

## **Christian Relationships: False Prophets // Matt 7:13-20**

We've been working our way through Jesus's magnum opus, what we have come to know as The Sermon On The Mount. It's always a bit of a challenge, in my experience - it's not at all random that Nicky Gumbel's book on the subject was titled "Challenging Lifestyle".

I invariably find that I go into it feeling like I know what to expect and then get blindsided by some particular point that I need to address. God's good like that, isn't He?

We're not quite at the end yet, but we've definitely got to a point where Jesus is drawing everything together. The threads are starting to be pulled in and it starts to become clear that he hasn't just been talking about a series of disconnected subjects. He hasn't simply been shooting out a load of moralistic philosophies - what he is doing here is painting a big picture of what it means to follow him and what impact that will have on us as individuals and on the world he loves and sends us into.

I really, really don't want to use this analogy but I can't think of anything else, it's kind of like Rolf Harris - can you guess what it is yet? Let's just leave it there.

In his next section of teaching, Jesus throws out some strong statements. In many ways they are easy to take it a very black and white way, because he offers two choices for each area he is talking about.

There are two ways - a narrow gate and a wide gate.

There are two kinds of fruit - bad fruit, and good fruit.

So firstly, we are told that there are two ways available to us. It's to do with choices, direction, and motivation.

In our house we are getting very excited, because Abi is learning to drive. She's really enjoying it and as time has gone on we have found ourselves talking more and more about the potential freedom that will give us.

As she has been learning, we've talked a lot about her experiences so far - how much you need to have your wits about you, to be aware of potential hazards. I have come to realise that more or less everything is a potential hazard - I'm reminded of Keeping Up Appearances' Hyacinth Bucket's yelps of "Mind the pedestrian!"

We've come to realise that Abi is very good at recognising the hazards. I'll hold my hands up and say that I'm not great at that, and that's part of why I've held off from learning to drive properly for so long. But what I am good at is working out where we need to go, and seeing ahead at road signs and interpreting information in a way that helps us to go in the right direction.

I've been trying to apply these ideas to my own spiritual life, and I think it's fair to say that I'm quite good at looking ahead, at planning a route, knowing where I want to go, and interpreting the signs around me.

But do you know what? I'm really, really bad at spotting the hazards that are all around. That's an area in my life I need to get better at. I need to work harder at not letting cynicism and negativity set in when someone tells me a story about something someone got wrong, that tempts me to launch into any sort of judgement.

There are so many choices we can make that are easy, that we don't even have to think about. Our selfish nature just kind of draws us in that general direction.

When Jesus talk about entering through the narrow gate, he means it comes with a cost. We can't take everything with us. It means leaving our baggage behind. Some of that baggage might be attitudes that we have held on to and nurtured for years.

One commentator has said "You really have to want to get in through this gate."

And I think that's important. While faith and truth and life is something we are all made for and invited into, it's not something we can ever be ambivalent about.

If you're a Christian, and you're not sure exactly what real difference it has made in your life, then stop and think about how you got here in the first place. It's never too late to talk to someone who knows you well and look together at why you're following Jesus. And let's not shy away from asking the question: are you following Jesus, or just going to church?

They're not the same thing.

Part of what Jesus is saying here when he talks about the gate being narrow is - I think - that we can't assume that we know what we're doing. We can't always trust our instincts because we're kind of broken. God is at work in us, to be sure, but we will make mistakes along the way.

Just to underline this point, don't take what I am saying today and assume it's right. I'm just doing my best to interpret scripture. I have my own agendas and perspectives that will influence what I say, so it's your responsibility to listen, reflect, and with God's guidance come to an understanding of what he might be saying to you today.

Like I say, we all have our own ideas and agendas, and whether we are aware of it or not, we are all capable of self deception. We look for short cuts all the time. I know I do. When I get overwhelmed with the sense that I haven't grown enough in my spirit, I start to flail around and try crazy things like literally binge on the bible to try to medicate my soul.

But God has done something special and mysterious in the way he draws us to himself and leads us forwards.

This is what salvation and sanctification looks like.

This is part of what we call the 'now and the not yet'.

Just because God *will* draw all people to himself doesn't mean that we don't need to pursue his kingdom *right now*.

When we say "Jesus has done it", it doesn't give us a get out of jail free card.

What I mean by that is: yes, we are set free, we are ultimately forgiven, but his spirit continues to work in us, sanctifying us, making us more like him. We don't get to be like him overnight, and it takes a certain degree of getting involved on our side.

The narrow door is about choices. Sometimes people reference a section from the film "The Matrix" where the character Neo is offered a red pill and a blue pill - one will reveal to him the true nature of his world, the other will allow him to continue as he is.

But as ever with Jesus' teaching, on the face of things they seem to be black and white - or red and blue - but there are underlying nuances and mysteries that we are invited into, to explore and engage with.

The thing is that choices do matter. It makes a difference how we align ourselves in this life - eternal issues are at stake. To quote from another film, Russell Crowe's character in Gladiator says: "What we do in life echoes in eternity."

Sometimes when we hear these teachings, we have to make a kind of mental jump to be able to understand exactly what is being said. When people first heard this idea of narrow and wide gates, the whole idea of gates made perfect sense. There were many gates to the city - some of them would have been wide, allowing lots of people in at one time, and some of them would have been narrow, for a specific purpose.

Some have said that when Jesus talked about how it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God", he might have been referring to a very narrow gate in the city walls that was called the eye of the needle.

Whether this is true or not, the point is that following Jesus doesn't always mean taking the easy way, and that might mean that sometimes we will feel as though we are on our own, or at least one of very few.

While of course we do long to see many others find and come to follow Christ, the reality is that we will likely always feel that we are few in number.

Sometimes I find that, being something of an inverted snob, this idea often appeals to me. When I discover a band, or artist, or writer that no one else has heard of, I get a sense of elitist one upmanship over other people.

I find that this often works to my advantage when I meet other people and find opportunities to share my faith - the fact that it's quite unusual to be a Christian means that it is often surprising to people, and generally speaking it seems to me that they don't really have a problem with Jesus - it's just Christians that are the trouble. And if we are truly only a few, a remnant of the faithful, then that's a serious problem that we need to address.

So, there are two ways - the wide and the narrow. But Jesus goes on to talk about the kind of fruit we produce, and we could call this the two trees. There is the potential to produce bad fruit, or good fruit.

When I was at school, one of my most hated activities was cross country running. To this day, I am a pathetic runner, and back then I would cheat terribly by walking most of the route with a few like minded schoolmates until we saw a route marshal up ahead. At those points we would speed up to a jog until we were sufficiently out of sight to be able to resume our leisurely pace.

I make no apologies for those choices.

But the reality is that if it hadn't been for those marshals on the route showing us where to turn and which roads to head down, we could have very easily gone off track and got completely lost. We needed people we could trust to point us in the right direction.

In the same way we need to know that we are being led the right way in our faith, not being fooled or distracted.

Jesus warns us of 'false prophets' - people claiming to speak the word of God, but actually don't do anything of the sort. It can sound quite extreme and sometimes a bit confusing and frightening, but a large part of it is about how we discern God's voice.

We can go to the extremes of saying “God definitely says this,” or “How can we be certain this is what God is saying?” ... perhaps we need to find a third way that sounds more like “I think God might be saying this - can we press into it together and seek confirmation on it?”

When it comes to discerning, Jesus gives us some good advice when it comes to identifying false prophets - look for the fruit. Can you see this person bringing life to others, or only gain and growth for themselves?

And what does this fruit look like? Is it self sacrifice - giving freely of time and money, or is it self promotion - pushing a brand for its own sake, seeking the approval of others?

It's not always easy because it's almost impossible to know what people's motives are: am I here today because I like the sound of my own voice and want to tell you all what to do, or do I want to explore the teachings of Jesus as closely as possible and grow in faith with you? Maybe it's not that black and white.

We often make judgements based on our own past experiences, and our Christian tradition tends towards a very tribalistic attitude. I don't think we should reject tribalism as a reflection of our humanity, but one of the risks is that we can often too easily start to judge if people are 'one of us' or not.

Maybe we freak out if we hear that someone finds that they like to express their faith in a way that we might interpret as 'too liberal' or 'too dated' or 'too influenced by secularism' ... when at the centre is a desire to express a love of God.

Who God says is 'in' or 'out' seems to me to be judged in a quite different way. Just look at the story of Joshua, where the apparently right and religious are rejected and the prostitute Rahab is commended and accepted. Something else is going on there that we don't always see first time.

Jesus has been weaving a rich tapestry here. Let's think back to his teaching on pointing out the speck in someone's eye while we have a plank in our own - we're not expected to go around judging other people. That's God's job.

But we are expected to discern his voice and his will, and to seek wisdom in how to respond rightly.

So, despite all these seemingly impossible challenges and huge expectations to live and behave in ways that go totally against our human grain, Jesus says: “You can do it!”

Jesus was fully God and fully man - he had all he needed to achieve a perfect life, but I think it’s fair to say that he still had a tough time of it. We should take comfort in that thought.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a reality given to us that says: “Follow me.”

He says “Follow me” in life, through all the ups and downs.

He says “Follow me” in death - it’s been defeated, so have no fear!

He says “Follow me” into the life to come - he’s coming back to take us there.

It might not be easy, but he does walk with us, by our sides, as we go forward.

**// Chris Marsh 08.03.15**