

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 7:20-8:1 **“Who Will Stand The Test?”**

June 21, 2015
(4th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

**IIIB' MATTHEW 7:21-8:1
"WHO WILL STAND THE TEST?"**

2') vv.21-23 AN OBEDIENCE TEST FOR PROPHETS: TEMPTATION NO. 2.

Cover For Disobedience, Presumption
Do/Bear (poieo: 9x)
Correct Christological Confession By False Prophets

Judgment **a) v.21 Warning Against Empty Professions Which Avoid Obedience.**

21 1 "NOT EVERY ONE who says *to me*, 'LORD, LORD,' 2 Styles Of Faith v.21//Lk. 6:46*, WARNING
v.21b = *Entrance Saying*

2 shall enter the kingdom of heaven (God), 2 Destinies Enter//v.13, Jesus As Judge
Enter Kingdom Of God, Not Heaven At Death

1' but the one who *does* the will 6:10, God's Will Is Love, m. Pirke Aboth 5:22, James 1:22
Heaven = God's Part Of Creation, Seen , Overlap/Interlock

2' of *my* father who is in heaven. Ground-level Agents, Not Profession But Obedience,
Confession Does Not Always Indicate Approval

Heavenly Hearing
Q//Lk. 13:26-27, Power Does Not Always Indicate Approval

22 1 *On that day many will say* *to me,* *Judgment Scene*, REASON: Jesus As End-Time Judge
Sound Genuine, They Think He Will Look Favorably On Them

2 'LORD, LORD,
did we not **prophecy** in your name, //v.15, Charismatic Giftings, + 10:1, 7-8, 41; 24:11, 24
and cast out demons in your name, Acts 19:13-16, Exorcism, Power Ministry
and do many mighty works in your name?' Seek Power/Honor, Ignore The Lord, 24:23-28
What's Missing? Two Issues: Changed Heart + Obedience

23 1' And I will declare to them, Truth Told, Jesus Threatens *Inside Track* Christians
Outsider Wonders: Ex. 7-8, Mt. 24:23-28, 2 Thess. 2:9-10, Rev. 13:13-15

2' 'I never **knew** you;
'depart from me,
you workers of lawlessness (evildoers).' Ignore The Ordinary Elements: Love, Activities Over Relationship/Obedience
Ps. 6:9 //25:12-12, 26:72, Ban Formula, Formal Repudiation: *Go away*
28:19-20, 24:12//25:41, No Good Fruit, Tear Away Disguise
v.23d = *antinomians*, Jesus Words = *New Torah/Law*, v.24

Judgment **1') vv.24-27 THE TWO WAYS: ALLEGORY OF HEARING ONLY & ALSO DOING.** //Lk. 6:47-49

Issue = Proper Foundations, Not Torah But Jesus' Words

24 (-)a **"EVERY ONE then who hears these words of mine and does them** 2 Different Foundations *Antithetical Parable*
James 1:22-25, Future, Obey: Fruit = Hear + Do

b will be like a *wise* man who built his house upon the rock; 2 Types of People 13:35, Rocky Hill vs. Valley
Storm = Image Of God's Judgment/ Test: Storms, Fire, Earthquake

25 c and the rain fell, and the floods came, (4) Different Foundations, Same Test, Who Stands At End?
and the winds blew and beat upon that house, Promise + Warning, Is. 8:7-8, Ezek. 38:22!
Mt. 25:31-46, 4-Part Antithetical Parallelism

d but it **did not fall**, because it had been founded on the rock. //Avot of Rabbi Nathan 24
We Know Ahead Of Time! There Is A Great Alternative!

26 (+)a **AND EVERY ONE** who hears these words *of mine* and does not do them Higher Righteousness, To Hear Insufficient
1 Cor. 3:10-11, Ezek. 33:30-32

b will be like a *foolish* man who built his house upon the sand; Easier, WARNING & REASON TOGETHER
Houses Of Greed, Power, Lust, Anger Collapse

27 c and the rain fell, and the floods came,
and the wind blew and beat against that house, 2 Destinies Judgment As Kindness
Temple Fall? Severe Parable! Village Near A Wadi

d and it fell; and great was the **fall** of it." Issue = Obedience, Not Admiration, Ex. 24:7
Judgment Scenes: Mt. 10:40-42, 13:47-50, 18:23-35, 25:31-46, 7:13-27
End Of SM, We Are Moved To Act

IIIA' 7:28-29, 8:1 SERMON ON THE MOUNT CONCLUSION: JESUS' AUTHORITY. Q

Discourse Conclusion, Inclusion With 4:32-5:2
//11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1 Ends Each Of 5 Discourses

28 And when Jesus finished these sayings,
the crowds were astonished at his teaching, Jesus' Sheer Audacity // Moses, Mt. Understands SM As Teaching

29 for he taught them as one who had authority Mi. 1:22, authority = *out of himself/from the Holy Spirit*, "but I say to you...."
and not as the scribes. For Rabbinic Scribes, Authority From Past & Ones Teachers Carried Great Weight
Jesus Needed No Footnotes; His Words Are Self-Authenticating

8:1 When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. Like Moses With The Law

Brief Treatment Of Matthew 7:21-8:1

This text is the second half of a larger unit (IIIB' 7:13-27) that begins with the command to *Enter by the narrow gate* (vv.13-14), then goes on to give warnings against false prophets who disguise themselves as harmless (sheep) when their intent is vicious (wolves). Leaders who pay attention to the bad fruit they produce will recognize bad roots (vv.16-20). Such are headed for felling and fire (vv.19-20), but their presence calls for resistance lest others share their unhappy end. The thought unit opens with the two ways: the narrow and the broad (a. vv.13-14), and closes with two outcomes: a house that stands the storm and one that falls (a' vv.24-27). At the double center of the concentric pattern (b. vv.15-20 // b' vv.21-23) are warnings against false prophets, the first offering an ethical test (good vs. bad fruit), the second an obedience test (hear only vs. hear and obey). Nothing, not correct Christology (*Lord, Lord*), not even impressive exorcisms or miracles, are a substitute for simple obedience to Jesus' teaching which evidences loyalty and devotion. Powers and the spiritual gifts of the kingdom may work through me for the benefit of others, but they say little about the quality of ones inward relationship with the Lord. The gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit are to travel in tandem, but if allowed to separate, the outcome is dismal, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." If a healer shows up, check his credit, his track record, and his marriage license! Rogue charismatics may ruin a church; true ones enrich it.

As before, Matthew's editorial hand is evident. If Lk. 6:46 is the more original form of the Q saying, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" what Matthew has done in vv.21-22 is rewrite it as an *eschatological entrance saying* which allows him to confront the contemporary issue of false prophets who at the same time demonstrate charismatic power and bear bad fruit among those to whom they minister. How is Matthew to resist their attractive influence? By teaching that correct confession (vv.21, 22 contain the emphatic *Lord, Lord*) and charismatic giftings (prophecy, exorcism, and miracles) are not the litmus test for true discipleship. That resides solely in the combination of *hearing and doing* Jesus' teaching out of love and loyalty. To love God and neighbor is the core, not enthusiastic acclamation (*Lord, Lord*) or acts of power. The word of judgment (v.23) has close parallels with Lk. 6:27, though in a different context, so Matthew has likely joined them. Matthew agrees with the insight that the charismatic must be secondary to the ethic of obedience. It's for this same reason that Paul sandwiches his treatment of love (1 Cor. 13) between two chapters on the power and gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12 and 14). Intimacy with and loyalty to Jesus leads to obedience, and – as a bonus– correct insight into his identity and the presence of his Spirit's power where necessary. The art is to keep first things first and the secondary subsidiary for church health. The concluding parable of two houses and the single storm is parallel to Lk. 6:47-49 with Matthew tightening the parallelism and drawing a contrast between his twice-repeated *Every one* (vv.24a, 26a) and the *Not every one* with which he starts (v.21a).

Flash floods during winter rains was common in the arid hills and wadis of Galilee where Jesus was a builder. Building homes on the hills– where one could did down to bedrock, then lay stones on rock and only later above ground use mud bricks– was harder and more expensive that building in the alluvial soil of a valley. The two houses look alike, but only one rested on rock and had strength to face the forces of the flood. So is the difference between those who hear only and those to add doing to hearing. Just as Jesus went up the mountain to teach (4:32-5:2), so now he finishes and comes down, just as Moses did (7:28-8:1). He has impressed the crowds with his lack of footnotes and the directness of his authority and appeal. The Magna Charta of discipleship has been delivered and many follow in hope. Will they endure?



WHO PASSES THE TEST?

“I never knew you.... and great was the fall of it.”

Jesus’ final description of some of his supposed followers.

M A T T H E W 7 : 2 3, 2 7 d

Is it because we are a people of such intelligence, or perhaps the threat of product liability, that the following warning labels are found on consumer products?

On a Duraflame fireplace log: "Caution! Risk of Fire."

On a children’s Batman costume: "Warning: Cape does not enable user to fly."

On a bottle of hair coloring: "Do not use as an ice cream topping."

On a cardboard sun shield for a car: "Do not drive with sun shield in place."

And, for the first time parent, this label on a portable stroller: "Caution! Remove infant before folding for storage."¹

I— for one— am for a new product safety law. I’m considering writing publishers and asking that large, fluorescent colored stickers be placed on the covers of all Bibles. It reads, “Warning! Reading this book with no intention of obeying it is hazardous to eternal life.” Buyers would be required to read the sticker aloud to a cashier and sign a release form. The medieval spiritual writer Thomas a Kempis wrote this prayer: “Let not thy Word, O Lord, become a judgement upon us, that we hear it and do it not, that we believe it and obey it not.”² Or, as Jesus’ brother James reminds us in his letter, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, *deceiving yourselves*.”³ Obedience is an epistemological issue, a fancy way of saying that knowing truth is reserved for those actually do what Jesus says. Two verses from John 7 make this clear:

¹ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:21-8:1.

² Idem.

³ James 1:22.

“My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; *if any man’s will is to do his will*, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.”⁴

Notice that the knowing comes after the willing! It’s not so much in just reading the Bible but in risking to obey it that we find the truth of it. It is not we who say to God, “First show me the truth, and then I will obey it, if I agree,” but God who says to us, “Obey it, and then I will show you the truth of it because I am faithful and reward those who have faith to obey.”

TURNING TO THE TEXT

If you remember, the Sermon on the Mount opens with a series of blessings called *Beatitudes*; it ends in the text before us with a series of warnings. The bookends are blessing and cursing. Along the way we are told to *Enter by the narrow gate* and to *Beware of false prophets* who come dressed to kill as wolves in sheep’s clothing. So not only is the gate narrow and the way treacherous, the entire trek is lined with liars with impressive resumes, and if you picture yourself climbing a narrow, steep path with people shouting at every turn to buy tickets to Vegas, you’ll be close to the truth. They know precisely what appeals to wayfaring pilgrims; they lure many away; they know the struggles because they were once on the path themselves.

John Bunyan’s allegory of the path to the heavenly city, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, is the classic treatment of this theme. Bunyan knew beginning at the narrow gate is no guarantee of arrival at the heavenly city. There will always be those beckoning you to leave the narrow for the broad way. They tell you it’s enough to have correct doctrine and ecstatic religious experiences, that costly obedience is an optional extra for only the most advanced. They are lying, even if they do miracles and write theology books. Their messages are well-packaged for each generation: the health and wealth gospel, the gospel as good feelings and pop-psychology, six of the ten commandments (you choose!), Jesus and the American dream, discount discipleship, faith as a merely private thing, Satan as a medieval myth, the concept of sin as out of date, the poor as someone else’s responsibility, the church as the Christian educator of your children, that there’s a carbon between a church membership book and the Lamb’s book of life, sexuality as your personal playground and none of the church’s

⁴ vv.16-17.

business. You know the lies that are most attractive in our day. Many of them you have believed. False prophets will always have an audience because they appeal to the worst in us all.

It is only then, after warnings about the narrow gate and the false prophets, that Matthew transports us from the present to the end where we hear human testimony given and divine verdicts announced. The scene set before us is dizzying and disorienting. Everyone is there, all the angels as well. It is the cosmic courtroom. At the front of the masses lined before the bar of heaven is an impressive group with thick resumes in hand. How confident they appear. Further back in the crowds we hear people shouting out, “Hey, see that prophet at the front of the line, he told me what only God could know.” Another shouts, “And the one just behind him, she cast demons out of me and healed my wife with a prayer. No wonder they are near the front. Spiritual hall-of-famers. When they enter, let’s all clap.”

Sudden there’s a hush; the crowd grows still as an angelic bailiff shouts, “Order in the court. Order in the court.” The heavenly proceedings begins in verse 21 with an announcement of divine law, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven.” Mental assent to correct doctrine is not sufficient. It is immediately followed by a clarification that distinguishes between the *not everyone* and others who will be granted entrance, “Not everyone... but the one who *does the will* of my father who is in heaven.” The standards Jesus announced during his lifetime are repeated. They echo down the corridors . It should surprise no one; it was already written in the book long ago.

Here in verses 22 and 23 we gain a preview scene of the judgment in the form of a case study. The Crucified And Risen One now sits at the right hand, and the encounter is not an impersonal administrative matter but face-to-face, “Not everyone who says *to me*... And on that day many will say *to me*.... And I will say *to them*.... ” We each have an audience before the resurrected, glorified Jesus; we gaze on him and he on us. And if you missed it in the Bible, it’s repeated near the end of the second article of the Apostle’s Creed said often enough in church, “And he shall come again to judge the living and the dead.” The truth about me will be told. You as well. *The living and the dead* means everyone. The oft-raised question about unbelievers and those who’ve never heard is not addressed here. This scene is for the church, not for the world as we normally understand it. It’s an internal family matter in which sheep and goats from the same flock are separated, wheat and weeds from the same field assigned to separate bins; an internal stress test where one house falls before the great

deluge, another just next door stands. An appropriate text to place over this scene would be 1 Peter 4:17-18 which tell us where God always starts:

“For the time has come for judgment to begin *with the household of God*; and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, ‘if the righteous man is scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinner appear?’”

Some supposedly Christian prophets who have a correct confession of Jesus and great intensity of faith— as demonstrated by the fact they call him *Lord, Lord* and have a resume of impressive signs and wonders— are banished. “I never knew you,” he says, “Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” That shock leaves those of us with much less impressive resumes wondering, “But what about me?” which is just the point: *What about you?* How can you avoid an unpleasant surprise at the end of life? Matthew’s answer is given in verses 24 through 27 in the story of the two houses, one of which stands, the other of which crumbles, which leads to a further question: If I was to face the flood of God’s test today, would my life stand or fall? D. Elton Trueblood wrote, “The chief way you and I are disloyal to Christ is when we make small what he intended to make large.”⁵

For Jesus, the obedience that is built on a foundation of trust is everything. And if we sever the link between belief and behavior and between faith and the good works that flow from it, we will be severed says Matthew, just like these supposedly great prophets. The trust of faith is a necessary and repeated beginning; participation in the gifts and powers of the Holy Spirit is an incredible bonus, but what Jesus is after is that we learn *to do what he says*, and what he expects is not hard to find.

The Sermon on the Mount is peppered with commands. Love your neighbor as yourself, turn the other cheek, seek first the kingdom of God, give up being a harsh judge, use wise moral discernment, take the log out of our own eye, lay up treasures in heaven, hunger and thirst for righteousness, become pure in heart and a peacemaker, be salt and light, seek reconciliation, avoid the lustful look, praying and fasting and giving for God alone, forgiving others as we wish to be forgiven, quit serving wealth or the hope of it, give up fruitless anxiety, trust God for your needs, learn wisdom, inspect the fruit, pray for protection from the Evil One, avoid false

⁵ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:21-8:1.

prophets, stay on the narrow way, dig deep to a solid foundation. Jesus Christ has the power and will change us into that kind of people if we do not resist him. Sanctification, the process of becoming holy as he is holy, follows justification, having him bring us into initially into right relationship with himself.⁶ As we trust and follow, he does something *for us* and something *in us*. We can be changed by love and wisdom into love and wisdom, which is the point of it all. The great news is that in Jesus’ company we get to become a new kind of human being, and it’s so new the only image that works is *born again*. I’m not raising the standard, only repeating it. A.W. Tozer wrote:

“The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are at opposite sides of the same coin.”⁷

2') vv.21-23 An Obedience Test For Prophets.

The earliest and most basic Christian confession has two words in Greek and three in English, “Jesus is Lord.” Paul says you can’t make the statement sincerely without the help of the Holy Spirit.⁸ *Lord* is the Old Testament word for God; to apply that title to the Jesus they knew meant his earliest Jewish followers had come to see in him a fresh revelation that pushed them in a new direction,⁹ towards what would finally become the doctrine of the Trinity, that the one God of the Jews— *Yahweh* or the *LORD*— is shown in Jesus and the Spirit to be not just a unit but a unity, a mysterious and loving eternal communion of three— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit— one God in three persons. *Lord* was also what people called Caesar, so it was politically

⁶ For U.M. teaching, see *The Confession of Faith*, Article XI, “Sanctification and Christian Perfection,” *The Book of Discipline 2012*, 73, and the attached article “Of Sanctification,” 70.

⁷ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:21-8:1.

⁸ 1 Cor. 12:3, as made explicit in the Nicene Creed, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, *the Lord*, the giver of life....”

⁹ For the scholarly case, see the ground-breaking work of Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), especially under the heading “Jesus as Lord,” 108-117. Applying God language to Jesus was not a late addition but an early fact. High Christology is genetic.

loaded as well, the question being, To whom does the world rightly belong? The Christian answer was clear: the world belongs to the one God of the Jews, the Son he sent whom we follow, and the Spirit who accompanied him and now dwells in us. It was both a religious and a political claim at the same time.

To make the claim that Yahweh is Lord, *and* that Jesus is Lord, *and* that the Holy Spirit is also Lord, is the distinctive Christian confession.¹⁰ This is who God is revealed to be, a truth entrusted to the church in divine revelation and guarded in our teaching.¹¹ It's not something we figured out; it was shown to us, and we had to find language over time to guard it from misunderstanding, thus the Councils and the Creeds. And if you say it twice as in *Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy*, you add intensity. The truth is confessed and felt; head and heart are engaged. Old time religion But, according to Jesus, good Methodist doctrine and a warm Wesleyan heart are not enough. Hands and feet must be added, "Not every one who says to me *Lord, Lord...* but the one who *does the will* of my Father who is in heaven." Obedient action completes faith. Nazi judge Roland Freisler understood this and admitted, "We and Christianity are the same in one thing only: We demand the entire person!"¹²

If God is to save us, he must have all of us: the mind, the emotions, the will, your body as the place these are integrated. The thinking part, the feeling part, the choosing and acting part. Not a fragmented piece or segmented slice but a whole self surrendered to Jesus, brought into right alignment through evidence-based trust and pointed towards the kingdom of God. A convinced mind, a converted heart, an engaged will and an obedient body are all necessary. Jesus will take what we give and begin where we allow him to work, but eventually the whole self in all its capacities must be brought under his sway. As Sir Francis Bacon, the sixteenth century English scientist and essayist, wrote:

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 3:17. On the Trinity in the New Testament, see Allen Churchill, "The New Testament and the Trinity," in Allen Stirling, editor, *The Trinity* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2002), 31-100. For primers on the Trinity, see Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2012), Jason Byasse, *Trinity: The God We Don't Know* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2015),

¹¹ See our Articles of Religion, Article I: Of Faith in the Holy Trinity (*BOD 2012*, 63-64).

¹² PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:21-8:1.

“It is not what men eat, but what they digest that makes them strong; not what we gain, but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read, but what we remember that makes us learned; not what we preach or pray, but what we practice and believe that makes us Christians.”¹³

It was not that these early Christian prophets were wrong in what they affirmed and experienced, only in that they did not go far enough. They were false prophets because they propagated the lie that obeying Jesus and becoming an entirely new kind of person was optional. This is why he pronounces them *workers of lawlessness* he’d never really known. They preferred the gifts to the Giver and building a spiritual resume to knowing and obeying. They were into display; he was about foundations.

I’m not ashamed to say I’m working for the renewal of the United Methodist Church on several levels: locally here in Greenwood, nationally with movements that take our doctrinal identity seriously, in our conference with The Wesley Fellowship, globally through The Mission Society. On top of that I want to be numbered among those in mainline denominations who embrace the charismatic dimension of the faith and are open to the intrusions of the Holy Spirit in all the colorful spectrum of spiritual gifts, from the most mundane to the most amazing.¹⁴ I’m not ashamed of prophetic words that pierce the heart with truth, that prayer in the Spirit is valuable, or that prayer for healing sometimes yields surprising results. I know God illumines Scripture through personal revelation, and that the ministry of deliverance from evil is a valuable part of the larger work of loving and wise pastoral care when people are in a spiritual bondage that does not yield to standard medical interventions.

With the false prophets who were condemned I can say *Lord, Lord* and trot out my resume, “Did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” To which the answer is *Yes*. I live in a world of orthodox Christian faith with a supernatural world view and sometimes lively spiritual walk in which I fully expect to see more and more of what I read in the Bible made real in experience. About half my life is a to-do list; the other half consists of divine appointments and dealing with interruptions and surprises. If you followed me around for a week, you’d be amazed what happens, the best explanation

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ See Beth Felker Jones, *God the Spirit: Introducing Pneumatology in Wesleyan and Ecumenical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

for which is that Jesus is still alive and messin’ with Pastor Phil.

I recommend it. I want more. When I confess the Creeds it is with devotion and a sense of being surrounded by the communion of the saints. And not always, but sometimes when I pray I feel God near enough that it lights me on fire and fills me with holy resolve to offer myself as a living sacrifice. I regularly see things it takes God to explain. Some of them I don’t share in order to keep my job! But that, my friends, is not enough, because the false prophets had all this and were dismissed and condemned. It’s what the frightening little phrase *depart from me* means. It’s expanded later on in chapter 25 and made explicit, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels....”¹⁵ Jesus utterly repudiates these prophets and ignores their padded resumes! How can this be?

Pastor Phil, are you telling us that those who have correct doctrine and have done miracles in Jesus’ name are not guaranteed entry into the kingdom of God? That’s exactly what I’m saying because it is the verdict of Jesus himself. That the blessing and power of God may come through me to another says nearly nothing about me and everything about the mercy of God for the needy person. God wants to get people help and will use any who are willing. I am— in the case of spiritual gifts— merely a *pass through*. You may not like it, but God regularly pours the water of life through dirty pipes; it’s all he’s got. If someone sends you money in the mail, you don’t write a thank you note to the postman but to the benefactor.

Don’t make the mistake of confusing spiritual gifts and spiritual fruit. They are related but distinguished. Spiritual gifts are the power of Jesus poured through us for others, whereas the nine fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5 are the character of Christ formed in us over time for our sanctification. Spiritual gifts come and go in a moment; mature fruit takes time to grow. Ideally they go together: open to the power, full of love and wisdom. But it is not always so. Which is why the prophets Jesus rejects did not list love and the other virtues on their resumes. How could they since they were full of pride? “Did *we* not... did *we* not... did *we* not?” Instead, they offered emphatic confession and miracles, none of which Jesus questioned or denied. As odd as it sounds to us, great anointing of the Holy Spirit and holy character are not necessarily the same thing. The Pentecostals and Charismatics have numerous examples in their history of powerful ministries that utterly collapsed under ethical

¹⁵ v.12.

compromise. That John Wesley had solid theology and rich experience and continued faithful to the end of his life is one of the reasons he's still worth listening to.¹⁶ I heard of a Christian recent leader who refuses to read the books of anyone who is still alive because he's convinced that only those who end well should be listened to!

One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a Christian leader is to have gifts or opportunities that go beyond their character. With success come notoriety, and with notoriety fame and money and prestige and the company of important people and more speaking engagements and book offers and then— if you are not careful and accountable— to the false belief you are so special that God will overlook certain indulgences and that personal holiness and obedience are no longer important issues. Steeple eagles often crash and burn. I read their stories on the scandal sheets every week. I don't think for a minute that the false prophets Jesus rejects set out to be such. No, they knew Jesus as Lord and joined the Holy Spirit in kingdom ministry. But somewhere a lie crept in to an unguarded inward crevice. "I am *above* the ordinary Christian; what applies to novices does not apply to us elites."¹⁷ And with their guard down, a rotten seed took root in the manure of inward pride. Outwardly they succeeded; inwardly they no longer delighted in knowing and obeying Jesus in small things. Because their beliefs did not change and the Spirit's power did not lift, they thought they were O.K. Pillars of orthodoxy, anointed servants of God, all the while marching towards the dark side of judgment because they used Jesus and his power rather than value him first. In a book on the sayings of the desert monks of the fourth century, Owen Chadwick sounds a note of caution:

"Sometimes we excuse... minor flaws in people, especially if they have done something extraordinary for God. But God doesn't just want extraordinary good works from us, but obedience in small things as well. Athanasius, a desert monk of fourth-century Egypt put it this way: 'If an

¹⁶ For the untold story, see Daniel R. Jennings, *The Supernatural Occurrences of John Wesley*, (Sean Media, 2005); Frank Billman, *The Supernatural Thread in Methodism: Signs and Wonders Among Methodists Then and Now* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2012); Robert Webster, *Methodism and the Miraculous: John Wesley's Idea of the Supernatural and the Identification of Methodists in the Eighteenth-Century* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Seminary, 2013).

¹⁷ Adapted from Eugene Peterson, "The greatest errors in the spiritual life are not committed by the novices but by the adepts," *Leadership*, Vol. 4, No. 2.

angry man raises the dead, God is still displeased with his anger.”¹⁸

Suppose, for instance, you are given a counterfeit bill in change. Thinking it genuine, you pay for gas. The station owner then pays an employee, who buys groceries for the family. After several more circulations it goes to the bank where a cashier says, “This bill is counterfeit.” The fake note did lots of good while in circulation, but when it arrived at quality control, it was exposed as a fraud and removed. So with the false prophets of whom Jesus spoke so plainly. What counts most is knowing him and obeying him in a way that changes us and roots out all compromise with *the spirit of lawlessness*. We don’t get to set our own standards; he does! Jesus says that knowing him trumps orthodoxy and miracles, valuable as these are as secondary level supports. Does that mean that the verdict of *I never knew you* and *Depart from me* applies only to a group titled *prophets*? No. The section dealing with them begins with the words *Not every one*, while the next section in verses 24 through 27 begins with the words *Everyone then who hears these words of mine*. The negative example of the prophets is *about* them but *for* all of us. They are an example not to follow, lest we meet their end.

1') vv.24-27 Parable Of The Two Houses And The Single Storm.

Eleven miles off the east coast of Scotland stands Bell Rock Lighthouse. Since 1811 it’s endured the North Sea’s most violent storms. It rests on less than an acre of solid rock that’s covered by seawater twenty hours a day. Robert Stevenson and his band of sixty-five builders had but four hours a day to gouge out a foundation. Because of their work, the 115-foot-tall lighthouse is in use today.¹⁹

The geography of northern Israel near Nazareth has rocky hillsides, while the valleys— where creeks and rivers run— are sandy because of erosion washing down from higher ground. A builder like Jesus has two choices: build in the valley on sandy soil or on a rocky hillside.²⁰ One was easier. Hillside builders planned for the worse; valley builders hoped for the best. And if the winter rains come in a rush— as

¹⁸ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:21-8:1.

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ David Dockery & David Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom* (Wheaton, ILL: Shaw, 1992), 119.

they often do— a dry creek bed or wadi quickly becomes a torrent. Hard rain and strong winds form flash floods off the hills. They look alike, but after the storm only one house remains. Same materials, different foundations. The imagery is not about the normal troubles of life, though that might be a bad secondary application; it is about the God’s final judgment pictured as a sudden storm that tests everything all at once. The violences of nature— fires and storms and earthquakes— are often used in Scripture to image God’s final testing. If it burns, it’s cheap; if it crumbles, it needed seismic shaking, and if it can’t stand the flood, away it goes! The foundations and inner issues of life are often hidden, but one day they will be clear to all.

What survives God’s stress test is founded on *hearing and obeying* Jesus. Jewish rabbis also told such stories about those who studied and obeyed the Torah, the five books of Moses. The startling authority of Jesus is indicated by his reference in verse 24 not to the Torah but to *these words of mine* in which he places his teaching as the equivalent of and even superior to the Old Testament. The one who tells the story not only knows what the standards are, he also claims to be the one who pronounces the judgments of God at the end of history, “And *I* will declare to them....” Here is a glimmer of Jesus’ self-understanding.²¹

Jesus uses analogy. *This*, he says (the judgment), is like that (the builder’s choice). The familiar gives a window into what has not yet happened. “Do you want your life to endure the coming catastrophe? Then you must both hear and put my words into practice. ‘Everyone then who hears these words of mine *and does them* will be like a wise man who build his house upon the rock...’” To hear and do is firm foundation; to hear and not do is sandy soil. “Is that thunder I hear? Say Andrew, where is your house built?” Everyone looked around; Jesus grinned.

Responding to the terrors of tornado alley, a Tulsa developer in the year 2000 offered an optional safe room in new homes. Reinforced concrete, good for level 5 winds. Nine of the first ten paid an extra \$2,500 for the room, which can also be used as a closet, bathroom, or vault when not needed. The tenth, the developer said, were 75 years old and opted for a hot tub instead.²² Perhaps someone will have a

²¹ For a treatment of direct and indirect claims on Christology, see James R. Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), Chapter 5, “Did Jesus Consider Himself God?” 67-97.

²² “Americans Are Facing More Disasters,” *USA Today* (5-23-00).

video when the tub goes airborne with its aging cargo! “Look, Maude, the tub’s a-spinnin’!”

CONCLUSION

Thomas Linacre was physician to Henry VII and Henry VIII, founder of the Royal College of Physicians and friend of Renaissance thinkers Erasmus and Sir Thomas More. Late in life he took Roman Catholic orders and was given a copy of the Four Gospels to read for the first time. The Bible was still the preserve of clergy and not in the hands of ordinary laity. Linacre lived through the papacy of Alexander VI, the Borgia pope whose bribery, corruption, incest, and murder plumbed new depths in the annals of Christian shame. Reading for himself, Linacre was amazed and troubled, "Either these are not the Gospels," he said, "or we are not Christians."²³

Anyone listening? Anyone obeying? “Everyone then who hears these words of mine *and does them....*” No easy way to be saved, only the Jesus way. Follow him as a learner. Confess him as Lord. Stay open to the Spirit. Beware of false prophets who morally corrupt the church and whose behavior is not as impressive as their resumes. Value your relationship and intimacy with Jesus above everything else so you are willing to do what he says. There’s no other way.

We’ve been sold a bill of goods, haven’t we? It’s time to re-dig foundations. Time to listen and obey. I feel the winds picking up; I see angry, dark clouds rolling our way. I do not want this church or its people or me to be washed away. God help us, because we are not ready for the pressures we will face. We have grown soft and wobbly. I am no prophet, only an aging, trembling, frightened pastor. I never thought I’d say that. Start digging!

²³ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), 109-110.
