

I Never Knew You

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Matthew 7:21-23

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Introduction:

Good morning, Cornerstone.

I want to invite you to turn your Bibles with me to Matthew 7:21-23. As you are finding that, I want to refresh your memory on what we learnt last week. In last week's text, we heard Jesus' warning that false prophets would arise in the church, and that they would appear as wolves in sheep's clothing. The challenge of that text was to stay alert and keep our eyes open for danger. In today's text we are going to hear Jesus warn us against another danger, but unlike last week, it is a danger that resides in our own hearts.

Jesus is going to challenge us this morning to take a deep dive into our own hearts, and to reflect on the true nature of our personal faith. For some of you, this will be deeply uncomfortable. I can only imagine that in a room of this size, some people are going to realize this morning that their relationship with the Lord is not what they thought it was, and that unless something changes immediately, they stand in peril of everlasting judgment.

Does that sound extreme to you? Well, here is what the famous preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, has to say about our text for this morning:

"These, surely, are in many ways the most solemn and solemnizing words ever uttered in this world, not only by any man, but even by the Son of God Himself."¹

Well, if that does not stir you to want to pay close attention, I do not know what will. Let us turn, then, to the words of our Lord as they are found in Matthew 7:21-23.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 516.

we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Do these words give you pause? They should.

Jesus is here addressing people just like you and me. They are men and women who call Jesus Lord, and they even do mighty works in his name. They have zero doubt that they are saved, and they self-identify as members of the family of God. But to these self-assured people Jesus speaks these words: “I never knew you...”

Do you now see why Lloyd-Jones called these the most solemn words ever spoken?

Lest they one day be spoken to us, let us dive into the text and heed the warning that Jesus is here giving.

We will begin by looking at three truths this text teaches. The first of these truths is that:

1. A Day of Judgment is Coming

While you might be tempted to think that this point goes without saying, it is an unfortunate reality that far too many Christians have begun to deny it. There exist pockets of Christianity that teach that Jesus is all love, and that he accepts everyone. They champion verses like John 12:47 where Jesus says:

“If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.”

What these people fail to do is continue reading. If they did that, they would see that the very next verse says:

“The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.”

The simple truth is that if you are a whole Bible reader, you will be consistently confronted with the idea that a day of judgement is coming. One day, every human being who has ever lived, will

stand before the judgement seat of God, and they will be sorted to the right and to the left. Those on the right will inherit eternal life, and those on the left will enter eternal punishment. This is the consistent teaching of the Bible from its first page, to its last.

Understanding and believing this truth is absolutely essential if we want to take Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seriously. If this life is all there is, everything that Jesus just taught us doesn't make sense. If there is no kingdom of heaven, then why wouldn't we store up riches in this life? If there is no judgment, why wouldn't we return evil for evil? We might as well carry on as selfish creatures caring only about our own concerns.

But as it is, we know that a day of judgment is coming. We know that there will be a day of justice and recompense. But let me ask you this: even though you know this to be true, are you living like it is?

Has the Sermon on the Mount series made you rethink the way you do marriage? Has it changed your spending habits? Has it turned you into a more forgiving, merciful, and meek individual? That is what this sermon of Jesus is designed to do. It is designed to transform us from the inside out. If it has not had this effect on you then you need to cry out to God and ask that it would, because a day of judgment is coming, and on that day, you want to make that you belong to the family of God.

Unfortunately, the whole reason that we have these words of Jesus is because some people believe they are part of this family when they are not. So let us now turn to the second truth this passage teaches us.

2. Mere Orthodoxy Will Not Save You

In case there is any confusion around this point, allow me to explain what I mean by orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is a fancy church word for right belief. To be orthodox is to believe in the truth that was taught by Jesus and His Apostles, and that passed down throughout the history of the church. Everyone in this room should have a desire to be orthodox, but no one in this room should trust in their right belief to save them.

In our passage this morning we see that those who are being rejected by Jesus had a right belief about him. They called him Lord. And we should also note the double emphasis they put on this title. They were not merely referring to Jesus as Lord or teacher, but the repetition of “Lord, Lord” shows that these people were aware of the unique authority of Jesus, and they connected this authority with entrance into the eternal kingdom.

But Jesus is not satisfied with people merely recognizing him as Messiah. It is a wonderful thing to know Jesus for who he is, but this knowledge on its own will not save you. Later in your Bibles, in the book of James, we find this same truth being taught. James 2:19 says:

“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe- and shudder!”

James is confronting a group of people who relied on their faith to save them. These people, however, had a misunderstanding of what saving faith is. They thought saving faith was a matter of belief, and belief alone. They did not think that their faith needed to change them. So long as they knew the answer to all the Sunday school questions, they thought God would surely accept them. But James writes to them to remind them that the demons know far more than they ever will, and yet they stand condemned. The only faith that can truly save is a faith that is accompanied by obedience.

Brothers and sisters, I must confess that I believe this is a warning that we who are in the evangelical, “small r” reformed world, need to hear. As a church, we at Cornerstone pride ourselves on being people of the Word, and rightfully so. That is the flag I want to wave the highest and the proudest. We should never shy away from that. Being rooted in God’s Word and having good theology is absolutely critical. But there is a very real danger that this could cause us to become puffed up and grow complacent.

As a youth pastor I see this all the time. I meet students who were raised in the church, who grew up attending Sunday school, and who memorized catechism around their family table. They know the answer to every theological question you throw at them, and they even know how to respond to reflection questions in a way that will make them seem extra spiritual. It can be tempting to write those kids off as not needing extra attention. Surely, if anyone’s name is written

in the book of life it is theirs. But thinking this way is abundantly naïve. Just because a person knows the answers doesn't mean they truly know the thing itself. I could read a lot of books about performing brain surgery, but that doesn't mean I should be trusted with a scalpel.

On a personal level, I can recall a season of my life where I experienced this firsthand. When I was studying at Bible School, I fell into the trap of thinking that my grades were indicators of my spiritual health. After all, if I pulled off a 95% on my Synoptic Gospels paper, how could anyone argue that I didn't know Jesus? The problem was that even though I was learning more and more about Jesus, I was learning about him as an object of academia. While I was getting 90% on my papers, I would have gotten 40% on my brotherly love test, and 30% on my prayer life.

This is a very real danger for all of us who love to learn and read books. It is a danger that has always existed and will continue to exist until Jesus returns. In his wonderful book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer hits the nail on the head. He writes:

“To be preoccupied with getting theological knowledge as an end in itself, to approach Bible study with no higher a motive than a desire to know all the answers, is the direct route to a state of self-satisfied self-deception. We need to guard our hearts against such an attitude, and pray to be kept from it. As we saw earlier, there can be no spiritual health without doctrinal knowledge; but it is equally true that there can be no spiritual health with it, if it is sought for the wrong purpose and valued by the wrong standard.”²

Did you catch that last line? Doctrinal knowledge is a wonderful thing, but if it is sought for the wrong purpose and valued by the wrong standard it is a poison to your soul. So, let me ask you, why do you love God's Word? Do you love it because in it you find the very words of life and a hope for your soul? Well then, Hallelujah! But if you love it because you find in its pages an opportunity to impress your peers and humiliate your enemies, then may God have mercy on your soul.

Brothers and sisters, these are not light things. We need to heed Christ's warnings lest we too be found self-deceived. So let us now turn to our third lesson, and our second warning.

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 22.

3. Mere Orthopraxy Will Not Save You

Once again, we have come across another fancy church word. Whereas orthodoxy means right belief, orthopraxy means right action. And just as with orthodoxy, I think we can all agree that serving the Lord with our actions is a good thing. We should all strive to be both hearers and doers of the Word, but we should not pat ourselves on the back too quickly for being that type of person. The people who Jesus addresses in this morning's passage also thought they were doing everything right. They respond to Jesus' judgment by saying:

"Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?"

There is no indicator in the text to suggest that these people were trying to pull off a bold-faced lie. In all probability, these men and women had done many great things in the name of Jesus, and yet Jesus still declare that he never knew them.

What are we to make of that?

Commentator R.T. France writes:

*"Prophecy, exorcism, and miracles can hardly be described as 'bad fruit,' but even these spiritual activities can apparently be carried out by those who still lack the relationship with Jesus which is the essential basis for belonging to the kingdom of heaven."*³

If you are a whole Bible reader, you already know this to be true. There are many examples in the Scriptures of men who did mighty works in the name of God, and yet had a heart that was far removed from him.

If you were here last week, you will remember Pastor Paul mentioning the prophet Balaam. Balaam was a man who spoke the Word of God. In fact, he couldn't do anything else. Even though he desired to curse Israel, he was constrained by the Spirit to bless them. Does this mean that Balaam was a good man who should have anticipated a warm welcome at the pearly gates? Absolutely not. Although Balaam truly prophesied in the name of the Lord, he was motivated by greed and he was more than willing to give some advice on how to make Israel sin.

³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 292.

Or consider Judas. Here we have a man who walked and talked with Jesus. A man who was commissioned by the Lord to preach and cast out demons. We have zero indications that he alone of all the disciples was unable to perform such an act. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that he was a full and active participant in this ministry. But how does his story end? He betrays His Lord and is found to be a worker of lawlessness.

Or perhaps we should turn to the book of Acts and consider the hilarious story of the sons of Sceva. I love this story so much I think we will read it in full. It is found in Acts 19:11-16. You are welcome to follow along with me on the screen as I read.

“And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?’ And the man in whom was the evil spirits leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.”

Now this example is slightly different than the first two because these sons fail to successfully perform the exorcism, but nevertheless, they sought to perform mighty works by taking up the name of Jesus. But how did that go for them? They thought they could wield the name of Jesus without having a relationship with him, and they were left fleeing for their lives naked and wounded.

All three of these examples teach the same lesson. A saving relationship with the Lord goes far beyond performing mighty works in His name. It is very possible that a person could give their entire life to ministry, witness many incredible miracles, and still hear the terrifying words “I never knew you...” on the day of judgment.

To put this in a context that might be a little more relatable, it is entirely possible that a person could read through the Bible every year, attend church every Sunday, and serve regularly in the

local soup kitchen, and still hear the terrifying words “I never knew you...” on the day of judgment.

This should give all of us pause.

It should cause all of us to immediately stop what we are doing and reflect on what we ourselves are trusting in for our salvation. Are you trusting in your faithful church attendance? Are you trusting in your works of charity? Are you trusting in your theological knowledge?

All these things are good, commendable, and helpful, but none of them on their own will save you.

Well, at this point in the sermon you may be feeling a little solemn. Perhaps you are worried about the state of your own salvation, and you are asking yourself the question “How then can I be saved?”

That is an appropriate response to this text, and we will spend what remains of our time answering that question. This passage describes the saved person in two ways.

A saved person is:

1. Known by the Lord

When Jesus pronounces his guilty verdict, he does so by uttering the words: “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

Perhaps you find this to be an odd statement. How can the omniscient God of the universe not know someone? Doesn't He know everything?

Once again, France is helpful here. He writes:

“To ‘know’ is commonly used in biblical literature for much more than acquaintance or recognition; it denotes a relationship. In 1:25 it was used following the Hebrew idiom for the sexual relationship, but here it reflects rather the OT idiom for God’s special relationship with

*his people... 'I never knew you' means in effect that he does not acknowledge them as part of his true family."*⁴

To be a saved person, then, is to belong to the family of God.

The Bible teaches that we are not naturally born into this family, but that we are adopted into it.

John 1:12-13 says,

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

This, ultimately, is our only ground for hope. We rest secure not because of the strength of our convictions or the works that we have done, but only in the adoptive love of the Father which came to us based on no merit of our own.

Ephesians 2:1-10 is here worth quoting at length:

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loves us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Have you ever read any words more beautiful than these? I am not sure that such words exist.

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

We have just been told that our salvation is secure for no reason other than the fact that God loves us, and that He saw fit to do everything necessary to save us and keep us.

A couple of weeks ago Pastor Paul told the story of a conversation he had with a dying man. Do you remember it? He asked this man what he anticipated saying when he arrived at the pearly gates. The man immediately began speaking of his church attendance and other good deeds, but our pastor was quick to halt him and remind him of the true grounds of his salvation.

Brothers and sisters, the only hope that any of us have is the work of Christ done on our behalf. We are to plead Jesus and only Jesus.

Do not be like the men and women in today's passage who sought entrance based on their many mighty works done in the name of Jesus. Declare HIS works, and not your own.

Take comfort that you have a seat at the table in the family of God, but never forget that your seat comes with certain expectations.

This passage makes it very clear that the saved person is not only known by the Lord, but they are:

2. Obedient to the Lord

Belonging to any family comes with certain expectations. Every family has its own rules about what words are appropriate and inappropriate, what clothes should and should not be worn, and how members are to conduct themselves outside of the home.

The same is true of the family of God.

Indeed, one of the ways we can be assured that we truly belong to the family of God is by examining our conduct.

Matthew tells us of a fascinating and instructive encounter between Jesus and his biological family. We find that story in Matthew 12:46-50.

“While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are

my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Jesus is here redefining who it is that belong to the family of God. We should take no comfort in our proximity and familiarity with Jesus. We should only take comfort that Jesus calls us his own. And one thing that is made abundantly clear both in this story in Matthew 12 and in our main passage for this morning, is that Jesus only calls us His own if we are obedient to the will of the Father.

So ask yourself, if Jesus were to come today, would you be found doing the work of the Father?

[Note: I am going to stop here and will revisit tomorrow after sleeping on it and receiving your feedback. I want to incorporate more about how our adoption changes our motivations for obedience, but that is not currently coming to me.]