

Upon whose Work are you Resting?

By Randy Williams and Jay Wegter

Introduction

“Depart from Me, I never knew you,” To these words, R. C. Sproul says, “I consider these to be the most terrifying words that ever came from the mouth of Jesus.” And indeed they are. The greatest and most dangerous of all deceptions is to be mistaken about one’s eternal destiny. For that is to be utterly deceived by one’s own presumption concerning the state of the soul. For the atheist who refuses to acknowledge God’s existence, it is a tragedy. For the Buddhist, it will be devastating to learn there isn’t another earthly life, another cycle of life in which to attempt to reach nirvana. We as Christians have learned to accept they will not be in Heaven. That’s the exclusivity of the gospel—there is only one path through one Person that brings us into the Kingdom of God. We grieve for those that reject Christ—it is tragic—but we accept their eternal destiny as God’s justice. But, that is not who Christ is talking about in our Matthew 7 passage.

Christ is talking to those who claim to believe in Him. He is speaking to those that profess to know Him and who claim to do works in His name. That’s what makes Christ’s pronouncement to them an even greater tragedy. How do you go through life, perhaps decades, thinking that you have served Him, expecting to ultimately arrive in heaven? And then, the minute after you die, you hear the worst possible news: “I never knew you. Depart from me... forever.” It is terrifying because the window of gospel grace has been permanently closed. There’s no purgatory to finish one’s purification from sin. Instead of entering heaven, through what you thought was the narrow way, your path proved to be the broad road that leads to destruction. How does this happen? We will attempt to answer that question during the course of this article.

Background context

Matthew chapter 7 is the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. The listening audience was by and large Jewish, but it is debated whether Jesus was speaking to his disciples only or was he addressing a larger group which included non-believers. In the second half of Chapter 7, beginning at verse 13, we find Christ uttering four warnings, each of these warnings contrasts the authentic with the counterfeit. All four of these warnings represent the proverbial *fork in the road*. For, one way leads to heaven and the other way leads to hell. Here is a brief review of the four warnings:

- The first starts in verse 13. Christ describes the narrow path and contrasts it with the broad path. The narrow path is hard and few find it. The broad path is wide, populous, and easy.
- In the second warning starting in verse 15, Christ contrasts good and bad fruit. These ‘bad trees’ are the deceivers; they are the wolves in sheep’s clothing, and they never stop trying to delude others.
- The third warning is our text (‘depart’) which we will open up momentarily. The fourth warning begins in verse 24. It is about the wise and the foolish builders. You know the song, *The wise man built his house upon a rock. The foolish man built his house upon the sand.*

- And now back to the third warning which is our passage. In it, Christ contrasts those who enter heaven versus those that do not. He speaks of those who are deceived, who are horribly surprised at Christ's words, 'depart from me. . .'

Our Lord's warnings here in Chapter 7 are not isolated from the remaining warnings in the Gospels. Repeatedly, Christ defines the narrow way for us. Aside from these four warnings in Matthew 7, other warnings in the Gospels include: the sheep and the goats... the wheat and the tares... the ten virgins... the parable of the sower... the good and the bad fish... and, the wedding feast guests. While they can be terrifying for us, these warnings actually express Christ's deep love for us.

Now to our text for the third warning in Matthew 7:21-23.

Point #1: A mere profession of faith by those that claim to know Christ does not ensure salvation. For, in verse 21, "***Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.***"

"Lord, Lord" is a zealous claim of familiarity. The deceived here acknowledge Christ's identity as Lord. In saying 'Lord' twice they add a note of certitude as if they know the state of their souls better than Christ does! But, evidence of salvation cannot rest in this claim alone. If we do not obey the will of God, we mock Christ in calling him Lord. How is this different than those who draped Him in a purple robe, gave Him a crown of thorns and then taunted Him by saying, "Hail, King of the Jews"? But let us not miss a significant detail here. This warning in verse 23 is not for the nominal Christian, the one who goes to church on Christmas and Easter. No, these individuals profess to be Christians, and regard themselves to be actively ministering in the name of Jesus. They could be saying, "Didn't we preach the gospel in your name? Don't we give to the church? Didn't we serve on a missions board for all those years?"

Matthew Henry, the English commentator, warns us: "If a preacher, one that cast out devils, and wrought miracles, be disowned of Christ for working iniquity; what will become of us, if we be found such? And if we be such, we shall certainly be found such." Saying you know Christ neither proves nor disproves your faith.

Point #2: Christ Himself demonstrated how narrow the way of life really is. Let me first point out a *narrowing* in verse 21. It tells us that not everyone who calls Me 'Lord' will enter heaven, but only those that do the Father's will. So this verse identifies two groups: The first group is made up of those that claim to know Christ, and the second group is made up of those that do the Father's will. Please note that in terms of what is claimed, the second group is a subset, or a part of the first group. They all claim to know Christ, but only some will them enter Heaven. That's the first narrowing. There's also a narrowing in verse 22. Here is that verse again: ***On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'***

We've already established that claiming to know Christ is not proof positive evidence of salvation. That was our first point. And, here in verse 22, we read that those that also do works in His name will not, by that activity ensure their salvation. So how does this verse narrow the way of salvation you ask? It narrows it in that neither claiming to know Christ nor doing works in His name

saves you. It seems there's a difference between doing works in Christ's name and doing the Father's will.

"On that day many will say to Me." Many will say (in other words not a small number); many are deceived. In Matthew 7:13, Christ warns us by saying: ***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.*** Again, a warning about the many. Continuing in verse 14: ***For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*** The narrow way is hard and only a few will find it. The narrow gate analogy is also referenced in Luke 13. Reading from Luke 13:23, ***And someone said to him, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' And He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'***

Notice Christ states, 'not be able'. In terms of God's sovereign, enabling grace, let's look at Matthew 22:14, for it reveals the divine vantage point in granting salvation. That verse tells us simply: ***For many are called, but few are chosen.*** Does this surprise you? It should not. How many were saved on Noah's ark? Just eight. How many were found to be righteous in Sodom? Less than ten. Or how many true disciples did Christ have during his earthly ministry? Many were healed and thousands witnessed Christ's miracles first-hand. The Gospels tell us that great crowds followed Him. So many in fact, that He often had to escape, or climb into a boat to preach. Many shouted "Hosanna!" on Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Many claimed to be His disciples. And then, just five days later, how many of same people shouted, "Crucify Him?" Even His apostles abandoned or denied Him on the night of his arrest. Those who walked with Christ had far more eye-witness, first-hand evidence of His identity than we do today, and if that evidence produced just a small number of true followers in possession of saving faith, how can we say that in today's world a massive number of people are saved? Are you among the many, or are you among the few? 'Good soil hearers' bring a harvest of good fruit to maturity (Mt 13:23). In these good soil hearers who bring to harvest, the Word of God dominates exceptionally ('they hold to the Word fast, and bear fruit with perseverance', Luke 8:15).

Point #3: Those deceived in regard to their salvation appeal to their own 'works. This point is also drawn from Matthew 7:22: Again, it reads, ***On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'*** What is that Day? It is the Day of Judgment, either when one dies, or when Christ returns. It's the Day when all pretenses pass away in an instant and one's true nature and status before God is revealed. As to the deceived, they have glanced at themselves in the mirror of truth countless times, but refused to see their true nature (Jas 1:23-24). For, if they had seen their depravity in the mirror of God's Law, they would have seen nothing but iniquity and vain hopes. For, we must note that the convicting work of the Law in the hands of God's Spirit produces a devastating guilty verdict: "The most important question that could ever be asked is: Do you know in reality the living Christ? Do you know Christ by personal revelation? The question is not: Do you read the Bible? Are you religious? The question is: Have you ever seen yourself a lost, vile sinner before a holy God? Have you ever been stripped of your self-righteousness and laid low in the dust of humility? Have you ever viewed by faith the glorious Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, all because of a direct and personal revelation to you of God the Holy Spirit?"¹ We can see from this quote by W. F. Bell that a true believer would never even think of appealing to his works as the foundation of his salvation.

On that Day of Judgment, the starkest of contrast between the unbeliever's dead works and the righteousness of Christ will be shockingly evident. Christ is not glorified by our dead works. For, according to Hebrews 9:14, dead works are the rotten fruit of a defiled conscience. The One who spoke the universe into existence doesn't need our works. He knows how feeble and vile we are. He desires a humble and contrite heart (Is 57:15). Our Lord has said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3). Christ's warning here in Matthew 7 reminds us that we do not, and cannot contribute to our own salvation. Matthew Henry puts it this way: "Grace will bring a man to heaven without working miracles but working miracles will never bring a man to heaven without grace." But for the deceived, who do not know they do not know Christ, they have not been given the gift of grace and so offer their own meager works as meriting salvation." Therefore, when the deceived are speaking of their works there is an element of boastfulness. In effect, they say "Oh Lord, look at how great our works are! With all we did, haven't we merited your favor and deserved heaven?"

None of us have any right to boast in ourselves. To the Corinthians, Paul quotes the prophet Jeremiah when he writes, *Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord* (1 Cor 1:31). God intends by His sovereign electing love to eliminate all possibility of boasting. The greatest religious lie ever told is that a human being can be good enough to get to heaven. It is the lie that every religion other than biblical Christianity will tell you. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, and even Roman Catholics all subscribe to a form of salvation which depends upon human works. Finding merit in our own works is our natural desire. Instinctively we feel as though we must have some input to our salvation, otherwise it is far too humbling for us to accept. Sadly, this false doctrine of synergy, God's works plus our own, has infected many so-called evangelical churches. According to a Lifeway Research poll a few years ago, 77% of all Americans believe that personal salvation is a result of good works.ⁱⁱ

Point #4: To those deceived, Christ reveals their works to be evil and not righteous. This point is drawn from verse 23, *And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.'* You might be wondering, aren't these works at least partial evidence of a true believer? Why aren't they good fruit? Notice carefully that the deceived do not allude to good fruit in their lives (as a result of abiding in Christ), but rather to their individual works. Their motive for works was not pure because Christ didn't know them; they did not have life in Him. He rejected them as branches that never were joined to Him (Jn 15:6).

Doing the will of God is the good fruit of being rooted in Christ, thus being a good tree. For the deceived, their tree is bad, and a bad tree can only yield bad fruit, despite appearances. The second of the four warnings in Matthew 7 speaks of this good and bad fruit. It tells us that we will know them by their fruit (7:20), but the quality of fruit is not always easy to discern. By way of illustration, consider the two builders in the fourth warning. There are two houses, one built on rock, one built on sand. From a human standpoint, they look similar because we can't immediately see their foundation. Yet, spend any time with one of these two 'builders' and the fruit will become evident whether or not that person is building upon Christ's Word by obeying it.

Let's look at Judas Iscariot. As part of the inner 12 disciples, he followed Christ for three years. Matthew recounts his betrayal of Jesus in chapter 26. And during the last supper, starting in verse 23 he writes: *And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they all stood up and exclaimed, "It's Judas!* No! That's not how it goes. Matthew tells

us *they were very sorrowful and began to say to Him one after another, Is it I, Lord?* Judas looked like a true follower. When Christ called him out, none of the other apostles knew. He appeared to love the poor, but he stole from the moneybag. He appeared to serve, but his real love wasn't Christ. Let's look at another reason why the plea of the deceived is rejected. Christ addresses their works as evil. Why? While they manifested an external show of piety, the self-deceived are still internally wicked. They are living a double life. Their natures are still spiritually dead to God. They are like the Pharisees that Christ calls out in Matthew 23. In particular verse 27: ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead man's bones.***

Though outward religious, Ephesians 2:1-3 describes the heart of every unbeliever, including the religious unregenerate as corrupt. **By contrast, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires** (Gal 5:24). The 'new man' is created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph 2:10). He is transformed. He has a new bias; he is ashamed of the sin he once loved (Rom 6:21-23). We must remember that the works of the unsaved are never righteous in God's sight. The natural man cannot do anything pleasing to God (Rom 8:6-8; 1 Cor 2:14). Scripture emphatically rejects the idea that a lost person can do anything spiritually good. Many verses prove this, but let me briefly mention two of them. Isaiah 64:6a: ***We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.***

Ephesians 4:18-19: ***They*** [that is the Gentiles or the unsaved] ***are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is total depravity.*** Their faculties are under the sway of their depraved natures. Thus, their deeds cannot be good because they come from a bad tree, one rooted in Adam. They have no living relationship with Christ; He does not know them. When a person is regenerated, new spiritual life is imparted. God grafts them into Christ and they immediately become a good tree, one rooted in Christ. At this instant, by a sovereign act of God, they enter into an intimate relationship with Christ. He knows them, they recognize His voice in the Word of the gospel and He knows them; that is mutuality (Jn 10:3-5, 27). And they endeavor to obey their Savior because they love Him (1 Pet 1:3-9; 1 Jn 4:19-20).

How are we to apply the warning of Matthew 7:21-23?

Application #1: Does our Lord want us to live in a fearful state of paralyzing doubt having only a mere probability of salvation? How can you know that your life is built upon Christ? How can you know that your life is built upon Him as the foundation of rock rather than on your own foundation of sand? How can I know if I'm deceived? or if I'm saved? John MacArthur offers four biblical tests to determine if your faith is truly from God:

1. Love. What do you love? If you are reborn, you are a new creation and this causes your affections to change as He sanctifies you. Not immediately, but over time. Have you started to love what God loves and hate what God hates? Proverbs 8:13 says, ***The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.***
2. Humility. Do you recognize your sinfulness and failures? God does not impart grace to the proud. Do you feel God's grace in your life? If so, are you overwhelmed with gratitude when

you consider the incredible gift that's been given to you? James 4:6 says, ***But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."***

3. Obedience. Not perfect, of course, but is there a longing to obey God's word? As the children memorized recently in Sunday school, Psalm 1 verses 1 and 2 say, ***Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord.***
4. And perhaps the best way to validate if you have genuine saving faith is during a trial. Maybe it's illness, death of a loved one, or even persecution. Do you stay rooted to Christ? Does your faith stay intact? Think of Job. After losing his children, his servants, and his livestock he says near the end of chapter 1, ***Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*** May we have that same faith and that it will not be shaken!

To these four tests above we would add that the indwelling Holy Spirit manifests a number of evidences of genuine salvation. A true believer is said to be a son of God who is 'led by the Spirit' (Rom 8:14). That refers not primarily to subjective leading, but to the fact that the Spirit leads the saint into doing the revealed will of God as commanded in Holy Scripture. And, because the Holy Spirit is a divine Person, He can emanate in a believer's life, love (Rom 5:5), joy (Rom 14:17), consciousness of sonship (Rom 8:15), or grief (Eph 4:30). A true believer's conscience is very sensitive to the Spirit, therefore, he knows when he is rightly 'adjusted' to the Spirit, or when he is living with unresolved sin which needs to be forsaken and confessed. The Spirit produces the fruit of Christ-likeness in a believer (Gal 5:22-23). In addition, the Holy Spirit testifies to the believer's human spirit the assurance that he belongs to Christ (Rom 8:16). Because of the Spirit's witness in the Word of God and His witness in the Christian, believers are promised that they can know for certain that they possess eternal life (1 Jn 5:11-13).

Ray Comfort, the well-known evangelist, tells this revealing story about those who are the deceived. Years ago, when Russia was under communism, two Russian guards burst into a prayer meeting, fully armed. They said, "If you are not prepared to die for your faith, get out of here!" And half of those professing Christians left. When the doors were closed, the guards put their guns down, got out their Bibles and said, "We are believers but we didn't want to risk fellowship until we sorted out the sheep from the goats."

Here is the second way I'll attempt to answer this question: How can I know if I'm deceived? We read the following in 2 Corinthians 13:5: ***Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?— unless indeed you fail to meet the test!*** How do you examine yourself? There's no specific formula, but allow me to draw from Psalm 26. These are declarations made by David to God, but I'm going to turn them into questions to earnestly ask in prayer. You may want to turn there yourself to follow along. Again, Psalm 26.

- Vindicate me, O Lord, Have I walked in integrity?
- Have I trusted in you without wavering?
- Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and my mind.
- Is your steadfast love before my eyes?

- Do I walk in your faithfulness?
- Do I sit with men of falsehood?
- Do I consort with hypocrites?
- Do I hate the assembly of evildoers?
- Do I sit with the wicked?
- Do I proclaim thanksgiving aloud and tell of all your wondrous deeds?
- Do I love the habitation of your house?
- And do I love the place where your glory dwells?

My friends, to those of you who are certain of your salvation, and to those of you who are uncertain, I urge you to examine yourself. If you doubt your salvation, there may be a good reason. Go back and check your foundation. On whose work are you resting? The worst possible deception is to be mistaken about your eternal destiny.

Application #2: This present author (Randy Williams) notes that having lived in the ‘Bible belt’ for the past 18 months, I’ve found that it is very different than San Diego. Most people here in Texas claim to be Christians, and praise God, a good number of them are truly saved. But many claim to be, but lack the biblical marks of salvation. They say they grew up church. They have said the sinner’s prayer, and they have been baptized. From a human standpoint, they are decent law-abiding citizens and faithful church-goers. They may be members of a Bible study, tithers, and serve in other ways. But as we’ve discussed, these alone are not evidence of true saving faith.

So, let me pose a question to the true believers: will this message change how you interact with those who profess to be Christians? I pray that it does, and that you consider the following. I believe you should probe someone’s claim to faith, lovingly and gently, but in boldness and truth. Do not assume someone is saved because he appears to be a good person or because of his profession to be a Christian. Ask them about the source of the certainty of their salvation? Do they examine themselves? Take them to Matthew chapter seven. Are they resting solely on the shed blood of Jesus Christ, or upon their own works? In addition, if their profession doesn’t match their lifestyle, you should be willing to bring it up. Call them out on it. Do it privately and carefully, but do not overlook it. When you broach the subject, a true believer should repent, convicted by the Holy Spirit. Reprove a wise man and he will love you (Prov 9:8a). But, some may respond with “Who are you to judge? Or, who are you to question my faith!?!” I say that’s a red flag as to whether they are in Christ. 1 John 2:4 tells us *Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*

I know doing this is not popular. Many churches would probably reject it. I’m preaching this to myself as much as I am to all of you. I admit, I have fallen short. We don’t like confrontation; we don’t think it’s kind. 100 years of secular psychology have made us humanists who have replaced loving confrontation with, “I’m okay, you’re okay.” Exercising loving admonishment is hard to do. Welcome to the narrow road! Dr. Steven Lawson says: “The hardest person to reach with the gospel is the one who thinks he is saved, but is not. He cannot be converted until he knows he is lost. Until then, he does not know that he does not know.”

By way of illustration, imagine that you are going skydiving. As you watch the packing of the parachutes, you notice a big rip in one of the chutes as it’s being packed. You’re not sure what to say

and so you don't say anything. While you're up in the plane, you look across at a man with that parachute on his back. You can feel his excitement. You worry that if you tell them, you'll burst his bubble. You'll ruin his day. Most likely, no one will be allowed to jump. Do you keep it to yourself? You must do the right thing! You need to say something. If you truly love that other person, you must tell him. This is an issue of the source of one's reliance; either Christ or self, either rock or sand. If one's source of reliance is not revealed in this life, it will be revealed on Judgment Day. Christ warned us—we must warn others, and we must do it while their window of grace is still open.

Summary

We must remember that being saved is not just knowing who Christ is. It's not working just a little harder, dedicating yourself to Him more, or somehow eking out just another 2% of obedience. No, being saved is a personal and mutually intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. If you do not have this relationship, drop all your pretenses and run to the cross, humbly begging for mercy. Plead with Him to search your heart and reveal how He sees your sin. Pray for the divine grace needed to repent from your sins. Do not make a savior out of imaginary grace or religious devotion. Only Christ can replace your sandy foundation.

For those that are truly saved, never forget that you were once polluted and vile. You were a self-deceived rebel. And then without anything to merit it, God hand-picked you, plucking you out of the broad way, out of the world's gutter and placed you on the narrow road giving you well-marked boundaries. By giving you a new nature, He replaced your bad tree with a good one, enabling you to produce good fruit. By the indwelling Spirit at work in your new nature, He has let you see that you were a former sand builder. But, by His grace, you have been granted a new foundation, anchored in Him, our rock. Thank you, my Savior. For instead of hearing the most frightful words, "I never knew you; depart from me," you will instead be greeted into Heaven with, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt 25:23).

End Notes:

ⁱ W. F. Bell, "*Do you know Christ by personal revelation?*" -- Chapel Library

ⁱⁱ <https://www.rotw.com/get-facts/77-all-americans-believe-personal-salvation-result-good-works>