

How do we know who belongs to Jesus and who does not? We might say it's those who say that they believe in Jesus, those who say that he is their Lord. Surely, they are the ones who belong to him! And that's a good thing. Absolutely, it's a good thing. It is good to confess our faith in Jesus, especially in front of the world. That can certainly be a sign of faith. But Jesus tells us that words all by themselves are not enough. Words can be just words. It is what we do that makes the difference. It is what we do that never fails to show the truth of our hearts. That's how we know who belongs to Jesus and who does not.

So Jesus, then, in our Gospel reading is coming to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. And as he's coming to the conclusion of that sermon, he wants to insist on how important it is for us to listen to what he has to say. And so he uses four different examples to do so. Our reading for today is two of them, but we want to look at all four of them together.

So Jesus begins by saying 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." So everyone in the world, then, Jesus says, is in one of two groups: those who enter by the wide gate and those who enter by the narrow gate. Those who enter by the wide gate are the unbelievers, those who don't even pretend to listen to Jesus. They have no interest in following him. They want to go their own way. We as Christians, of course, are called to bring the Gospel to them, to tell them about Jesus Christ so they could turn from their wicked ways and live. But the sad reality, Christians, is that so many people do not believe in Jesus, and so they walk the wide way that leads to destruction. They walk the wide way that leads into hell. But those who walk the narrow way are those who listen to Jesus, who call on him, and who do what he says. Through Jesus, they are entering into the narrow gate. Because of Jesus, they are entering into the kingdom of heaven. Listening to Jesus and doing what he says makes all the difference here.

But Jesus goes on to another example. What about those who claim to be Christians, who claim to be a part of the Church, but are only pretending to do so? In reality, they want nothing to do with Jesus. Jesus calls them false prophets, those who speak lies in the name of God. Those who pervert God's Word into something other than what it actually is. Even if they may seem like they are a part of the Church, in reality they are not. But they may seem like it! By all means. There's many a false prophet out there who seems like a really nice guy, who seems to be godly, who seems to be very serious about the Word, who seems to know the truth of what the Lord says. And yet in reality, they deny the Bible, and they turn away from it, especially in ways that the world likes to hear.

So how do we know, then? How do we know who belongs to Jesus and who doesn't? By what they do. It is their fruits that show the false prophet. It is their actions that show the truth of their hearts. Jesus says in verse 18: "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit." The fruits make all the difference!

Now, it is important to say here that Jesus is talking about over the long term, about repeated actions. Because we don't want to get hung up on a single word or a single thing that somebody does. Because even someone who is godly will trip up from time to time and say the wrong thing. And Christians stumble and fall into sin all the time. That's just the reality of living in this body. But it's the people who refuse to turn away from these things, who keep coming back to it,

who are told to repent of it and yet do not that Jesus is talking about here. They are consistent in what they are doing, and that is what it means by showing their fruits. But the same is also true for those who do belong to Jesus. They also show the truth of their hearts by their fruits, because a good tree produces good fruit. And the fruits of the Spirit, like love and peace and joy, show themselves in the life of the believer, of the one who actually belongs to Jesus. They listen and they do what Jesus says, and that makes all the difference here.

But what if somebody seems very sincere about following after Jesus? They say that Jesus is their Lord. They seem to be very serious. Maybe they even go to church very frequently. Surely, they must be part of the kingdom, right? Jesus shows us the truth here. It is possible to have an empty faith. Jesus says 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." Calling him Lord, as important as that is, is not enough if it does not also include doing what he says.

But how might I determine that for myself? How do I know if that's the case? Ask yourself one simple question, Christians: what does Jesus mean to me? Is Jesus just a way of making me feel better about myself? That I feel pretty bad about something that I did this week, but I know that Jesus is going to make me feel better about it, so I don't need to worry about it anymore. If Jesus is just there to silence my conscience so I don't have to listen to those voices accusing me anymore, I'm in a very dangerous position indeed. Because, Christians, Jesus certainly brings us peace. Jesus certainly brings us forgiveness. He loves to forgive those who confess their sins. But when I am forgiven, then I also want to stop doing what I was doing before. Then I also want to start doing what Jesus tells me to do. It makes a difference in how I live. If I just come to Jesus to feel better and then live the same way as before, how can I say that I'm a part of the kingdom of God? But if I come to Jesus asking him for forgiveness, and then because of that forgiveness, strive to do what he says, then I can know that I belong to him. Listening to him and doing what he says makes all the difference.

Jesus uses one more example just after our reading, beginning in verse 24. He 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." So if I build my house on the rock, then, that house is going to stand, because it has something firm to hold on to. It is solid and unmoving. But if I build my house on the sand, that house is going to fall, because it is shifting and uncertain. It has nothing firm to hold on to. But the difference between these two, Christians, is what we do. All those who hear the words of Jesus and do them are like those who build on the rock. All those who hear the words of Jesus and do not do them are like those who build on the sand. That's the difference. Listening to Jesus is the important thing. That is how we know who belongs to him and who does not.

But we might say, "But hold up a second! I thought we weren't saved by our works. I thought we weren't saved by what we do." And that is absolutely correct. We are not saved by what we do. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible is perfectly clear about that. But Jesus is not talking about how we are saved here, Christians. Jesus is talking about how we know

if we belong to him, how we know if we have faith. Because words can be just words. I can say that I believe. I can say that I want to follow Jesus. I can say that he is my Lord, and so forth. I can say any number of things. But how do I know if those words are true? By what I do. Because faith and works always go together. They're never apart from one another. You can't have faith without works or works without faith. It's impossible. The two are bound firmly together. Now, works cannot come before faith. And I think this is where we usually get hung up. Works do not come first. Faith comes first, and then works. But faith always shows itself through works. It always shows that it is there by what we are doing. This is why James says in James chapter 2: "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." Works show that faith is alive. Works show that I belong to Jesus.

And a living faith, Christians, means that I want to do what Jesus says. It means I want to listen to him. I want to listen to him, because I know that he has the words of life and truth. But that's not always easy, is it? Sometimes it's very hard to listen to Jesus, because listening to Jesus very often means that I have to change how I live. I have to stop doing this or I have to start doing that, because Jesus told me to do it. And that can be very hard. It's hard because of our sin. Our sin doesn't want to change. Our sin wants to keep going the way that it's always been going and not listen to Jesus. And that's why it can be so hard to forgive somebody who has hurt us, even though Jesus tells us to do it. That's why it can be so hard to love our enemies, even though Jesus tells us to do it. That's why it can be so hard to say that this is the truth to someone else when I know that it's going to hurt their feelings to hear it, even though Jesus tells us to do it. Listening to Jesus may be the hardest thing that we ever have to do.

But when we have a living faith, Christians, then I want to do it because of my love for him. Because did not Jesus do the hardest thing of all in forgiving us? In dying for our sins so that we would belong to him forever? We love because he first loved us. We forgive because he first forgave us. We listen to him and do what he says, because he is our Lord and because we love him. And that is why we strive after him in everything, because of what he has done for us.

So Christians, let us listen to Jesus. Even if it's the hardest thing that we ever have to do, let us do what he says, because he first loved us and made us his own forever. Listen to him and do what he says, because he is your loving Lord.

Let us pray. Almighty Father, who showed your love for us in sending us your Son, help us to always listen to your voice and to do what you say, trusting in you above all things. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.