



Sermon Transcript November 24, 2019

We Believe! Choices and Consequences Matthew 7:13-14, 24-29

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 24, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Matthew 7:13-29

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Introduction

This morning we come to the final statement in the EFCA Doctrinal Statement. A doctrinal statement is simply a list of things we believe to be true. In fact, each of the ten statements that comprise our doctrinal statement begins with the simple refrain, “We believe . . .” “We believe in one God, Creator of all things.” “We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures . . . Therefore, the Bible is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.” “We believe . . . human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath.” “We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate (God in the flesh—it is the very thing we will celebrate during this coming month).” “We believe . . . that Jesus shed his blood on the cross as the perfect, all sufficient sacrifice for our sins.” This is just a sampling of beliefs we have looked at and reaffirmed over the past few months.

As we come to this final statement of belief this morning, I feel as though I ought to warn you before we read it and reaffirm what we believe. What we are about to confess to be true is jarring to the sensibilities of our culture. And I would even say, statistics tell us that what we are about to confess is increasingly being called into question by those who consider themselves followers of Christ. So I am very much aware of how out of step this statement is with the flow of culture. At first glance, it may even seem to be offensive to some. And yet, if we are going to confess that the Bible “is to be believed in

all that it teaches,” you can’t get around what we are about to confess to be true.

Our final statement has to do with our response to the gospel and what we believe about our eternal destiny. “We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of his glorious grace. Amen.”

In this statement we are confessing that we believe everyone needs to decide what they are going to do about Jesus. A choice needs to be made. Will you “turn to him in repentance of your sin and receive him as Lord?” We believe that this choice has consequences to it. These consequences are eternal. We believe that heaven and hell are at stake with this choice that is before you this morning.

Recently, I was listening to a podcast on NPR and Jesus was the topic of conversation. One of the four participants wrote a book called *Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower*. He is not a religious man and he doesn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God. But at the same time, he finds the moral teachings of Jesus to be attractive. Another one of the participants wrote a book called *Dating Jesus*, and it details her journey of growing up in a fundamentalist—evangelical church and how she has moved away from organized religion, though she still believes in God. It was a fascinating conversation to listen to, and quite honestly, even though I disagree with many of their foundational beliefs, they have legitimate critiques that would be good for us to humbly receive and consider.

As they got to the end of the podcast, they all were praising the changing tide of opinion about God that they see in our culture and even in many churches. There is less of an emphasis on the justice and wrath of God and more of an emphasis on the love of God. It presupposes that the two are opposed to each other. The objection often goes like this, “How can a God of love be also a God filled with wrath and anger? If he is loving and perfect, he should forgive and accept everyone. He shouldn’t get angry.” I would propose to you that the opposite question should be asked. How could God be a God of love and not express wrath and anger against evil and not have a day against injustice? The existence of hell does not cancel out the notion that God is a God of love. It is quite the contrary. The existence of hell is further proof that God is a God of love.

Miroslav Volf is a professor of theology at the Yale Divinity School. He grew up in

Croatia where he witnessed the ethnic battles between the Croats and the Serbs. In his country, one third of the land was captured and entire cities were leveled. Just one town, Vukovar, located near his home city, was completely destroyed. All of its 30,000 residents were either killed or driven out. There were 1 million refugees out of a population of 4.5 million people in his country.¹ He once said, “If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship.”² A God of love is not indifferent to what is evil. God does something about it. In our statement of faith, we affirm what we learn in Scripture that someday God will restore this fallen and broken world and there will be a New Heaven and a New Earth and God will put an end to what is evil. Hell is not opposed to the existence of heaven.

When I was listening to the podcast, I was imagining myself sitting in on that discussion and wondering how I would humbly respond to what they were saying. Inevitably, when the suggestion is made that we diminish the “justice of God” for the “love of God” an appeal is made to simply return to the Sermon on the Mount and to the teachings of Jesus. It is as if to suggest that Jesus didn’t really talk about judgment. Instead, his message was a message of love. When I hear something like that, it makes me want to ask whether or not they ever read the Sermon on the Mount or the teachings of Jesus. In fact, no one talked more about hell than Jesus did. Does that surprise you? The issue of judgment is the focus of the end of the Sermon on the Mount. To drive his point home, I want to highlight two choices Jesus says we need to make in life. He says that there are two different gates for you to walk through as you walk through the path of life. Which gate will you choose? He said that there are two different foundations to build your life upon. Will you build your life on the rock or the sand? These choices are designed to get us to think about what we will do with Jesus.

But with each of these choices we are called to make, the consequences are significant and eternal. In verse 13 the wrong path leads to “*destruction*” and the right path leads to “*life*.” In verse 27 a life that is built on the wrong foundation becomes a life that simply cannot stand in the judgment. But the life that is built on the rock will stand. So this choice you must ponder this morning, is no small matter. There is truly a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.

Choose Between Two Gates

The first choice you need to make has to do with which gate you walk through to set you on a course for life. There are two gates to choose from. One gate is wide, many take it

and it is relatively easy to take. All you have to do with this gate is “go with the flow.” The other gate, is narrow and few go through it and it is hard. These two gates lead to very different ends. The wide gate leads to destruction and the narrow gate leads to life. Listen to how Jesus put it in his own words starting in verse 13. *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”*

This is an interesting statement at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, especially if you are familiar with what is in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Virginia Stem Owens was an English professor at Texas A&M and she assigned her freshman class to write a response paper to the Sermon on the Mount. It was a piece of literature included in their textbook and so she asked them to interact with these words of Jesus. It was interesting how many of the students had never read or even heard of the Sermon on the Mount. So they are approaching it with a clean slate and without any layers of preconceived opinions. Their responses to the Sermon on the Mount caused Owens to put down her red pen and wonder about the trend she was seeing in their reaction to these words of Jesus. Not only were these students unfamiliar with this wonderful “body of literature” we call the Sermon on the Mount, but they hated it.

Here were a couple of the comments the students wrote:

“I did not like the essay ‘Sermon on the Mount.’ It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is.”

Another student wrote: “The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery? To be angry and insult someone is like murder? These are the most extreme, stupid, un-human statements I have ever heard.”

Tim Keller was reflecting on this article and he said what Owens knew was that when her students read this sermon “they were desperately looking for cover.” “Because when you read the Sermon on the Mount, you know this is how you want people to live like around you. You just don’t think you can do it yourself. And all of a sudden you are forced to say, ‘Wait a minute, this is an arrow pointing at my heart.’”³ In other words, the evil that lives inside your own heart is being exposed by these penetrating words of Jesus. Virginia Stem Owens, therefore concludes, “When honest ignorant ears hear it as it is, it is terrifying.”⁴ Keller put it this way, “it has been said if anyone read the Sermon on the Mount with an open mind they would fall down and cry out, ‘God save me from the Sermon on the Mount!’”⁵

Here is the thing about hell that you need to understand. Peter Gurry puts it this way: “The way you think about hell is a reflection of how you think about sin and, in turn, how we think about Christ.”⁶ Let me explain what he is saying here. He says, “It’s tempting to rush to the Hitlers and Stalins of history to make the point that God is just in consigning people to hell. But who among us can identify with the concrete historical atrocities perpetrated by those evil men? Yet we *can* identify with the reality of festering hatreds, deep-rooted self-centeredness, and utter failure to love God with heart, mind, soul, strength.” This is the “stuff of the heart” that the Sermon on the Mount exposes. Gurry says that “if we preach a hell we don’t deserve then we will preach a Jesus we think we do deserve.”⁷ But then, you no longer have the gospel. We don’t deserve the grace of God. The very definition of grace is “unmerited favor.” We don’t avoid hell because we are better than others. We avoid hell because Jesus is better than us. This is why we say in our statement of faith, “We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ.”

There is a gate you need to walk through before you ever set foot on the path Jesus has laid out for you. Jesus says in John 10:9, “*I am the door [the gate]. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.*” And so to enter the “*narrow gate*” where God’s blessing awaits you is to come to turn to Jesus. It is a “*narrow gate*” because there is no other way by which one can be saved. It is a “*narrow gate*” because it requires one to be “*poor in spirit*” and therefore acknowledging that you have nothing in yourself to earn any favor before God. And when you come to that point and turn to Jesus by faith and walk through that gate, God puts the perfection and the righteousness of Jesus on you and opens you up the path to eternal life.

Therein lies your first choice. What will you decide to do with Jesus? Let the Sermon on the Mount do it’s work in your life and cause you to cry out, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” Turn to turn to Jesus, who lived for you and was crucified for you and rose from the dead so that you can receive life. It is your choice.

Choose Between Two Foundations Blessings!!! - does these words—obedience

So this brings us to the very end of this great sermon with one final and grand choice to make. What is the foundation upon which you will build your entire life? Jesus says, “*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man*”

who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

The number one value in our culture is freedom. You get a sense of this when you are at a ballgame and the national anthem is sung. The singer gets to the climactic point in the anthem and holds the note for a few extra beats: “O’er the land of the freeeee . . .” and the crowd begins to cheer—often drowning out “the home of the brave.” Alan Ehrenhalt captures the attitude of our country when he writes, “Most of us in America believe a few simple propositions that seem so clear and self-evident they scarcely need to be said. Choice is a good thing in life, and the more of it we have, the happier we are. Authority is inherently suspect; nobody should have the right to tell others what to think or how to behave.”⁸

Freedom in our culture has come to mean that we are our own authority. Any constraint that is put on us is the enemy. That is why some see faith as an enemy to freedom because faith puts constraints on us. Clearly there are constraints laid out for us in the Sermon on the Mount. But the irony of it all is that these constraints lead to true freedom. Imagine seeing a five year old driving a car (I thought I did once. It was terrifying!) Cars weren’t made to be driven by a five-year-old. But here is the thing. If God is the Creator of the universe (which we confessed the first week) and if he has told us what is good in his Word (which we confessed the second week) could it be that any constraint that God lays out for us is for our good and leads to true freedom? God knows how life is made to work. He puts constraints around sex and sexuality. He puts constraints around how we interact with one another—forgiving and loving each other. Why? Because at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to a life that is blessed. It is the life that builds its foundation on Jesus.

Do you notice the difference between the house built on the rock and the house built on the sand? They both hear the word of God. But the one who puts it into practice is the one who builds their life on the rock. It is a reminder that Jesus is not just inviting us to a way of belief. It is a way of life that he invites us to.

Jesus is saying that the choice you have before you this morning is whether or not you will build your life on Jesus or on something else. But Jesus is saying that choice you make has consequences because there is no other foundation upon which you can build that will be strong enough to stand the storms of life. Make no mistake about it, the storms will come. I don’t know when or what. I just know they will. And furthermore, I think the ultimate reference that Jesus is referring to when he speaks of the floods and

the wind is the final judgment. Just like in Psalm 1 we are reminded that the one who stands on his own without the blessing of Jesus, will not stand in the day of judgment. His house will crumble like a house of cards under the weight of God's judgment for our sin. Only the one who stands in that final judgment with Jesus at his side will stand on that day because he will be standing on that rock.

Conclusion

I offer you this final thought.

C. S. Lewis said this about one's discovery of the biblical God. He said, "An impersonal God, we like that well and good. A subjective God of love and goodness inside our heads, even better. A formless life force surging through everyone which we can tap, best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other cord, approaching at infinite speed. The Hunter, the Covenant Lord, the Husband, that is quite another matter. There comes a moment that people dabbling in religion suddenly draw back, supposing they really found him. We never meant it to come to that. If there is a God, you are in a sense alone with him. You cannot put him off with speculation about the hypocrisy of your neighbor or minimize what you read in books—what will all that chatter and hearsay count, when the anesthetic fog we call the real world fades away and the divine presence in which we have always stood becomes palpable, immediate and unavoidable."⁹ I tell you, you must choose Jesus, or you will not stand on that day when that fog is gone and there you are in all your nakedness and sin and shame, standing before this holy God. "On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand." It is your choice.

¹"To Embrace the Enemy" *Christianity Today* <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/septemberweb-only/9-17-53.0.html>

²Ibid

³Tim Keller Sermon: On the Mountain: The Terrifying and Beckoning God

⁴Andy Naselli "Why People Hate the Sermon on the Mount" www.andynaselli.com 11/13, 2012

⁵Keller

⁶Peter Gurry "Are We Proclaiming a Hell we Don't Deserve—And a Christ we Do?" www.thegospelcoalition.org April 9, 2018

⁷Ibid

⁸Alan Ehrenhalt *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 2

⁹Quoted in Keller Sermon: On the Mountain: The Terrifying and Beckoning God