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# "I Never Knew You": Jesus' Rebuke in Matthew 7.23

MARY ELLEN PEREIRA

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It is easy to assume that the message of the book of Matthew would be heard as good news by Christian listeners. It is, after all, a gospel and in that way announces great news: Jesus, whose birth was heralded by prophets and angels alike and whose death shook the earth, had been raised back to glorious life. Jesus, whose teaching and authority was substantiated by his power to work miracles, had subsequently authorized his followers to baptize and teach in his name.

But it is likely that some were able to hear in this Gospel of Matthew a sermon that pierced them to the heart, finally startling their closed eyes and dull ears to perceive a rebuke that moved them to fruitful repentance and faithful observance of Jesus' teachings. It is this gracious message of sharp rebuke that we, too, must hear today.

## **JESUS' SHOCKING DENUNCIATION OF SOME WHO CALL HIM LORD**

Like us, Matthew's early audience may have anticipated hearing a message that commended them for their faithfulness in the kingdom of heaven. Early on, Matthew had already contrasted the actions of Jesus' stepfather Joseph ("a righteous man" who consistently did as he was commanded by messengers of God; Matt 1.19, 24; 2.14, 21) with the unrighteousness of Jewish religious leaders whose lives showed no deep evidence of changed hearts. These Pharisees and Sadducees were extremely knowledgeable about the teachings of God and had even responded to John the Baptist's call to a baptism of repentance, but had failed to show authentic evidence of changed lives. Because their obedience to God was limited to certain outward actions rather than a deeply changed heart that imitated God's character, these religious leaders were severely condemned by John's declaration that "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3.10).

Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew also reports that Jesus denounced the careful righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, warning his own followers that they were being called to a type of righteousness that needed to surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. If not, they would "never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5.20).

Many of the Sermon's practical examples emphasize the need for purity of one's heart attitudes as the Lord's commands are put into practice. So, instead of satisfying the words of the Law by neither murdering nor committing adultery nor swearing falsely, the Lord's followers were instructed that the heart's anger and lust and manipulations were to be rooted out. Likewise, practicing spiritual disciplines for the purpose of impressing others earned Jesus' condemnation and actually identified the presence of hypocrisy in a disciple's life. Above all, living in the kingdom of heaven would require an authentically changed heart that could naturally produce deep and active involvement of the Lord's teachings in all relationships and circumstances.

These themes are further emphasized when Matthew finally recounts the concluding remarks from the Sermon on the Mount. And it is here that the Christian disciple would have been most alarmed to be reminded of Jesus' rebuke of some who were calling him, "Lord":

"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 in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers'" [workers of unlawfulness] (7.21–23).

These are not words aimed against the scribes and Pharisees, but toward some of Jesus' own devoted followers. The awful news in Matthew's Gospel is that someone might do tremendous works in the name of Jesus and yet learn in the end that he or she has never actually entered the Lord's kingdom.

This rejection of unsuspecting disciples, who naively assume that they are part of the kingdom of heaven, comes as a shock. Ironically, these are no "ordinary believers," but those who have toiled hard and long as the Lord's emissaries: proclaiming God's word, defeating God's enemy and accomplishing God's mighty acts. All of their efforts have been done in the name of the Lord. How then can they be rejected by the very Lord they meant to please?

The Lord's declaration, "I never knew you," recognizes that although the rejected workers claimed Jesus' authority for their ministry, they were not actually part of his kingdom and were not serving under his authority.<sup>1</sup> This language is borrowed from the courts, where an individual would be able to designate a legal representative who could reliably speak on one's behalf. As Hans Dieter Betz has pointed out, "An advocate cannot represent a client whom he or she does not know personally . . . Therefore, the renunciation formula not only denies knowing the persons but also having any responsibility for them."<sup>2</sup> Although many workers claimed to serve and speak under Jesus' authority, he renounced all responsibility for their actions and rejected all personal connections with them.

Instead of accepting these workers, Jesus identified their work as evil deeds, or "lawlessness," and expelled them from his presence (7.23; also 13.41). We must be careful to understand that the "lawlessness" that marks these unauthorized workers does not particularly refer to breaking the Torah laws. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is used especially to describe the religious leaders whose hearts did not reflect the heart of God in mercy and justice although their outward actions perfectly observed God's legal commandments. Jesus denounced such hollow law-keeping as "hypocrisy and lawlessness" (23.23, 28).

But how does Jesus identify his faithful representatives if it is *not* on the basis of works done in his name? How does he "know" his followers?

### How Jesus Knows His Own Followers

According to this scripture, being preachers of the word of God is not enough to place us in God's kingdom—even if our ministry were to be accompanied by demonstrations of great spiritual power or impressive miracles. Just as John the Baptist condemned the religious leaders who came to him for a baptism of repentance when their lives lacked any indications that their hearts had ever changed, Jesus is looking for changes that emerge from hearts that are conformed to the heavenly Father's character and desires.

The simple fact is that "only the one who *does the will of my Father in heaven*" will enter the kingdom of heaven (7.21; emphasis mine). As Thomas G. Long has pointed out, "A true leader, an authentic leader of

1. J. C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 114. See also Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 79.

2. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Hermeneia Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 551.

the faithful community, will work to ensure that the church looks and acts like the kingdom rather than just 'sounding like' the kingdom. A true leader will show the mercy and forgiveness of the gospel and not just preach beautiful sermons about mercy and forgiveness."<sup>3</sup> Jesus is looking for particular identifying marks of his kingdom in our lives, marks that emerge from hearts that authentically and actually embody his teachings in the particularities of daily life.

Immediately before his startling rejection of certain workers, Jesus had emphasized that those who falsely claim to speak for God can indeed be distinguished from authentic leaders. After warning the believers about false prophets who would come into their midst, Jesus observed that, "You will know them by their fruits"—a point so significant that it is repeated in both 7.16 and 7.20. Instead of identifying authentic prophets simply by the content of their teachings, listeners must also examine the actions that spring from the prophets' lives—the "fruit" that is produced in their lives—in order to recognize whether they come from God.

This *inclusio*—examining the "fruit" of a prophet's own life as a means of recognizing "good" or "bad" prophets—brackets some simple illustrations to help the believers understand the significance of discovering the relationship between our outward life and the substance of our hearts (7.16–19). We know that if a bush produces thorns, it is indeed a thorn bush and not, for example, a grapevine. In the same way, the presence of thistles should alert us to the fact that a certain plant really is a thistle and not a fig tree! The type of fruit that a plant produces is the definitive clue to its identity.

Just as we know how to recognize trees or plants by the fruit they produce, we can recognize false leaders by their "fruit." Whether it is the lack of good fruit or the presence of bad fruit, either result indicates that the tree (i.e., leader) is still bad at the core. And since "behavior flows from character," Craig S. Keener points out that "a person transformed by and consistently dependent on the power of God's Spirit will live according to the traits of God's character."<sup>4</sup> Authentic disciples and leaders will display increasingly consistent behaviors that are consonant with their Lord's life and instructions.

After teaching his followers how they will be able to recognize, or "know," false prophets, Jesus carries his implications about testing the "fruit" of a leader's life a step further to show how he uses similar tests to distinguish between his own false and true disciples. In the case of his church, it is not an individual's claim that Jesus is Lord or even the fact that ministry is being done in his name that means that an individual is part of the kingdom of heaven. It is "only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7.21).

In the final section of the Sermon on the Mount, this theme of doing the will of the Father is specifically tied to Jesus' teachings. Although all of his teachings must eventually be taken into consideration, Matthew 7.24–27 seems to place a special emphasis on the teachings given in the Sermon on the Mount as it considers whether a person actually obeys "these words" of Jesus (7.24, 26). Those who hear *these* words and act on them are contrasted with those who hear the words but do *not* put them into action (7.24–27). Indeed, those who practice the teachings of this Sermon are wise (like a homeowner who builds upon a rock-solid foundation), while those who never put his words into practice are utterly foolish (similar to fools who build houses on sand).

In contrast to those whom he "never knew" and are expelled from his presence, Jesus acknowledges his relationship with any individual "who hears these words of mine and acts on them" (7.24). In other words, he "knows" them by their good fruit when they actually put his teachings into practice in their lives. The righteousness that is part of the kingdom of heaven exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees because it bears the fruit that is associated with a heart that is changed and a life that follows Jesus' instructions.

3. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, eds. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett (Westminster Bible Companion Series; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 84.

4. Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (IVP New Testament Commentary Series; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 165-66.

**THE STANDARD OF MEASURE—SURPASSING THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES**

As he began the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quickly pointed out to his listeners that kingdom righteousness would exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (5.20). These religious leaders were remarkable for both their knowledge of God's Law and their detailed observance of it. Jesus, however, indicated that neither of these characteristics were adequate qualifications for entering into the kingdom of heaven. What, then, was the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and how should ours be different?

Some of the traits of the scribes and Pharisees can be commended. These leaders were obviously familiar with the scripture, including very detailed knowledge of the law and the prophets (2.4; 23.2). They also honored the commandments of God, faithfully observing even the smallest details (23.23). Jesus did not denounce these practices. Instead, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had urged a similar commitment to keeping the law when he warned against breaking even the smallest commandment or teaching others to do so (5.19). And when speaking later about the practices of the scribes and Pharisees, he did not forbid the continuation of their tithing of minuscule herbs like mint, dill and cumin (23.23).

How, then, is our righteousness supposed to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Are we to try to do the same, but perhaps even more rigorously?

Although Matthew frequently describes them in negative ways, his Gospel is not primarily a polemic against the Jewish leaders nor is it designed to bring the scribes and Pharisees to a belated repentance. Matthew's Gospel is a sermon aimed instead at helping wanna-be disciples (like us) to repent and come fully into the kingdom of their Lord. So the scribes and Pharisees model the characteristics of religious leaders who carefully practice the commands of God but fail to change their hearts at a radical level or grasp the nature of kingdom life. They represent all of us who follow God with our outward actions, but have never learned to follow the Lord at the deepest level of our heart's inward motives and desires.

It is clear from Matthew's Gospel that our righteousness must go beyond what was practiced by the scribes and Pharisees—not in quantity, but in *quality of its character*. Like a good tree producing good fruit, there is to be integrity between our inner character and our outer actions. *Our hearts, not just our actions, are to obey the Lord's teachings*. So, in the Sermon on the Mount we are reminded that we must go beyond mere outward obedience to the letter of the law. We must come to obey the commands in our hearts, too.

Instead of simply avoiding the outward acts of murder or adultery or retaliation, now our repentant hearts also accept the Lord's teachings. We do what he has commanded in this Sermon, finally bringing our inner characters and motives into line with his character and will. We begin to reconcile with brother and enemy alike. We refuse lustful thoughts. We answer without manipulation and give without resentment. We give to others and pray and fast without feeding our egos. We do not accumulate possessions or worry about necessities. This type of righteousness goes far beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees. This type of repentance finally matches the will of the Father in heaven (7.21).

**PUTTING JESUS' TEACHINGS INTO LIFE**

At the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records that "the crowds were astounded at His teaching, for *he taught them as one having authority*" (7.28–29; emphasis mine). It is not clear, however, whether Jesus' audience actually put his words into practice. Were they wise or foolish? Did those who called him, "Lord, Lord," hear his words and act on them? Or did their ears remain dull so that they listened but did not obey (13.15)?

In the passages that follow the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew leaves no question about the type of response that should follow. It is clear that Jesus' sayings evoke an obedient response—at least in most situations. A violent storm becomes calm at his order (8.23–27). Demons obey his commands (8.28–32). Paralysis, blindness and even death respond to Jesus' authority (9.2–8, 18–25, 27–31, and elsewhere). Jesus' authority is powerful and warrants obedience.

And yet, some do not obey. The religious leaders continued to question the source of his authority—even after witnessing Jesus' miracles—and refused to let their inner lives be cleansed (21.14–15, 23–27). They would continue to look righteous on the outside, but on the inside they were still filled with deadly, decomposing filth (23.25–28).

When the leaders refused to accept Jesus' authority, the Lord told a story. A father asks each of his two sons to go and work for him. One replies, "Yes, I will do as you ask," but never carries out his father's wishes. The other son initially refuses, but then changes his mind and does the work as the father requested (21.28–32). Matthew primarily records this illustration, not to denounce the religious leaders of Jesus' day, but to challenge all of Matthew's readers to consider which son they resemble—the one who promised to obey but never followed his commands or the one who actively did what the father requested?

In the final verses of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commissions his followers to make disciples by baptizing them and teaching them to observe everything that he had commanded (28.19–20). And then the Gospel stops. We never hear whether the followers finally submitted to Jesus' authority and allowed his teachings to permeate not only their actions but also the deepest places of their hearts. Were they foolish, not acting upon the Lord's words? Or were they wise, following his instructions? Do Matthew's readers catch their own reflections in the Lord's rebuke as he warns us, "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 in heaven"?

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