

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### **UNRECOGNIZED IN HEAVEN**

**Matthew 7:21-29**

**Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 1, 2008**

In our Gospel lesson for today from Matthew 7:21-29; is part of what is known as The Sermon on Mount. Jesus declared that our profession of righteousness must be accompanied by concrete obedience. This obedience is faith in the gracious provision of God in salvation. So in this text, Jesus clearly believed that men could prophesy and do even more astonishing works while never knowing the God in whose name they were functioning. And our Lord anticipated the problem of false profession by those in the church and deals with it here at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The conclusion of that sermon is a driving warning against being sidetracked from the true faith. In verses 13-20 He warned us against the dangers that come from the outside. Now in verses 21-27 He warns us of dangers that come from ourselves. Specifically, they are: **(1.)** The danger of basing your salvation on lip service, and **(2.)** The danger of basing your salvation on lifestyle.

For many standing on the religious soap box, the body of Jesus Christ has become a market, the Christian is regarded as a consumer, the Christian ministry is converted into a business, and blessings are measured in terms of profits and material success. What obviously works is giving the people what they want. Offering a message that promises health and wealth will in turn receive support and big profits. No one has to ask whether the gospel preached is from God so long as the success formulas work.

Now the question is why would anyone willfully take up the so-called "narrow way" apart from being born-again? For many it is the path of least resistance. To do otherwise would impair comfortable family and social relationships. Besides, evangelical Christianity's preachers dominate the religious media. Its recording artists sell hundreds of thousands of CDs. A billion dollars is spent annually on its publications. Being born-again can be profitable. Jesus saves, but he also sells.

I think it would be good for us to remember that the Biblical lifestyle is a good way to live. Families that subscribe to Biblical models tend to be

happier and healthier and say together longer. It is not at all surprising that Christianity, being so wholesome, attracts those who would practice its style without knowing its inner reality. The human race has an incredible capacity for self-delusion, and nowhere is that more perfectly demonstrated than in the lives of thousands of evangelicals who are not born-again. What wise Solomon said in his day describes some people in our day too: **“Those who are pure in their own eyes, and yet are not cleansed of their filth.” (Proverbs 30:12).** It would be good for us to think upon this great truism presented by John Newton: *“If I ever reach Heaven I expect to find three wonders there: **first**, to meet some I had not thought to see there; **second**, to miss some I had thought to meet there; **third**, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there.”*

**Question Success?** *“Not every one 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.”* Those are harsh judgments.

It is difficult for us to imagine that much of what is done in the name of the Lord Jesus on such a grand scale could be so wide of the mark as to merit His disapproval. We ourselves are accustomed to honoring the name of Jesus. When much is done in His name, it seems strange to think it all could go unrecognized. So little appears to be done in His name as it is. How could Christ possibly refuse these works in His name? He does explain the basis for His judgment in the Gospel for today.

**The Ten Words:** The strong warning of Jesus comes as a conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount and it is our Lord’s interpretation of the law of God. He did not give us something different from the Ten Commandments. He did not give us substitutes for the Ten Commandments. But Jesus did give us a radical interpretation of the commandments. He did this because religious people had worked hard to understand the Ten Commandments. The worshiping community had given elaborate interpretations, illustrations, and exhortations as to the way the commandments should be kept.

The people created their moral standards for behavior, their ethics for controlling behavior, on the basis of what they called the Ten Words. In doing this they taught not simply what they thought were right or wrong but

what they believed was the righteous life. They taught people how to earn the goodwill and favor of God by their behavior. Jesus exposed that notion as completely erroneous. He showed that each of the commandments, to be sure, is meant to control behavior. Yet each of the Commandments by its very nature also reveals that people are sinners in their hearts. They sin before they do anything. They lust in their hearts. They think evil. All bad behavior has its source in the heart. Misbehavior began in the garden, when Adam and Eve failed to trust the word of God. Sin was initiated with the doubt in the heart and it has been that way ever since.

**Action Words:** For this reason, Jesus said that to do something in His name was not necessarily recognized in heaven. It must be done as a *“doing of the will of the Father who is in heaven.”* Now does one do that? Not be doing commandments, because the commandments already condemn us as sinners. Thus Jesus said, *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them...”* How does one act on them? That is a typically Hebrew way of speaking. In Hebrew words are always action words. It is natural then to think of acting out words or doing them, because, in the Hebrew understanding of things, words are meant to be done.

**An Illustration:** Jesus fittingly used an analogy or illustration to make His point about acting on words. We shall see from His illustration, this kind of doing is not something we do on our own. It is doing His words. We draw on the words that come from Him as the source for our acting, and they become the enabling power for acting. The Illustration Jesus’ uses is the parable of the man who builds his house on a rock and the foolish man who builds his house on sand. The point of the parable is that one must build one’s life on the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Rock. All doing is meaningless if it is not built on the Rock. All the materials and the energy are wasted if our life is not built on the solid foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ is life. Life is to be found in Him. He not only gives life but redeems and saves it. By dying on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus did not simply demonstrate that He could withstand the temptations of life, the terrors of death, and the captivity of the grave. He actually built for us a life that can withstand these same forces. Adversity, guilt, shame, temptation, terror, and death may work against us, but Christ is the foundation that enables us to stand up against it all. There is no fury we cannot weather when Christ is our foundation.

**Too Easy?** In John's gospel the people asked Jesus, **"What must we do, to be doing the work of God?"** Jesus answered them, **"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."** (John 6:29). People often say, "That's too easy." Some would also say, "That means people do not have to do any good works, and you will simply discourage people from doing good in the world." Jesus would answer, "If you say that, you do not understand either my Father or me." The whole point is that we do not have to try to manipulate God through what we do.

God does work a miracle in us when God gives faith. In one sense faith is easy, because God gives it. In another sense it is impossible on our part. It is impossible because we cannot have it without God. But with God we are free to do what has to be done. The commitment and the faith for work are essential. No work that we do will be perfect. Yet by faith our works are furnished with the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Even as we are made righteous by faith, so are our works made righteous. All that we offer up to God in Jesus' name by faith is acceptable to God. The freedom to live and work this way can never be emphasized enough. Knowing that through God's word of grace and forgiveness we are liberated, we do what has to be done without worrying whether it will be acceptable.

Our Lord therefore encourages us to act on His Words, which is to do the will of the Father. This is simply to ask that we be bathed in His love and forgiveness in order to share His love with others.

I hope all of us will examine our hearts by the standards Jesus set down and not by our culture or anything else in this world. May we, like the hearers of old, respond to Jesus' words: "When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." (Matthew 7:28).