

The Two Ways

Matthew 7:13-23

As we've noted throughout this series, the Sermon on the Mount contains many memorable and quotable sayings. Near the end of his teaching, however, Jesus reminds his disciples that this has been no theoretical exercise. It's not enough to just listen to and understand what Jesus says, his words need to lead to transformed actions in our lives.

In the Greek in which Matthew's Gospel was first written, one word keeps recurring in the second half of chapter 7, *poieō*, which means 'to do.' Most of our English translations use a variety of different words, meaning that we lose the impact of the repetition we find in the original. *Poieō* is translated as 'bearing' either good or bad fruit in verses 17 to 19, 'doing' the will of God in verse 21 and the wrong sort of 'performing' which we find in verse 22, and, in next week's reading, we will discover a stark contrast between hearing the words of Jesus and actually putting them into practice (v26). As the sermon comes to its conclusion, 'the message is clear, that those who have now "heard" Jesus' teaching receive no benefit from it, unless they put it into practice.'¹

Another striking feature of the final words of the Sermon is the series of contrasts which are used to describe the choices facing those who have listened to Jesus. The NIV sums up these contrasts under three headings: 'Narrow and Wide Gates' (vs13,14), 'True and False Prophets' (vs15-20) and 'True and False Disciples' (vs21-23).

As RT France notes verses 13 and 14 provide a particularly stark choice. 'This is not a matter of more and less successful attempts to follow the lifestyle of the kingdom of heaven, but of being either in or out, saved or lost. The two routes lead in opposite directions, and their destinations are totally apart. Without using those words, this saying sets before us the radical alternative of heaven or hell.'² The imagery of two contrasting roads is similar to that found at the beginning of Psalms, where we read of how, 'the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction' (Psalm 1:6).

We also found in these verses the clear implication that only a minority of people will come to follow Jesus. This teaching is disturbing and yet it is consistent with other teaching found in Matthew's Gospel which suggests that not all who initially respond to Jesus will remain faithful to him (see 13:19-23). Douglas Hare notes that, 'Since the Greek word for "narrow" in the same verse can also be used metaphorically with the meaning "troubled" or "beset with difficulty," it is possible that Matthew's first

¹ RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 286

² RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 287

readers understood the statement as reminding them that the Christian way involves misunderstanding, rejection and persecution.³

The second risk (7:15-20) raised by Jesus is that of false prophets, the possible presence within the community of disciples of those who are actually working against God's purposes. These people apparently 'come to you' from outside the community. These verses contain imagery found elsewhere in the Old Testament and in Jesus' other teachings. Ezekiel (22:27) and Zephaniah (3:3-4) describe those who abuse their spiritual leadership roles as wolves, and Jesus frequently speaks of his disciples as his flock who are under the risk of attack from wolves (Matthew 9:36; 10:6; 10:16; 18:12-13; 26:31). The imagery of fruitfulness which reflects the underlying health of a tree is found in Psalm 1:3 and 92:14, Matthew 3:8 and John 15:1-8 and is also used by Paul in some of his letters (Phil 1:11; Eph 5:9 and Gal 5:22).

Finally, in verses 21 to 23, we are warned about the danger of false disciples, people within the church who claim that Jesus is their Lord and can back this up with acts which suggest spiritual power and authority. And yet we are told that one day Jesus will say to such people, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (v23). The warning resonates with earlier teaching on giving, praying and fasting. It is not the outward appearance which counts, but the heart relationship with God.

For discussion

1. In Matthew 7:13,14 Jesus speaks of the contrast between broad road which leads to destruction and the narrow road which leads to life? Does that description reflect your own experience of following Jesus?
2. Scripture seems to offer two, apparently contradictory, visions of how many people will be saved by God. Matthew 7:13,14 suggests the number will be relatively small but other texts such as Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 67 speak of the hope of many people coming to him. Do these ideas contradict each other or are there ways in which we can hold them in tension?
3. The first readers of Matthew's Gospel may not have been surprised by the advice of 7:15-20, given that travelling false prophets were known to be a problem within the early church. How might this teaching help us to evaluate those who might approach our own church seeking to work in partnership with us?
4. When Paul writes about spiritual fruit in Galatians 5:22 he focuses on character, rather than signs and wonders. Do you think we get this balance right as we consider the fruitfulness of ministries in our own time and place?
5. In Matthew 7:21-23 we read of those who have apparently done significant actions on behalf of God and yet are not known by Jesus. Can you think of situations you've come across where impressive actions were not backed up by sincere faith? What were the warning signs that all was not as it should be?

³ Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, 1993, 82