July 10, 2016

“Hearing the King”  
Matthew 7:13-20

**FCF**: The struggle with the choice before us.

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) The King has come. The kingdom is at hand.

(magnet) We must hear and heed the summons of the King.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Choices can be difficult. That’s true with political candidates, cellphone carriers, menu options, and the ice cream shop. Whether it’s 31, 21, or just more than 1, choosing your flavor is hard, especially for children. I have witnessed more agony in decision making at the ice cream shop than at any polling place. So much pressure. So many options. Choices can be difficult.

But it’s not just because of the number of options. Sometimes, it can be just the fact we struggle with being told we have to make any choice at all. It violates our sense of autonomy, our desire to rule ourselves. Jesus unapologetically speaks into this, forcing us to make a choice.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 7:13-20

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

In a series like this, it can be helpful to stop and be reminded of where we are – in this case, how the Sermon on the Mount fits into Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus’ ministry has just begun. His message has been made clear (READ Matthew 4:17). He has called His disciples. They have been travelling throughout Galilee. The word is spreading and His popularity is growing.

There were two groups of people present that day (READ Matthew 5:1). So this is first a message for disciples. That is, it is not how to become one of Jesus’ followers but how to be one. It is teaching on how to live as children of our heavenly Father, how to live as citizens of the kingdom. It is how to live in the tension between “the times”, this period in which the kingdom has come in truth but it has not come in full, in between the already and the not yet.

We are near the end, near the conclusion. In the words of John Stott, Jesus has spoken to Christian character, influence, righteousness, piety, ambition, and relationships. Now is the point of decision. Again, though this is primarily for disciples, this is also a mixed group. And to all who would hear, Jesus says the Sermon on the Mount is not to be admired; it is to be embraced. The King has come. The kingdom is at hand. We must hear and heed the summons of the King.

Jesus has put before us two alternative roads and two alternative teachers. And we must choose. We must decide. That said, there’s something serious we must deal with first.

1. **CLEARING THE DECK**

Given our natural reaction to Jesus’ words, we need to take a moment to clear the deck.

*Illustration:*

That is an expression that goes back to the days when the crew of a sailing ship would prepare for battle by removing or securing all loose objects on the deck that might otherwise get in the way of the guns or knock down and injure a sailor. Today, to “clear the deck” means to get something out of the way so you can then move on to something else that’s more important.

1. *Honest Admission*
2. How we feel

We need to clear the deck and start with an honest admission of how we feel. We’re tired of people being pushed aside. We’re weary of the “know-it-alls”. We’re sick of the hurt and harm.

1. How this sounds

And Jesus’ words here sound arrogant and narrow-minded. They sound frighteningly like what we would hear from the lips of fanatics or extremists. It all sounds so very exclusive to us.

1. *Brief Reflection*
2. The principle

So let’s reflect on that and consider a basic principle. It’s true that harm can come from arrogance in God’s name. But it’s also true that exclusive claims can be good and necessary.

1. Some examples

Here are some examples I got from my friend, Zack Eswine. At a wedding, the preacher says, “*You may kiss the bride*.” He does not say “*You may kiss a bride*,” giving the man the run of the place. We all understand that and would be rightly offended to see the groom kiss any other woman. When we accept a job offer, hand over a housing deposit, or make a hotel reservation, we expect the other party to honor the exclusivity of the deal. Things should be settled. When parents learn their child is desperately sick but that there is a specialist and a treatment, they don’t complain that she’s the only specialist and that this is the only cure. They’re just relieved.

*Application:*

Life is filled with such things where exclusivity serves not to hurt but to help. And we’d be fools not to accept it. There’s more we could say on this. And you may not find that totally convincing. But please do consider it. Don’t dismiss Jesus’ exclusive claims out of hand.

1. **ALTERNATIVE ROADS**

With that in mind, Jesus puts two alternative roads before us (READ Matthew 7:13-14). What we have is a warning (READ Matthew 7:13a). And then the reasons for the warning.

1. *Two Gates*
2. Wide

Jesus paints a picture of two gates. The first gate is wide. It is a simple thing to enter there.

1. Narrow

But the second gate is narrow. To go through it, you have to leave everything else behind.

1. *Two Ways*
2. Easy

Beyond the two gates are two ways. The first way is easy and broad. It is the way of tolerance and permissiveness. There are no curbs or boundaries on this path. And so many walk on it.

1. Hard

The second way is hard, a struggle. The word here is tied to opposition and persecution, pressure for what you believe and how you live. And few walk on it. They are a despised minority.

1. *Two Ends*

On past the two gates and at the far side of the two ways are two ends.

1. Death

One is death and destruction. At the end of the wide gate and easy way, all is lost forever.

1. Life

But the other end is that of life. At the end of the narrow gate and the hard way is found human fulfillment and fellowship with God, beginning even now and then lasting on forever.

These are the two alternatives. There is no third road. We must choose between them.

*Illustration:*

I can remember travelling late one night some years ago along I-64 from Norfolk to Richmond. The signage tells you that there is a fork in the highway ahead, a split marked by a concrete divider, where you have to go either to the left or to the right. The blue lights and the terrible wreckage we saw as we got closer made it clear that someone had stayed in the middle.

*Application:*

With stakes even higher, this is what Jesus is warning (READ Matthew 7:13a). I realize that, instinctively, we don’t like this. Something here makes us uncomfortable. We prefer to remain uncommitted and undecided. We want to leave our options open and to avoid labels.

I want to say this as clearly as I can. Jesus came not to be sensitive to us but to save us. And so He forces the choice. Hear Him. “*You need to decide. You’re either with me or not. In the kingdom or out*.” Truth does not come from majority opinion or personal preference.

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1. **ALTERNATIVE TEACHERS**

And Jesus presses harder. There are two alternative roads and two alternative teachers (READ Matthew 7:15-20). Again, a warning (READ Matthew 7:15a). And then the reasons.

1. *The Real Danger*
2. Imagery of a wolf

To start, Jesus makes clear the danger is real. He uses the imagery of a wolf, the natural enemy of sheep. Sheep are completely defenseless against a wolf, outside the protection of a shepherd.

1. Impact of the teaching

The imagery fits the impact of the teaching. Given the context, this would likely mean to say that the gate is not so narrow and the way is not so hard. This deception brings a false security.

1. *The Deception*
2. Innocent disguise

In fact, deception is what the wolf is about. Clad in an innocent disguise, not broadcasting his identity or intent, looking like one of the flock, he behaves as though he actually belongs there.

1. Keeping up appearances

Keeping up appearances – bright smiles, feigned piety, faking the walk, parroting the talk, hiding behind impressive credentials, book sales, and lofty degrees. These teachers are wolves.

1. *The Tests*

So, given the stakes, Jesus gives some tests to see who is true and who is false. And, to do that, He switches the metaphors from the fields to the orchards (READ Matthew 7:16a, 20).

1. Character

This would start with the testing of character. Listen to Paul (READ Galatians 5:22-23). If such fruit is showing itself, then these teachers are surely true. If it is not, then they are surely false.

1. Teaching

Consider their character. And examine their teaching. Is it consistent with the Scriptures, the core of the gospel message of our security by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?

1. Influence

Consider their character and their teaching. And their influence. What sort of effect do they have on those around them? Through them, are other people built up in faith, hope, and love?

Just as He does with the two alternative roads, Jesus is saying that there are two alternative teachers – true and false. He gives us the warning. And then He gives us the tests.

*Illustration:*

And it’s vital we take Him seriously. You go to the beach and you see signs warning you of certain things. Sharks sighted, stay out. Riptide, swim at your own risk. What do each of these warnings assume? That the things they are warning us of are real and present dangers.

*Application:*

It’s the same here. The warnings and the tests for these false teachers and ideas assume some things. First, that they exist. We see this problem all through biblical history, Old and New Testament. We see it with the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus’ day. And ever since.

But the fact that falsehood exists assumes that truth exists – a measure and standard, something objective. And that all of this matters. Truth builds up and nurtures flourishing. Damaged doctrine damages people. What we believe about the essentials of reality – God, us, origins, purpose, hope – is deeply formative. It sets the whole course of our lives – our goals, our relationships, our responses to suffering. Do you see? This matters. It matters intensely.

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**CONCLUSION:**

We just celebrated the Fourth of July. Think about all that led up to the *Declaration of Independence* in 1776. The point being we Americans don’t do well under the rule of a king.

Fast forward to the summer of 1787. A crowd gathered around Independence Hall to learn what type of government their representatives had formed. When Benjamin Franklin walked out of the Constitutional Convention, a Mrs. Powel ran up to him and asked, “*Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?*” Franklin turned to her and said, “*A republic, Madam, if you can keep it*.” Key to this in the Founders’ minds was self-government, self-rule, self-restraint. Think with me of the recent tragedies in Orlando and Dallas. No matter what side of the political spectrum you may be on, you have to wonder how well we are doing ruling ourselves. And whether Franklin and the others would be just shaking their heads.

Into this comes the news of another King, Jesus. Yes, He laid down His law. But He also laid down Himself for those who know they can’t keep it. Yes, He forces this choice. But He also willingly gave Himself to the cross to meet the demands of divine love and justice. He is the King of the kings. His time on this earth can be easily documented in the annals of history. And His impact on this earth is deeply reflected in our greatest longings and lasting stories.

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