

Discern and Decide (Matthew 7:13-29)

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Date: 13 December 2020

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[0 : 0 0] pray. Amen. Cool. So lastly, we just want to read through the passage that we'll be looking at today. So if you have your Bibles, or if you, please turn to Matthew chapter 7, verses 13 to 29. Okay, I'll give you guys a second for that while I pull it up as well. 7, chapter 7, 13 to 29.

Okay, so chapter 13, it says this. Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.

Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, do we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons, and in your name perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and a fowl of a great crash.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law. So, welcome Pastor William.

Thank you.

[2 : 5 1] Father, you've made a decision that will change your life. This is what we do for you, and we're walking a narrow path. Help us as we listen to your word now, as you challenge us once again to walk your path, to trust your son, Jesus, the only one who truly speaks with authority, and is the only foundation that we should build our lives on. Help us, Father. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Congratulations. You've made a decision that will change your life.

This is what Nabil's friends told him as they celebrated him becoming a Christian. But all Nabil could do was weep as he counted the cost of accepting Jesus as the divine Messiah who offers true peace with God. You see, all his life, Nabil had been very religious. But these last few years, he slowly came to realize his religion could not give him real peace with God. But to follow Jesus means to betray his Abba and Ami, his parents, his extended family who had nurtured his faith, it meant being the only son in his whole family who did not walk the way of Islam.

Why don't you come and join our Bible study, said Jane to Lucy. You see, Lucy was sitting at a cafe, and a girl she'd just met at church last Sunday invited her along out for a coffee. Look, Lucy had been to church a few times. She's checking out Christianity, still exploring what this Jesus thing is all about. And it seems like Jane was also new to the church, and they struck up a friendship.

And as Lucy sipped her coffee, Jane started to talk with someone next door to them, sitting at the next table, who just happened to be reading a Bible. They got chatting, and the stranger actually said, oh, I'm actually a home group leader, and would you like to join our Bible study group?

Lucy felt a bit reluctant, but Jane said, please come with me. I don't want to go by myself. One more conversation. What am I building my life upon, said Harry.

[4 : 57] Harry grew up in a strict Asian family. His life was filled with studying and tutoring, extra lessons, exams. He even learnt a musical instrument, of course, to look good on your CV, right, for uni applications. Every year, Harry built up his achievements, right, academic prizes, school awards, competitions, got uni entrance, and yet none of this seemed to fill the longings in his heart. And so Harry began to hear about Jesus from his friends, and he had to start to wonder, what am I building my life upon? Three stories of real people. I've changed their names, of course, some of them. Other than name changers, what do these true stories have in common? What's in common here is that each person had to work out what was before them and make a choice about Jesus. Make a choice about the Christian faith. Each person had to discern and decide about following Jesus. Brothers and sisters, we've come to the tail end of Matthew's sermon on the mount, the sermon that Jesus teaches his disciples, this epic sermon. It's time to wrap it up now. And so Jesus is not giving us new information. He is just wanting us to discern and decide. I wonder if you notice, as Isaac read that passage, how kind of the intensity ramps up, ramps up, doesn't it? Right? He's warning of destruction, verse 13. Ferocious wolves, 15. Fire and evil. You can kind of sense the urgency. It's not just enough for you and I just to hear through the sermon series. We must now do God's will. We must now respond. We must now discern and decide.

And God's will for us to flourish as men and women in this world is not just outside behaviour that looks good. Right? He wanted a deeper righteousness that comes from a new heart.

We've heard that it's when we're poor in spirit, when we mourn for sin, when we are humble and hungry for God's goodness that we know we are part of the heaven's kingdom. Right? When our hearts are submitting to King Jesus, the wise one, we have access to then his heavenly father who answers our prayers, who is so generous to us and cares for us every day. And right, as we follow Jesus, the wise philosopher king, he teaches us how to offer our lives as salty, life-giving sacrifices. And friends, I want us to keep reflecting on Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Never let it go. As we keep reflecting and diving into the wisdom of Christ, six weeks isn't enough really to get through all that he has to say to us.

Because we all want to start to go beyond mere rule-keeping, don't we? We don't just want to be people who keep rules, but we want to live as whole men and women. Right? Good on the inside as well as the outside. Different in our devotional life, in our attitudes to the world, and in our relationships with one another. This is the kind of good life that Jesus promises us and wants to invite us into.

And it's a hard life. I wonder if you've reflected on all the teachings that we've heard. If I follow this really, I would be so made fun of by my parents, my family, my friends, workmates, for not sharing their hopes, not sharing their dreams, not following their script. But friends, we are called now to discern and decide. That's the point of these three final sections. And so the first thing he wants to warn us is to discern and decide which path to take here in verses 3 to 14.

[8 : 46] Enter through the narrow gates, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Have you ever picked the shortest route on a GPS, only to end up kind of winding around tiny streets trying to make that 10-minute left mark?

Or have you ever picked the biggest queue, right? There's three queues maybe at the checkouts, and you try and pick the one that looks like it's going to go the fastest, only to find that, you know, you're last and all the other queues go faster. What looks good initially can often turn out wrong. What looks like the broad path that is easy can turn out to be really difficult. And that's all that Jesus is trying to say here, right? That's all he's trying to say here. The road that everyone is walking down may look impressive with its wide gate, with its beautiful pathways, but look closely and it leads to destruction. Jesus is warning us that so many in the world are driving down the highway that leads to destruction. It's a road paved with selfish ambition, with pride about ourselves, with looking good on the outside, but unchanged on the inside. This wide road that everyone is following is full of people addicted to power, money, and sex. And look, if we looked at it with the world's eyes, this is the road that is celebrated, that everyone loves going down. It seems like the better path. But Jesus says, look closer. This path that looks good initially is missing so much.

Because people that walk down this path, this wide road, are exhausted, chasing treasures on earth. They are angry, lustful, vengeful, unloving, and untrue. And many on this path end up leading double lives. Lives that cannot be resolved. Lives where you have to be one person here and this group of friends, and then another person here and another group of friends. And Jesus just says, look, this road, it looks good, but it does not lead to life. It leads to death.

The word narrow here in verse 13, right? It says, small is the gate and narrow the road. Sorry, verse 14. It's a word that can also mean distressed or oppressed. So it's not just that the path looks small. It's actually difficult. It is a harder path. We've already heard before, it's those who are persecuted for righteousness sake who are blessed, right? This is the path that is going to invite suffering. Suffering for being a follower of Jesus. No surprise that Paul and Barnabas one day will say in the book of Acts, we must go through many tribulations, many sufferings to enter the kingdom of God.

And some of you know this, better than I have probably. You are here at PCBC, perhaps even though your parents disapprove. And some of you, you've chosen to follow Jesus though your family is as Buddhist or atheist or nominally Christian. Maybe they've just dropped you off here and hope that you'll become a good person. Some days, it feels lonely and hard, doesn't it? Wouldn't it be far easier to go back and join your friends on this big, wide path that looks nice? But Jesus reminds us to discern and decide.

[12 : 28] Only the narrow way leads to life, friends. Only when you follow his words, when you place your trust in him, only then will you be saved from the destruction that is coming at the end.

So discern carefully. Jesus says, don't look to the path where crowds flock to. Look to the small, rough-looking gate instead. This path may seem narrow, it may seem difficult and hard, sometimes lonely, but this is the path that leads to real, eternal life through his Son.

This is the narrow way that leads to true flourishing, true wholeness in our Father, everything good that Jesus has been talking about. You see, going back to our story, what goes, what finally pushed Nabeel, our brother in Christ really, to give up the way of Islam for the cross of Christ was actually a vision of a gate.

One night he had this vision, he was wrestling with the truth of the Bible and then this vision came to him of a narrow way that would cost him everything and yet led to light. You can read a story in his own book, it's fantastic, and yet he needed eyes of faith to get off the path of destruction and choose to head for the hard way that leads to life. And likewise, friends, all of us at one stage in our lives must discern and decide which path to take. And even for some of us who have been Christians many years, we must keep reminding ourselves that this is the path that leads to life, not that one. We must discern and decide which path to take. In the next section, from verses 15 to 23, Jesus tells us we must discern and decide who truly speaks for God. Let me read verse 15 out for you.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. It's another word picture, right? What looks, something looks nice on the outside and fluffy and cute. Actually, it's a ravenous wolf. Who is a false prophet? Some people actually really get excited about this question. They love to blog about it and tell you who and who and who is a false prophet.

[14 : 46] That church is a cult, right? Or those guys aren't preaching the true gospel. And there are plenty of examples in scripture where false prophets, false teachers are called out by name. For example, Paul tells Timothy that Hymenaeus and Alexander are false teachers. They are shipwrecking people's faith.

He says that in 1 Timothy. Their godless chatter is spreading like gangrene. Got to stop their teaching. Look, there are times we should call out false teachers by name and make judgment calls, as we heard about last week, about false teachers. I think that as I read this passage, as I read this through the week, I think here Jesus is much more interested in how you and I can discern and decide for ourselves who's a false prophet. Okay? You notice Jesus actually doesn't name anyone, but he is preparing us for the probability that there will be false teachers in the church. Just like in our fight against COVID, right? It's very important to know who has it and where so that you can, you know, put them in a nice hotel somewhere. But more crucial, okay, more crucial is our day-to-day patterns, knowing what the symptoms are, so that we can go get tested and we can discern carefully, right, and make decisions appropriately. That's how we'll win the war against COVID. And so, not just naming people, but also changing our practices and changing our attitudes. Jesus tells us two things here about false prophets that we need to know. One is this, you'll spot them by their eventual fruits, not by first appearance, but by what fruit comes out of their life and ministry, right? By final results and not the first glance. Have a look. By their fruits, you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. At home, we've been doing a bit of gardening at home, right? Trying to grow those little things from

New World, right? I don't know how many of you have successfully grown one. Some of them do start to sprout there, don't they? And one thing that's obvious is that when it says, right, it's coriander, it should sprout coriander, shouldn't it, right? Otherwise, you'd go back to New World and get a refund, okay? We'd never expect a mint plant, for example, to grow coriander or a strawberry plant to grow bananas.

That'd be bananas. But Jesus says, you will know a false prophet by their eventual fruits, okay? You might not be able to tell at the start, but eventually their fruits will show. Over time, false teachers will depart from Jesus' words. They will. They will. Or over time, they will teach and then eventually their lives will bear fruit that is opposite to the kingdom values that Jesus has been teaching through his sermon here, okay? Perhaps over time, a false teacher will be so puffed up in spirit that they'll start naming a ministry after themselves, right? That's a good giveaway, right?

If someone calls a ministry or a church after their own name. Perhaps you'll start to notice, this teacher, I've never seen them repent or say sorry for sin. Perhaps they won't be meek, if we think about all those beatitudes. They won't really be peacemakers. They're always dividing and divisive. Perhaps they're as unsalty and indistinct as everyone else in the world. They just dress and look and live exactly the same as the world around us. Perhaps they fit in a bit too well.

[18 : 33] And then, perhaps a false teacher will be a hypocrite, an actor, someone who looks godly on the outside, but actually they've been having an affair. They've been stealing money from church. Look for the eventual fruits. And the second way that Jesus tells us to watch out for false teachers, well, he just reminds us you cannot recognize them by first appearance, so be patient, right? Wouldn't it be easy? Wouldn't it be easy if all the false teachers in the world wore a sign on their heads, I'm a false teacher, right? But it's not like that. Sadly, Jesus reminds us they will actually look very similar to true teachers. Look at verse 22. Many will say, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? What Jesus is saying here is that they will look so much like real teachers. They'll even speak in his name. They'll even perform miraculous works. But Jesus says just because a teacher does that does not make them legit.

Just because, if you remember the story of the Exodus, just because Pharaoh's magicians could kind of copy the miracles that Moses did doesn't make them true prophets.

Just because someone claims to have the power to bring you closer into God's presence or can heal or have miracles, be discerning, friends. They could be legit. They could be a false teacher. Be careful.

And I think, PCBC, in our day and age, we can be particularly vulnerable to this, can't we? Okay? Because on first appearances, we tend to go with stuff that looks good, right?

Okay? We think about two websites. One looks like it was made in the 1980s or 1990s. And then one looks like it's sleek and really nice. Which one would we trust for our information?

[20 : 33] We'd go to the second website, wouldn't we? We can be really drawn to appearances. And yet Jesus warns us, don't go off first appearances, friends.

But look out for the end result. What may seem impressive, a slick service, best-selling books, award-winning music may actually hide abusive leadership.

Greedy financial practices. Or pastors who are unfaithful to their spouses. Or destructive teaching that is sending people to hell. This is a hard passage.

I read this and it's hard for me even to preach this. But my heart is burdened for you all. I say all this in love because out there, out there, on the internet, in churches, maybe you've even gone to their meetings, there are wolves.

They're dressed in designer labels, hipster clothing. They look good. They will scratch your itch. They will speak to your own passions. And my fear is that some of us will wander off into myths and ideas that take us away from Jesus, our first love.

[21 : 46] Be discerning. Be discerning. And as much as I could name false teachers, I don't think that's Jesus' point. What we need most of all today is Jesus' symptom checks.

Don't get caught up with first appearances. And keep listening and watch out for the fruit of their teaching. Okay? Please, could we not just look at external gifts and powers, but try and discern what is going on from their hearts.

That's the whole theme of the Sermon on the Mount, isn't it? Not just what's on the outside, but what's on the inside that matters. Go beyond the hype. Go beyond the curated social media lifestyle when we try to follow who is a trustworthy teacher.

And friends, this applies to me too. Anyone else that preaches here at PCBC. Please check what we teach lines up with God's Word.

It is no accident that we read the Bible's passage. It is no accident that I want you to bring your Bibles to church or on your phones. Don't let us get away with kind of preaching as if we were drunk people leaning on a lamppost, right?

[22 : 50] Okay, here's a lamppost. I'm drunk. Look, and the lamppost is meant to give me light, but I'm just leaning on it for support. Okay? That's how so many people preach today. They lean on the Bible for support of what they want to say rather than to illuminate what they should say.

Don't let us get away with that. Tell us off if we do. And I think this also reminds us too that Jesus gives us His Word in community.

Okay? It is a group project, a team effort to discern and decide who truly speaks for God. It says here in verse 16, you will recognize them by their fruits.

The you there is actually plural. It means that it's saying y'all or all of you, okay, will recognize them by their fruits. So Jesus is saying it's a team effort. Okay? Cults like Jehovah's Witnesses, like Mormonism, they grow massively because they target people who are left on their own.

Lonely people who aren't connected to friends or a healthy church family that look out for one another. And so I think it means prioritize those relationships you have, your cell groups.

[23 : 58] There's so many good preachers online. I know you could get your feeding anywhere you like. You could just turn me off and then go look up someone else. That's fine. But when you are listening and getting your feeding from a face on the screen or a voice on a podcast, it is much harder to go beyond first appearances and to do some of these checks to check what their life is like, whether it matches up with what they teach.

Friends, it's far better, I think, if you and I heard average sermons week by week here at PCBC and you know whether our lives match up with our teaching.

Far better. Remember Lucy sitting at the cafe, not sure what to do? She felt really under pressure from Jane to go along this stranger's Bible study group.

It seemed pretty odd that they actually wanted to meet secretly and not to even tell their church. And eventually, after some digging, Lucy and her pastors, and these pastors are friends of ours in Wellington, learned that Jane actually belonged to Shinjongji, a cult that had been actually trying to recruit new Christians from churches.

This is their strategy. They pretend to actually befriend you. They come into your church and visit. They seem really keen to listen to the Bible. And then they set up a coffee meeting.

[25 : 15] And then while they're there, they happen to meet a friend, a stranger who invites them to a Bible study. And then they get sucked in. They get sucked in. They are dangerous and deceptive. They are a cult.

These are false teachers. For example, their founder claims to be the second coming of Jesus. Only he can interpret the Bible's true meaning and salvation is not enough through Jesus.

You have to harvest new members for the cult. But you would not know this at first because actually the way they work is deceptive. They come to you and they don't tell you everything at first.

And actually for them, it's okay to lie. Because if you do God's will, it's okay to lie. Thankfully, Lucy got away from this cult. But sadly, hundreds of other people in New Zealand, not just Asians, Kiwis, all kinds of people have been sucked in.

There are wolves out there dressed in sheep's clothing. Lucy had to discern and decide who truly speaks for God. And friends, you and I have to too. We need to do the same throughout our lives as we follow Jesus Christ.

[26 : 20] And the way we will do this discerning and deciding ultimately is if when we build our lives on Jesus' words. So that is his final warning from verses 24 to 29.

Jesus says this, We must discern and decide which foundation to build upon. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine, says Jesus, and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose, the winds blew and beat against the house, yet it did not fall. Why? Because it had its foundation on the rock. But if you hear these words of mine and don't put them into practice, it's like a foolish man, he says, who built his house on the sand.

The rain comes down, the streams rise up, the winds blow and beats against the house, and it all falls down with a great crash. After that final sentence, the crowds were so amazed.

Why were they amazed? Why were they amazed? I don't think it's just because of Jesus' wisdom and great insight, even though it's there, obviously. I think what astonished them, it says there, is because he taught as one who had authority.

[27 : 36] Did you notice how in verse 24 he described his teaching? These are words of mine. And actually the original text, the word my, comes first.

These are my words. Look, the other teachers in Jesus' day, they knew how to recycle the law and prophets. They knew how to kind of basically repost other people's opinions and talk about them as if they were their own.

But only Jesus, only Jesus speaks with God's authority when he teaches wisdom for you and I, for everyone. Friends, Jesus is the greater King Solomon, right?

Full of wisdom, that king, but Jesus is better. And he calls his daughters and sons out of darkness into heaven's kingdom. And he says this, Friends, when you and I see Jesus as all-wise, when we see that his words matter for our life, then, then when he goes to the cross and dies for us, that message will mean something.

If we just look at Jesus and say, oh, what a nice teacher. What wise, helpful words. That's not enough. It's not enough. If Jesus is all-wise, when he is crowned with thorns and crucified, then he is fulfilling God's wisdom.

[29 : 03] He's not just a fool that made a mistake. If Jesus is divine and God, when he is raised to life again three days later, he has proven that every word he says comes true.

And it matters that we listen to his words. And we must repent of going our own way, our foolish wisdom chasing. And we must turn to God's wisest king instead, King Jesus.

All right? This is the twist, I think, that people like Gandhi, Karl Marx, many people who love the Sermon on the Mount, okay, they love the ethical teaching. They love all this good stuff, how to be good.

Even the Dalai Lama likes some of the Sermon on the Mount. This is the twist. They see all this just as good morals, but it's not enough. Jesus says, these are my words.

And he's basically implying, I'm your king. You must follow me. And when you don't build your life on the foundation of Jesus, then you are a foolish builder.

[30 : 06] I mean, think about those houses, right? Surely, we all love real estate these days. Perhaps the foolish man actually had a better house, right? He didn't have to dig up the foundation as much. So probably his house probably looked nicer than that one.

Probably had three stories. I don't know, okay? Probably had more time to really flesh out the house and make it really, really good. Surely, surely, on the outside, right, all that fasting and giving that the Pharisees did, surely it looked much nicer than someone else who was building on a different foundation.

Surely the person who has rocked up to church and just pretended to be good all their life, surely that looked really nice compared to someone who struggles hard but is trying to be faithful.

And yet, Jesus says again, don't look at first appearances. Ask any homeowner and they'll tell you. The foundation is actually the part you can't see but matters the most and is the most costly to fix when it goes wrong.

No one sees your heart but it is the most essential part of you to be whole and righteous. No one sees your day-to-day obedience and following Jesus in a difficult world but that is the part that turns you and shapes you into who you are.

[31 : 23] And so friends, Jesus' final warning is this, discern and decide on your foundation. Build your house on the rock. Discipleship, following Jesus, is not found just in words or in doing stuff or sounding religious.

Not even in performing miraculous deeds. It's by doing the will of the Father slowly, quietly, faithfully as Jesus taught.

So as this year draws to a close, as 2021 starts to peek through, it's worth asking, right? How are we doing as followers of Jesus?

Are we building our lives on a shaky foundation? Are we maybe just doing morality for show? Just looking like we are good people but we can't even keep our own standards up let alone God's standards.

Are we chasing earthly treasure, trying to build on a foundation that really is sinking sand? Or are we committed to building our lives on the rock of Jesus Christ?

[32 : 25] His hard but good demands on our life and our relationships. His call for deeper righteousness to fulfill all of God's wisdom. The tenderness of His care.

Are we committed to building our life on that foundation instead? Friends, it's worth reflecting as we end the year, right? Because if we hear and if we obey Jesus' voice, God promises us we are building our life on the right foundation.

No matter what other people say, no matter what it looks like, even if it's not perfect, even if it's costly. And one day, there will be a final storm.

A final storm, where the winds will blow and there will be a great crash, a final judgment, as it were, where you and I must stand before our Creator.

And on that day, either we will be swept away for foolishly denying Jesus, or we will be counted as part of His family because we built our life on the words and actions of Christ.

[33 : 30] And so let me go back to person number three. As Harry listened quietly to someone explaining to him the good news, he wondered what his mum and dad would think.

He started to think, well, what would my friends say if I started to follow Jesus and openly say I'm a Christian? He even wondered, could Jesus really fill the longings of his heart and make him whole?

But he discerned and he decided that a new life in Jesus was the foundation that he wanted and needed. So what about you? Who offers the true wisdom that you'll listen to?

Whose will should you be building your life upon? And who will you follow from the depths of your heart? Let's pray. Father, we reflect on the sermon.

These are hard words from the Lord Jesus as we've heard through the past six weeks. And yet, you've embraced us. We've learned so much together, but we've been challenged to seek you first, your kingdom and your righteousness.

[34 : 52] Father, I want to pray specifically for people here who do not think they are building their life on your words. Who are building their life on not a firm foundation, but a shaky one.

One that will not hold up when storms come, when struggles hit. Father, I pray for them. Would you help them to see that there are two ways to live and the way that honors and exalts themselves, that puts themselves first, will not succeed.

It will lead to destruction. Father, help them to see that your way, even though it is hard, is best. Help them to cling to your cross, to trust that you died on the cross for their sins and that the life you invite them to is hard, but it is worth everything.

Father, I pray for them. And Father, I pray for each one of us who do genuinely want to follow Jesus. Help us to keep discerning and deciding to follow you on days that are good and on days that are hard.

Help us to walk into 2021 still clinging to you, not perfect, but whole because we have you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 19] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.