

## **MATT 7.13-23: KEEP RIGHT ON TO THE END OF THE ROAD**

*[Chelmsford 22 July 2012]*

'*Keep right on to the end of the road*' is the title I've given to my sermon today. It is in fact the title of a song written in by the Scottish entertainer Harry Lauder, following the death of his son in 1916 in the course of the First World War. The chorus of the song goes:-

*Keep right on to the end of the road,  
Keep right on to the end,  
Tho' the way be long, let your heart be strong,  
Keep right on round the bend.  
Tho' you're tired and weary still journey on,  
Till you come to your happy abode,  
Where all the love you've been dreaming of  
Will be there at the end of the road.*

Yes, '*Keep right on to the end of the road*'.

This line came to mind when I read the words of Jesus found in Matt 7.13-23, where Jesus talks not just about choosing the right road, but also about keeping right on to the end of the road.

### **1. CHOOSE THE RIGHT ROAD**

Listen to Jesus: "**Go in through the narrow gate, because the gate to hell is wide and the road that leads to it is easy, and there are many who travel it. But the gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard, and there are few people who find it**" (Matt 7.13-14)

Jesus says there are two ways – one which leads to "**life**"; and one which leads to death. One that leads to heaven, and one that leads to "**hell**".

This metaphor of the two roads or ways was a well-known metaphor in Judaism.

- The Psalmist in Psalm 1 speaks of two ways – one is the way of the "**righteous**", and the other is the way of the "**wicked**"; one leads to happiness, and the other leads to "**doom**".
- In Jeremiah 21.8 God says through the prophet: "**Listen! I the Lord am giving you a choice between the way that leads to life and the way that leads to** "

Jesus takes hold of this metaphor and applies it to life in the Kingdom, life lived under the rule of God.

- The road that leads to **life** with God in heaven is "**hard**" – its demanding – it takes effort and determination; it involves loving our enemies; forgiving those who hurt us; keeping our word, whether it be in the context of business or in the context of marriage; it involves sitting loose to money and to possessions; it involves putting God first, whatever.
- By contrast the road that leads to **hell** is "**easy**" – you simply go with the flow and

in do what you like; there are no ethical parameters; just live for self.

Not surprisingly, the way of the Kingdom is not a popular option. Most people do not choose to go this way – “**there are few people who find it**”. By contrast “**there are many people who travel**” the way that leads to hell. In the words of Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*: “*The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don’t fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do*”.

Do notice that entrance to both roads is through a “**gate**”. The “**gate**” to hell is “**wide**”; whereas the “**gate**” to life is “**narrow**”. The implication is that the gate to life is easy to miss – it takes some effort to find and involves turning off what appears to be the main road. “**Go in through the narrow gate**”, says Jesus.

Jesus urges us to make sure we choose the right road. We can choose either to go the way that leads to hell – or the way that leads to life. A decision is called for. At this point the emphasis is not about “keeping on the right road”, but about “starting on the right road”. The call to “**go in through the narrow gate**” is ‘*the call to conversion, the call to make Jesus Lord*’ (Frederick Dale Bruner).

Here in this church we run Alpha courses. The Alpha course involves exploring what Jesus has to offer. This exploration takes time – for many it takes much longer than the actual 10 weeks. But eventually we have to make a choice – a choice between following Jesus, and going our own way. It’s an awesome life-or-death choice – but frankly it is also a no-brainer of a choice, for surely the choice is obvious. In the words of one commentator: “*It is about being on the road that starts narrow but opens out into the life of heaven, or staying on the broad road of our self-centredness until it contracts to a dead halt that ends in final destruction*” (Michael Green).

This morning let me ask you: which road are you on?  
Have you chosen the right road?

But choosing the right road is just the beginning. In Harry Lauder’s words, we then need to ‘keep right on to the end of the road’. Alas that it is not always easy.

And so with that in mind we turn to the next section of the Sermon on the Mount.

## 2. BELIEVE THE RIGHT TEACHERS

Jesus went on to say: "**Be on your guard against false prophets; they come to you looking like sheep on the outside, but on the inside they are really like wild wolves**" (7.15).

As Peterson puts it: "*Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or another*".

Wherever God is at work, there Satan is at work too.

Satan is concerned to stop God's people keeping right on to the end of the way of faith – and he often does this by deceiving and confusing people through "**false prophets**": i.e. people who claim to speak in God's name, but who don't.

- The OT prophets knew all about this. Jeremiah had a head-on collision with false prophets who said "**all is well**", when in fact "**all is not well**" (6.14; 8.11). The false prophets of his day were more concerned to curry favour with the people than to transmit the word of the Lord obediently.
- In Jesus' day the Sadducees and the Pharisees took on the mantle of the false prophets. They had lost out on the heart of true religion and had put all the emphasis on outward religious observance. Jesus denounced them as "**hypocrites**"; he called them "**blind guides**" (Matt 23.15, 16).
- It wasn't long before false prophets appeared in the early church. Paul, when saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders, warned them of trouble to come: "**I know that after I leave fierce wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock**" (Acts 20.29). I.e. he warned them of false prophets, men and women claiming to speak in Christ's name, but who were not Christ's.

Who are the false prophets today?

Sadly, two groups of people within the church come to mind:

- The 'cynics': i.e. theologians who deny the divinity of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus and in doing so destroy the very root of the Christian faith.
- The 'pluralists' - i.e. theologians who deny the uniqueness of Jesus - who argue that all religions ultimately lead to God - that there is more than one way which leads to salvation.

Time and again we see these theologians on our TV screens, airing their doubts and confusing many of God's people

These false prophets, said Jesus, look like "**sheep on the outside, but on the inside they are really like wild wolves**". But, says, Jesus: "**You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?**" (7.16 NRSV)

I'm told that in Palestine there was a certain thorn, the buckthorn, which had little blackberries which at first sight resembled little grapes. Likewise there was a certain thistle, which had a flower, and which at a distance could be taken for a fig.

Yes appearances can be deceptive.

But a thorn bush or a patch of thistles could not deceive anybody for long.

The same, said Jesus, is true of false prophets: for ultimately we will know them "**by their fruits**".

What had Jesus in mind?

- When Jesus spoke of "**fruits**" did he have in mind what Paul later called the fruit of the Spirit – qualities such as love, joy & peace? That's the interpretation Peterson in his paraphrase gives: "*Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions of your pocket book*". That is certainly true. But that is probably not what Jesus has in mind.
- Rather Jesus seems to have had their teaching in mind rather than their character. This is suggested by a // passage in Matt 12.33-37, where Jesus again made use of the fruit-tree metaphor: "**A tree is known by the kind of fruit it bears. You snakes - how can you say good things, when you are evil. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of..... You can be sure that on Judgement Day everyone will have to give account of every useless word he has ever spoken. Your words will be used to judge you – to declare you either innocent or guilty**".

I.e. people's hearts are revealed by their words just as trees are known by their fruit. We therefore have a responsibility to test teachers by their teaching. We do this by using as our standard by the Word of God as found in Holy Scripture. As Calvin put it: "*All doctrines must be brought to the Word of God as the standard*", for "*in judging of false prophets the rule of faith (i.e. the Scriptures) holds place*".

The fact is that those who deny the divinity of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus or the uniqueness of Jesus are "**false prophets**" – they do not belong to Jesus. They may wear dog collars, they may be distinguished bishops and learned theologians, but they are not his. Of such people we need to beware. Such people can through their false teaching turn us off the way that leads to life.

We can only keep right on to the end of the road by right believing.

### 3. LIVE RIGHT LIVES

Christian faith is more than choosing the right road, and believing the right teachers – it also involves living right lives

Jesus went on to say: "**Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do**" (7.21)

Peterson: "*Knowing the correct password - saying 'Master, Master', for instance - isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience - doing what my Father wills*".

In the musical *My Fair Lady* Eliza Doolittle exclaims: "*Words, words, words, I'm sick of words! I get words all day through, first from him, then from you! Is that all you blighters can do?*". Jesus too is sick of words, words, words. Jesus is impatient of pious professions of faith that don't issue in practice

Here is a real challenge to evangelical Christians

- We can be such wordy creatures. It has been said that the first test of an evangelical church is the length of the sermon; and the 2nd test is the presence of a meeting for Bible Study & prayer. Although I believe that listening to sermons and taking part in Bible study is vital to healthy Christian development, nonetheless there can be a very real danger if the Christian life is limited to sermons and to Bible study. We can suffer spiritual indigestion - indeed, more than that we can become flabby and repulsive in the Lord's service. We need to work off all the teaching we receive in actually serving Christ!
- We can be such one-sided Christians. We bang the evangelistic drum - and rightly so; but sometimes we forget to ban the drum of social involvement. We make much of the Great Commission to "**go and make disciples of all nations**", but sometimes we forget the Great Commandment, to "**love our neighbour as ourselves**"

The words of Jesus found in vv22,23 make me feel even more uncomfortable: "**When Judgement Day comes, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! In your name we spoke God's message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles!' Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you wicked people'**" (7.22-23)

Peterson: "*I can see it now - at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking'. And do you know what I am going to say? 'You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here'*"

We may kid ourselves that we are busy doing things for God - but in fact we may be doing the wrong things; we may deceive ourselves and in fact be serving only ourselves and not our God.

Jesus is impatient of every form of self-serving hypocrisy; he is impatient of religious high-jinks which ostensibly are for the glory of God, but which in fact meet more the emotional needs of the participants.

Jesus wants his followers to get down to the nitty-gritty of being involved in the life of the world.

The fact is that it is not enough to believe the right things - we must also live out our faith.

It is true that nobody enters the kingdom of God because of their obedience - but nobody enters the kingdom who is not obedient

Genuine faith goes way beyond calling Jesus "Lord" - it goes on to implement his lordship in our lives.

Genuine faith is not about having a spiritual high, but about living out the kind of life described not least in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus calls us to choose the right road – believe the right things – and to live right lives. He calls us to ‘keep right on to the end of the road’.