their scriptures also confirmed the supporting idea that there was also one, and only one, path, or way, to God. However, since God created humanity with free will, the ability to choose, what was communicated created the idea of "two paths," choices that either led to God or led to destruction. But the choice would be theirs. Moses mentioned this several times, including these verses from Deuteronomy:

1. ***"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse - the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God" - Moses, Deuteronomy 11:26-28a.***
2. And then from God Himself, through the prophet Jeremiah: ***"[T]ell the people, 'This is what the Lord says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death'" - God speaking, Jeremiah 21:8.***

But, while the audience would have been familiar with this "two paths" picture, what Jesus is explaining has far deeper implications than what they had heard from their leaders and teachers. He is still reflecting a similar picture of "the way of life and the way of death" but, here, He is creating a picture of a gate so restrictive, so narrow and so demanding that there is room only for the individual person. Nothing else - not baggage, not mementos, not treasures from this life - will fit. Therefore, what is understood about the narrow gate is that it is difficult and demanding; it is asking for all else to be sacrificed for the outcome of passage.

This is in stark contrast to the "broad gate" that essentially invites people to "come as you are" - no sacrifices to make, no demands to be met, bring whatever you want. Sounds great, right? And how easy to get through: The Greek words in the text not only convey "wide" but "spacious" as well. But the great deception, of course, is in its outcome: What starts out like a breeze ends in a blistering destruction. Their scriptures certainly would have already highlighted this outcome: ***There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death - Solomon, Proverbs 14:12.*** But in its most basic form, these two options are the end result of a value statement; as Jesus had said earlier: ***"[W]here your treasure is, there your heart will be also" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:21*** or, to paraphrase: "What you value most reveals what you love most."

Then Jesus continues: ***"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious [ravenous] wolves" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:15.***

Now the idea of a "false prophet" in the Greek suggests not only somebody presenting false doctrine but also somebody whose claims to being a Christian are false, and their adherence to Jesus Christ is fake; in other words, they are imposters. In fact, Christ's presentation of them - appearing as sheep but in reality, being wolves - perfectly fits the idea of a "hypocrite" that Christ presented earlier, in that their outward appearance is masking their true selves; they are acting a part. And the idea in the Greek of the ferocious or ravenous wolf paints the picture of an animal that is extremely hungry and, most interestingly, hunting for prey. If that sounds familiar, it's because the apostle Peter wrote this in his first epistle: ***Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour - I Peter 5:8b.*** In other words, these imposters are not imitating the light of life that is Jesus Christ, but rather the dark destructive ways of their master, Satan.

Christ then continues with another wonderful picture of discerning the reality of His truth, marked by His impression upon a person's life: ***"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:16-20 (NASB2020).***

The "Jesus-basis" of our lives should be evident to all; in fact, Christ had already laid out that spiritual principle earlier in this Sermon (Matthew 5), so let's briefly go back to those verses, remembering that they are being spoken to His followers:

1. ***"You are the light of the world"*** - That is Christ's very own description of what His followers are, and are to be - His light in a very dark world. And take note: He is not saying, "You might be" or "You could be" or "Eventually you will be" but "Right now, as a follower of Me, you are!"
2. ***"A town built on a hill cannot be hidden"*** - A believer's life should stand out in such a stark contrast to the world that there is no way that it can be unseen, ignored or overlooked; in fact, it should be our "all things become new" nature to do just that. And just like it is impossible for a fish not to swim, or a bird not to fly, it should be just as impossible for a believer in Jesus Christ to hide their light. In fact, quite the contrary: it should be one of our greatest joys!
3. ***"Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house"*** - The very reason Christ indwells us through His Spirit is to be a light to the world; most fundamentally, that's the reason He has us here.
4. ***In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:14-16*** - The purpose of Christ's "light" within us is to communicate that light to others, that our lives would bring attention to the ultimate source of that light: our Father in heaven. The desired result? That our joy in living in the light of the Lord would be so impacting and overwhelming to those around us that they would want it for themselves.

Now, a verse that these people would have had access to would have come through the prophet Isaiah - a verse full of excitement and promise: ***"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you" - God speaking, Isaiah 60:1.*** That foretold the life-changing experience of what God was going to be offering through His Son. And now, after all the centuries of promise and expectation, that promise of God's light had come and, as Christ entered into their lives, they could know the glory of the Lord that was rising upon them. That was the light to which Christ referred, and to which they were to aspire.

And then Christ puts out a word of warning: ***"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord, ' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven."*** Then Jesus expands on the point: ***"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name drive out demons and in Your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!'" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:21-23.***

One of the greatest joys that Jesus ever spoke was the realization, as He put it, that: ***"I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me"*** - ***Jesus Christ, John 6:38***. His greatest pleasure was found in knowing that He was bringing His Father pleasure by always being found within His Father's will. And that is the model for all of Christ's followers - sitting on that Galilean hillside that day or sitting in our church this day. It is one of the great affirmations of lives found in Christ: Very simply put, who are we living for? Whose will has first place in our lives? Who do we live to please? And the ones Christ is specifically addressing are those who are relying on their works, even possibly great and spectacular works, to accomplish their salvation, to prove their worthiness before God. So, what are they lacking? Relationship, surrendering their heart and lives to God. Without relationship, as Christ said, "I never knew you." Their works, on their own and all alone, don't matter; in fact, they never will.

The scribes and Pharisees had fallen into the deception that told them that they were righteous, that they were pleasing God and doing His will with their lives. The lie? That they could accomplish those lofty goals entirely in their own strength. Obviously, Christ on multiple occasions voiced His rather loud and clear disagreement with their ideas. But they are a great example of a dangerously meaningless religion: knowing all the words, knowing all the right Bible verses, knowing the right behaviors - and still not being right with God. Why? Choosing their own will, choosing their own ways, instead of God's. Life being lived no different, Jesus Christ making no difference. So, what's missing? Seeing the sins, seeing the helplessness, seeing the impossibility of ever doing God's will by their own efforts - and realizing the one and only solution: surrendering to the Savior. In other words, being seen as righteous not because of anything we've done or could ever do, but only because of what God through Jesus Christ did do, bringing a new heart for God, a new desire to please God, and a spiritual ability to actually do God's will.

That's relationship and, frankly, relationship is much harder than religion, particularly when the one on the other end of that relationship is Jesus Christ. Relationship in the Christian sense is all about surrender; it's all about "I can't." Basically, it's all about giving up, admitting complete weakness and complete failure. Human beings don't like to do that, but that's why salvation is God enabled. It has to be, we can't do anything to find it or claim it or live it. That kind of complete and absolute helplessness is what makes Christianity a relationship - God choosing, through the redemptive work of His Son and by the subsequent indwelling of His Spirit, to overcome our sin and helplessness, resulting in, as Paul wrote: ***The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children - Paul, Romans 8:16***.

And then Jesus brings one final point into a short but incredibly vivid parable: ***"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. The 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. But 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. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:24-27***.

So, what is this final point that Christ is endeavoring to make? It is not simply hearing these

words of Christ that is enough, for simply hearing God's word does not translate as obeying God's word. Rather, it is the putting them into practice that reveals obedience to God's word as the great foundation upon which our lives are built. It's as the apostle James wrote: ***Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it - not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it - they will be blessed in what they do - James 1:22-25.*** And when both the trials of this life (the "storm" of the parable) and God's coming judgment come along, the life built on the foundation of obedience to God's word will remain standing because their lives have been built on the only foundation that matters.

This parable is also a nod to "appearances." Both men desired to build a good house. Their houses probably both looked strong and sturdy. But the storm revealed the foundation - what the houses were built on. For the second man, the appearances of a solid structure disappeared beneath the wind and the waves. Appearances didn't matter; they didn't change a thing concerning the final outcome - a great and total crash!

And then, at the end of this magnificent sermon, the outcome: ***When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law - Matthew 7:28-29.*** No teacher would ever be better than this!

APPLICATION

I called this message, "A Radical Distinctive." So, what exactly does that mean? Specifically, what does it mean to be distinctive? Well, put simply, to be distinctive is to have a characteristic that distinguishes someone or something from anybody or anything else. We talk about a food having a distinctive flavor, or a fashion designer creating a distinctive look. Well, in this case, the distinctive is in the relationship of faith in God that Jesus is presenting - and it all has to do with the number "1." Let's look and see how that has played out:

1. Only "1" recognized way - and a narrow way at that.
2. Only "1" recognized truth - as opposed to "wolves in sheep's clothing."
3. Only "1" recognized fruit - only possible from somebody planted in God.
4. Only "1" recognized will - God's, and God's alone.
5. Only "1" recognized foundation - God, and God alone, through Jesus Christ.

Now, in the culture of Christ's time, Rome was the strongest influence. With their conquest of Palestine came their religious beliefs. It is generally thought that, at the time of Christ, the Romans' faith encompassed some 12 main gods and goddesses, plus emperor worship.

Our world has continued that "all ways lead to God" idea. It is estimated that there are anywhere between 4,200-4,300 different religions in the world. In how they compare with the one true God that Christ was preaching:

1. Jews today, while observing one God, do not recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of God's flawless prophecies.
2. Islam is likewise monotheistic; however, while they regard Jesus as their second greatest prophet (after Mohammad), they do not in any way recognize Him as God

Himself. That would be blasphemous according to their beliefs; Allah alone is their god - with no "one and only" son.

3. Buddhism is a belief system that recognizes no gods, nor does Confucianism.
4. Hinduism recognizes some 33 million gods.
5. Shintoism recognizes some 8 million "kami" (spirits), plus they recognize elements of the landscape or forces of nature.
6. Taoism recognizes 16 gods and goddesses.

These are just the main religions in the world today, so that doesn't even begin to touch smaller religious groups than these, plus native religions throughout the world, plus the nonreligious such as atheists (estimated to be between 400-500 million), agnostics or those who hold to no religion in particular.

It should be no surprise then that Christianity is often labeled as "narrow-minded" or "bigoted" in that we preach and teach only one way to God - through Jesus Christ. We preach and teach only one truth - the truth found in God's word, the Bible. Is it any wonder that the world sees Christianity as something to be despised or laughed at or just ignored, just some stupid, ancient belief system with no modern relevance at all. So, what's behind that?

Well, it is much easier to live a life where heaven is the guaranteed outcome. And there are certainly some pretty good backups to fall back on, just in case - you know, things like "I'm basically a good person" or "I'm doing the best I can" or "I'm only human" or even "I've been baptized and confirmed." Man, that last one even sounds religious. And it is a whole lot easier to have a life where I get to set my own rules -and still get heaven anyway. I mean, what could be better than that; no matter my lifestyle, no matter my beliefs, I'm going to wind up in "the good place." That is also why we have seen such an explosion in recent years of all kinds of new ideas for society - what constitutes life, what constitutes marriage, what constitutes family, what constitutes gender and, behind all that, what constitutes truth. If something is true for me, who are you to try and tell me otherwise? And if I think something's OK, who are you to tell me it's not?

And of course, the people who laugh at or ridicule Christians likely have never had the experience of actually being Christians. Now being in a Christian "religion," maybe; there are some 200 separate Protestant denominations in the world, plus 24 separate branches of Catholicism, so there is a wide range of Christian "belief" to choose from. But as far as being in a true surrendered relationship to God through Jesus Christ is concerned, my guess would probably be, "No, they haven't had that experience." You can't know relationship until you've been in relationship. The world will never understand born-again Christianity; Paul himself said as much: *What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit - Paul, I Corinthians 2:12-14.*

It makes it even more amazing what Jesus did. He came into this "dumb as a box of rocks" place, this planet filled to overflowing with "stiff-necked people," and He poured out His

lifeblood, essentially saying: "Yes, there is only one way to God, one truth about God, and one life in God - and every last bit of it comes through Me. Do you really think I would have left the magnificent wonders of heaven for the sin-sick wounded of earth because I was bored? Do you really think I would have let Myself get arrested and beaten to a pulp if all beliefs were the same? Do you really think I would have let Myself be slaughtered on a couple of pieces of wood just to add an option to people's religious menus? Do you really think My Father, Almighty God, would have not only let Me die but then raised Me from the dead to show His power over all things, including death, if everybody's gonna wind up in heaven anyway? Why should I let Myself die if everybody's going to live?"

And one really important point: The miracle of God's grace was not having a narrow way, or just one way, but any way! We were the sinners; when it came to God, we chose to oppose. But praise God - He chose to offer us salvation by means of His one and only Son. And what a blessed message we have to share - that there is a way to peace with God, there is a way to forgiveness from God, there is a way to truly abundant life in God! Praise God - that His grace gave us a way!

CONCLUSION

Now we can go crazy over all the things we're seeing in the world, or hearing, or reading. I know sometimes I feel like I'm going to have a "meltdown" over something in the news. But we need to remember that all the immoral decisions we see people making these days are symptoms - symptoms of a disease called "sin." Those symptoms were certainly on display 2,000 years ago, and Christ still came. The point? From the life that He has given us, we are now the ones to go, to preach and teach the singular, distinctive beauty of the gospel message - and to do it with love. Paul said it this way: ***The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love - Paul, Galatians 5:6b.*** In other words, to impact the world with the gospel of Christ, we have to do it with the love of Christ. This is a sin-sick planet, but God has given us the remedy to present to the world: the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross. If we focus on the disease, we'll stay away. But if we focus on the cure - our wonderful Savior, who once cured each and every one of us - then the world will look not like a place to avoid but rather like a place to plant with the seeds of the gospel of Jesus Christ - for the honor and glory of the one true God who gave us the chance to find the one true way through His one and only Son! To God be the glory- let's pray!