



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Jesus’ Warning to Christians” Matthew 7:21-23 (24-29)

Ordination and Installation of Officers Solemnize the marriage of Alisdair Charleson & Cheryl Rowland

Since September 11, 2001, our nation has been gearing up for a much tighter grip on security—of our borders, of our troops, of our citizens already here. There’s a reasonable fear, given the attack of the suicide pilots. An important link in our nation’s security against terrorists depends on knowing “who gets in” and “who’s shut out” of our borders, or of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. Congress struggled with this extensively; the President weighed in clearly. People think this is important.

Long before 9/11, the question of who is “in” and who is “out” of God’s Kingdom has been front-and-center for Jews and then Christians. Deciding “who gets to heaven and who doesn’t” is almost a personal hobby for some!

God’s Word gives us lists of qualities that exclude people—sexual sin, greed, the usual things we might remember. But some people who have done these things seem to get God’s seal of approval. I’m thinking of King David, for example, when he lusted after the woman named Bathsheba, then set up her loyal husband to be killed on the battlefield, so David could take Bathsheba as his wife. God doesn’t approve that behavior, but when confronted, some of these people “got it”; they came to God and confessed, asked for forgiveness, even though they still had to endure the consequences of their sin’s effects on themselves and others. David’s later life was really painful, all because of what he had done in sinning against God and others. And still, when God identified him, he said, “I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.” (see 1 Samuel 13:14, quoted by Paul in Acts 13:22) Sounds like David was “in” with God.

Christians may believe they are saved, but there are so many who make a grave error—excuse the pun—when they do their “salvation calculus”. At least, Jesus thought so. Open your Bibles to Matthew, chapter 7, and find verse 21. Listen for God’s Word TO US THIS MORNING, as Jesus concludes his “Sermon on the Mount”. *[text]*

This is another of those astounding texts from Jesus. You may remember that later on in his ministry, a rich man comes up to Jesus—sometimes this is called “the rich young ruler”, in Mark 10—and engages Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus refers to The Ten Commandments of the Jewish Law, and the man says, “I’ve kept them all.” Mark’s text says, “Jesus looked on him and loved him.” “One more thing you lack,” Jesus says. “Go and give all you have to the poor, and come, follow me.” And the man’s face fell; he walked away sadly. You may remember this incident. Do you remember the disciples’ reaction? They couldn’t

believe Jesus had done this. This fellow looked like a great fit for their group, and they could sure use his cash and his business sense. *I mean, anyone who has that much money surely must be living out the blessing of God for his or her righteous life, right?* But apparently, Jesus doesn't think so. "So, who CAN be saved, if not some terrific, moral, successful guy like that?" Jesus says, "People can't do it; they can't save themselves. God saves people. Even those for whom Kingdom Life is really hard, God can turn someone like that toward Him, too."

The disciples who heard Jesus finish the sermon we read this morning must have had a similar astonishment. Matthew records the amazement of the crowd; how much more, Jesus' own disciples! Look at what Jesus says.

The scene in his story is the Last Day. God is about to roll everything up, like a bartender or shopkeeper who jingles his keys and says, "Closing time, lads." Well, on this last day, Jesus is judge. Some people are glad to see him. "Lord! It's the Lord! Lord, Lord, over here!" (See, they recognize Jesus. How can they not be Christian? How can they not be saved? How can they not be welcomed by the one they call, "Lord"?) But the Lord says, "I never knew you."

Did you see the coverage on Paris Hilton's release from jail this week? Just before emerging to the public, she had ducked into the bathroom at the jail to fix her hair and change into fashionable clothes, and then came before the crowds of fans and photographers, who were calling "Paris! Here, Miss Hilton!" If we asked Miss Hilton how many of those fans and photographers she knew, what do you imagine she would say? "Like, about none."

That's the way a lot of Christians know Jesus. They recognize him, they call out to him, but they don't know him. They're great fans during the Day of Judgment, but not a second earlier and not a second later—kind of like it is with earthly fame. They use Jesus—like people use Paris Hilton—for their own benefit, and then discard him when they get what they want.

And in Jesus' story, these people calling out to Jesus were spectacular fans of his. They had power to do wond'rous things, and that power has to come from God or The Imposter (like Pharaoh's magicians, who did with tricks many of the same things Moses did by the power of God). They did great things—cast out demons, healed the sick, all in Jesus' Name. They spoke the words, but they were doing these things on their own, without knowing the Source. It was all about them, the healers, instead of the power of God and invitation to Kingdom living. And that makes these miracle men, workers of evil. T. S. Eliot put it this way: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason." Too bad no one warned them in advance.

But of course, if they had known Jesus very well at all, they would have known this. Think of the many healing stories we have about Jesus in the gospels. (Come to the Healing Service on the third Friday, where we really experience the healing that comes from Jesus!) Scholars have found accounts of other traveling healers of that time, and it's interesting to compare those accounts with the healing accounts about Jesus. With Jesus, the accounts are simple. Jesus doesn't dress in elaborate robes, wearing a glitzy headdress, seeking to amaze the crowds. He does not use elaborate spells, or words that people cannot understand. He doesn't carry a variety of sacred substances to impart healing. Jesus' miracles seem to have another use; he uses them to underline the truth of what he is saying as he points to God, and God's Kingdom.

The miracles are great; but for him they are pointers to God's Kingdom, breaking into human life in Jesus. Anyone who knew Jesus at all would know this.

Now, as Jesus wraps up the whole sermon—three chapters, in Matthew's record—he caps it with another image, this one of two homeowners who are going to build their family homes. The first one has big plans. This is their dream house. It's finished in record time, because he just poured the footings on the surface. So in no time it was framed and finished, and the family moved in. Turns out it was a very wet year. The ground at the back of his house had a layer of mineral in it that gets like Teflon when it gets wet. Digging into the hill had exposed this layer of mineral, and in the rains, the whole hillside gave way, and the family barely got out with their lives. Oh—and, no insurance.

The second man paid a soils engineer do a study before he even bought the land. He got advice about placing his house and hired a contractor with a good reputation to engineer and install solid footings. This man's house took longer, and they had to cut back on one room's size and some of the finish work in order to fit this extra foundation work into the budget, but when it was finished and the rains came, this house held up just fine. [OK, I re-told Jesus' story for the foothills, but you get the idea.]

Doesn't Jesus' comparison sound extreme? But then, haven't you seen the news this week about the floods in Texas after a full week of solid rain? Or, don't go to Texas; just ask Jeannie and Igor Leliakov here in Auburn. They built their retirement home on one of our California rivers. In the wet year we had around 1993 or so, the river rose up, eroded the banks, and many houses, including Leliakovs', were swept away. Only with the help of their new neighbors did the family get their household goods out. Then Igor and Jean limped down to our area, and started over. It was a traumatic experience, to say the least. [And I believe this was one of the things God used to pry Igor loose from his conviction that man is the measure of all things, and that God is a fiction for the feeble-minded.]

Now, Jesus tells us his "flood" story (minus the Ark), and he tells us the story of the "God groupies" just before it, as a warning. He uses painful images here. These are stories about loss, tragedy, exclusion, failure. Hey, now--isn't the Bible supposed to be the "Good News of God's love"?

Here's a warning sign, probably from Hawai'i's Volcanoes National Park. It warns of danger beyond this point. You may not be able to see the diagrams there, but they portray someone standing on the high place, when suddenly a fault opens, and the ground collapses, causing you injury or even death (if you're near one of the vent or floe holes). Now, is this sign "good news" or "bad news"? Would you want to see this sign, before you hike on to the lava floes?

It's good news that the sign is there, for it equips us to make a decision about how much danger we want to risk, and it warns us about a hazard we would not be able to see.

Jesus' stories are like that. God has shown him most everything. But Jesus does not hoard that "inside information" for himself. He gives it away for free! He trains 12 other men to give it away for free. Why would he do that? Because, like his Father, Jesus doesn't want anyone to be lost. Jesus told that story of the lost sheep, to show us God's heart. This is how deep is God's love.

But please understand what “lost” means here. The miracle men in Jesus’ story would have called themselves “Christians”, don’t you think? 1) They recognized Jesus! 2) They did good, religious--even spectacular--things! 3) They used the Name of Jesus as they performed their miracles! But there’s no relationship happening, no connection with God. Being saved—being found—being “not lost”—is not “Whom you know by name recognition”; it’s “Whom you know, and Who knows you.”

These texts warn us about distractions and temptations that Christians can easily fall for. For example: over the centuries, Christians have argued over whether one can “lose their salvation”, or “have eternal security”. I think the argument itself leads to sin. First, there is a problem with theology as a human enterprise. The whole of theology is an attempt for humans to put God under a microscope, or order to understand God and His ways. A subtle (and to my mind, fatal) trap lies right here. Insulting as this is, we have to accept that our teeny human minds cannot--with the blunt instruments of human language--accurately capture God’s nature or requirements, apart from the presence of God in a personal friendship. Theology is OK as long as we don’t believe it too much, mistake it for the whole truth about God, or trust our human conclusions and logic too much. For to make this mistake creates just one more kind of pride and idol-worship. And you know what God says here [the Bible] about pride, and about idol-worship. A lot of Christians are like Job’s sorry friends. A lot of theologians and their students need to ask God for forgiveness. Theological debates can be a big distraction—a sin—compared to what God is looking for.

Truth is, we find texts from throughout the Bible that can be claimed by the “Calvinist/permanent salvation” people, and we also find texts from throughout the Bible that can be claimed by the “Arminian/you can lose your salvation” people. To me, that proves the limitations of human language. God is God, not just a larger version of ourselves. “God made us in His image, and we keep wanting to return the compliment,” I think Mark Twain said.

A second distraction and temptation Christians fall for is the illusion that we can live a Christian life sufficiently, by ourselves. You’ll remember that when Moses at the burning bush asked God to give him His name, God would not do it. He gave Moses a non-answer, for God was not about to give Moses some control to pull on God’s chain. Moses again and again would have to come to God, talk with God, listen to God. In the same way, with the Bible, God has not given us a rule book we can use without Him. Anyone who claims to have “the rules of God” we can follow apart from a relationship right now, in real time, with God--please gently bring them to the truth that is in knowing Jesus Christ. That man or woman could be “a functional atheist in Christian clothing”, and they need help. You help them. Warn them. Free them from the grip of this distraction and sin.

A third distraction and temptation for Christians is a total fixation on salvation as if that was the most important thing. Whether salvation is forever or salvation can be lost, this whole argument leads us time and time again to pay attention once again to ourselves, rather than our living, obedient relationship with the Master. The question, “Are you saved?” focuses all my anxieties on getting to a “yes”, for my own sake. Either we look for a time when I “made a decision for Christ”—hear the “eye trouble” in there?—“I” am the actor—or, we live with an unnecessary level of anxiety over whether we are always doing the right thing. Doing the right things are important. If living right didn’t matter, why would Jesus spend so much of his life giving us God’s directions and expectations? But the “evangelical/Calvinist/permanent salvation people” place their security in what they did; the “Arminian/you can lose your salvation people”

place their security in what they are doing—or not doing--now. And both can be living without a living relationship with God.

Have I been clear? We can be confident of eternal life now and forever with God to the extent that we know God, talk to God, and especially LISTEN to God. God is the One and Three--all relationship, all the time.

It is our responsibility to develop our senses for God, our ability to hear God, to connect with God. Scripture is a tried-and-true source; people have always met God in the Bible. But it's not the Bible itself that is the word of God. The Bible is a display screen for God's nature and relationship with us. If we ask for God's help as we read, we can watch the video of God's love for humankind across the Centuries, and so we get a glimpse of Who God is, where to look for Him, and some hints on how to live with and for Him now. Prayer in many forms is a way to hear from God, here and now. Deep, personal conversation with other men and women who know Jesus is a way we can hear from God, here and now.

But for most of us, this is new. So, like learning to ride a bike for the first time, it takes practice, including failures and successes. Then, there's the question of where do we want to ride the bike?--or even, are we willing to jump on God's "bicycle built for two", and LET HIM STEER?!

Do you know Jesus? This is God's warning to Christians and non-Christians. "Know me", God says. "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart." (Jeremiah 24:7, NIV) "Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 3:7, NIV) "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." (Isaiah 45:21, NIV)

This is your warning from the Lord God. He warns you because He loves you and doesn't want you to be lost. He loves you so much, He wants you to join Him in His mission to truly save the world. This is why God warns us. This is your warning from God.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on July 1, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]