

Knowing the Lord (Matt. 7:21–23)

By Jacob D. Gerber

If we have listened to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount with half-hearted disinterest, Jesus now makes the weightiness of his words abundantly clear. He has not been teaching merely pious advice that we may evaluate for ourselves, to accept or to reject at our pleasure. Rather, Jesus has been teaching us exactly how we will be evaluated on the last day. Furthermore, he here reveals the reason that he can make such pronouncements: because he himself will be the Lord, the Judge of all the living and the death. As Jesus begins to close this great Sermon, he impresses upon us a crucial point that we must consider if we are to be saved: *neither words nor works can atone for your lawlessness.*

Not by Words Alone (Matt. 7:21)

In v. 21, Jesus gives a new warning: “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.” Here, the contrast is between the *speaks* (ὁ λέγων; *ho legōn*) and the *doers* (ὁ ποιῶν; *ho poiōn*).¹ Jesus explains that calling him “Lord” is insufficient; beyond that, Jesus demands that we do his heavenly Father’s will. In context, it is clear that Jesus means the same thing here by “[doing] the will of my Father who is in heaven” as he meant when he spoke about the “good fruit” in Matt. 7:16–20.² So, while the New Testament does sometimes speak about someone’s doctrine as their fruit, it is clear that Jesus here insists that our doctrine must extend beyond merely *professing* Jesus’ Lordship to *submitting* to his Lordship in every area of our lives.³ This does not mean that our obedience is what earns something from Jesus, but rather that *doing* (not merely *saying*) the will of our heavenly Father is the only reliable evidence that there exists a true connection between us and Jesus.⁴ We are not saved by words alone, as though mere words were magical incantations to protect us from God’s wrath.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is never described as “the Lord” (ὁ κύριος; *ho kurios*), but he is frequently addressed by other people as “lord” (κύριε; *kurie*), which does not so much offer any kind of a theological confession, but only suggests respect for Jesus’ authority and status as a teacher.⁵ Still, Jesus does not speak here of those who cry out to get his attention on the roads of Galilee, but those

¹ “The two durative present participles λέγων and ποιῶν describe customary actions.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 305.)

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 133.

³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 375.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 305.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 293.

who will acknowledge his lordship as they seek to enter the “kingdom of heaven.”⁶ These high stakes explain the “fervency” of the repeated title, “Lord, Lord.”⁷

It is interesting to consider how what Jesus says here in v. 21 builds on his previous warnings. William Hendriksen subtitles this section, “The End of the Way,” drawing forward Jesus’ warnings about the easy way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13).⁸ Further, Jesus is clearing building off of what he said about the false prophets (Matt. 7:15). In part, John Calvin observes that Jesus may be distinguishing between two different kinds of threats to the flock: “Christ extends his discourse farther: for he speaks not only of false prophets, who rush upon the flock to tear and devour, but of hirelings, who insinuate themselves, under fair appearances, as pastors, though they have no feeling of piety.”⁹ Beyond this, Hendriksen also rightly notes that such pastors who speak one according to truth, but act according to a lie, are as bad as those who speak and act according to a lie: “A man who speaks the truth but acts the lie is also in a sense a false prophet.”¹⁰

Not by Works Alone (Matt. 7:22)

Yet, while Jesus says that it will be the *doers* who enter the kingdom of heaven, he does not mean that *all* doers will qualify: “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?’” (v. 22). The phrase “on that day” is a common phrase referring to the day of the Lord, a day when God will bring judgment upon the whole world (Isa. 2:20; Amos 8:9; 9:11; Zeph. 1:10, 14; Zech. 14:4; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:8).¹¹ On that day of judgment, Jesus warns that prophesying, casting out demons, and even “many mighty works” will not gain their entry into the kingdom of heaven. What is the problem? D. A. Carson clarifies that there “is no reason to judge their claims false; their claims are not false but insufficient.”¹² Just as we are not saved by words alone, so also we are not saved by works alone. Words are not magical, and works are not meritorious to earn salvation from God.

Why are their claims insufficient? Jesus has already told us: their deeds—as numerous and as impressive as they may be, and done in Christ’s name—are the bad fruit of diseased trees (Matt. 7:17, 18). They are the works of the wide gate and the easy way (Matt. 7:13). This is an astonishing, frightening qualification! On the day of judgment, some will plead the works that they have done as evidence of their obedience to Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus will reveal that they have been moving in the entirely wrong direction and bearing the wrong kind of fruit. Not all those who are productive in ministry will possess the kingdom of heaven! This calls for careful, sober, and critical self-reflection.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 293.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 228.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 374.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:367.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 375.

¹¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 187.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 229.

But By Christ's Blood and Righteousness Alone (Matt. 7:23)

Jesus' response to those seeking admittance into the kingdom of heaven is stunning: "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" First, we should not miss the remarkable claim that Jesus makes here: "he speaks of himself as the Judge and Lord before whom even the false prophets and their followers must appear at the last day. So spoke neither Moses nor any of the prophets including the Baptist."¹³ While not everyone understands the nature of his lordship now, the day will come when every knee will bow to his name, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10–11). In a sermon where Jesus has largely kept his own position and role in the background, here his authority as Judge of all the earth bursts into the foreground.

Second, it is interesting how Jesus evaluates the claims of those who seek entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Calvin observes that the specific word Jesus uses to describe his response is the word "confess" (ὁμολογήσω; *homologēsō*; ESV: "declare"). In this, Calvin observes a counter-confession: "Christ appears to allude to the vain boasting, by which hypocrites now vaunt themselves. 'They indeed have *confessed* me with the tongue, and imagine that they have fully discharged their duty....But I too will *confess* on the opposite side, that their profession is deceitful and false.' And what is contained in Christ's confession? That he never reckoned them among his own people, even at the time when they boasted that they were the pillars of the church."¹⁴

Third, far from approving of the great works that these people boast from their lives, Jesus rebukes them as "workers of lawlessness." This unexpected judgment follows the shock of what the prophet Isaiah had written: "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6). What they held out as their righteousness, Jesus dismisses as lawlessness—i.e., as a polluted garment. By "lawlessness," Jesus does not merely mean "wrongdoing," but much more: "the term points to a refusal to submit to the law of God; all the wrongdoing follow inevitably from this refusal. The words of these people may be good words, but their lives are lawless."¹⁵

Through this short passage, Jesus has annihilated every human basis for salvation. He began by saying that we cannot be saved by *words* alone—i.e., through professing him as our Lord. Then, he insisted that we are not saved by *works* alone—i.e., through performing great works in his name. Ultimately, we have a problem of lawlessness that we cannot outrun by our words or our works. What hope, then, do we have? While Jesus' authority as Judge may come into the foreground of his teaching here, he still leaves the most significant part of his work veiled. Namely, Jesus came to suffer and die for our lawlessness, and to accomplish the perfect righteousness that we failed to accomplish. Further, Jesus promises to give forgiveness of sins and his own personal righteousness to all those who turn from their sin in repentance and look to him by faith—that is for those who *know* him, and who are *known by* him. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 308.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:368.

¹⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 181.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Jesus contrast the “sayers” and the “doers” in v. 21? Why does Jesus say that calling him “Lord, Lord” will not be sufficient for salvation on the last day? How does doing the Father’s will relate to the fruit that Jesus exhorted us to produce in Matthew 7:16–20? How do those who say “Lord, Lord” without doing the Father’s will relate to the false prophets that Jesus warned us about in Matthew. 7:15?
2. If Jesus tells us in v. 21 that doing the Father’s will is essential for salvation, why does Jesus reject those who do great deeds in his name in vv. 22–23? Why are good works insufficient for our salvation? Why are we so tempted to believe that words are magical, and that works are meritorious for our salvation? Why does Jesus say that our words and works are actually powerless to save, regardless of how impressive they may be?
3. What does Jesus mean when he says, “I never knew you” (v. 23)? What does it mean for Jesus to “know” us in the way he speaks about there? How can you know whether Jesus knows you? Why does Jesus describe those who do such great miracles as “workers of lawlessness” (v. 23)? What is lawlessness? Why does lawlessness have such a powerful, condemning role so as to outweigh the best of our words and works?
4. In what ways are you tempted to trust in your words for salvation? How might you be tempted to trust in your confession of faith more than you trust in Jesus, whom you confess? In what ways are you tempted to trust in your works for salvation? What is the difference between seeing our words and works as the *roots* of our salvation, and as the *fruits* of our salvation? At the end of the day, what are you leaning on for your salvation?