

BE TRULY PRODUCTIVE**MATTHEW 7:13-29**

Did you hear about the three friends who decided to go deer hunting together: a lawyer, a doctor, and a preacher? As they were walking in the woods, along came a big buck. The three of them shot at the deer simultaneously. Immediately the buck dropped to the ground and all three of them rushed over to it. Upon reaching it, however, they couldn't determine whose shot actually killed the deer. A heated debate ensued. A few minutes later a game officer came by and asked, "What's the problem?" The doctor told him that they were debating who shot the buck. The officer took a look at the buck and within a few seconds, he said with much confidence, "The preacher shot the buck!" They all wondered how he had figured that out so quickly. The officer said, "That's easy. The bullet went in one ear and out the other."

If the words of this preacher go in one of your ears and out the other, it's probably no big deal. But if you ignore the words of Jesus, the greatest and ultimate preacher of all time, you have made the most serious mistake in all of life. Today we conclude our study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. It seems to me that Jesus addresses what it means to be truly productive in life in these final verses. Being productive matters to most human beings. You want your life to count for something, yes? You want to do things that matter and have significance, right? God put that desire in your heart and mine. No one wants you to be truly productive more than God Himself. So, please listen carefully to the final words of Jesus' sermon. Jesus was a wonderful communicator. He could take the things of everyday life and pull out all sorts of incredible, eternal truths from them. There are several images or metaphors that Jesus uses here – roads and gates, trees and fruit, houses and hurricanes – all of which help us understand some essential truths about God, human beings, life, death, Heaven, and Hell. Here's the bottom line: God wants your life to be truly productive. Let's take Jesus' images or metaphors and finish this statement in three ways. First of all, your life will be truly productive if...

YOU CHOOSE THE RIGHT ROAD.

Again, Jesus says, "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it." (Mt 7:13-14 NLT) Jesus underlined the fact that every person is called to make a decisive decision about who Jesus is and whether you will follow Him. Notice that Jesus taught there are only two roads a person can travel in this life when it comes to religion, spirituality, or having a faith of some kind. Yes, there is out there a bewildering multitude of religions, belief systems, philosophies, and individual opinions about spirituality. True enough! It's easy to conclude that all these multiple roads, many highways, and numerous paths you can travel in life, spiritually speaking, get you to the same place. Jesus said, in reality, there are just two roads. There's the right road and the wrong road. The right road is about truth. The wrong road is about what's false.

Notice, also, that Jesus taught there are only two destinations. The right road leads to the one true God and life. The wrong road leads away from the one true God and ends in destruction. Contrary to what our culture preaches every day, there are not all kinds of different pathways that get you to God. You don't get to God on the Hindu road, the Muslim road, the Buddhist road, the "I follow the Golden Rule" road, the "I was born in America" road, or even the "I had parents who took me to church" road. You only ever get to God and life by personally choosing to walk down the Jesus road.

These words of Jesus are just one of many examples where He can be so frustratingly exclusive. Many people today want to re-make Jesus into this tolerant, anything goes, and anything is acceptable kind of teacher. When I hear a person describe Jesus like that I know he or she has never actually read the New Testament! Jesus made it only too clear that no one ever gets to God except through Him. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (Jo 14:6 NLT) Jesus mentions a gate in these verses, too. What or who is that? On another occasion, Jesus said, "Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved." (Jo 10:9 NLT) Most people today resist and resent that kind of exclusivity. They think it sounds arrogant. But truth, by its very nature, is exclusive. Jesus was simply being truthful about what leads people to life and real productivity in life.

Notice, also, that Jesus said both the right road – and the gate which opens on to the right road – are narrow rather than broad. Now, why is that? And why is the road that leads away from God and to destruction described here as broad? The road that leads away from God is broad, roomy, and spacious because it allows for a great diversity of opinions about God and how to live life, a multitude of alternative lifestyles, and many different ways of thinking. It's very tolerant, accepting, and permissive. You need lots of room for all that stuff! In fact, the road is so wide because it tries to accommodate everyone and everything. You don't have to leave anything behind – not your pride, not your sins, not your self-centeredness, and not your selfish ambitions.

The road that leads to God and life, however, is very narrow in comparison. Imagine the gate to this road as a turnstile – there's room for just one person to go through at a time. The road itself has very clear boundaries established by Jesus Himself and a book called the Bible. That book defines truth and establishes how you're to conduct your life. There's a narrowness to this road, too. You have to leave many things behind if you want to get on down this road at all! All kinds of "luggage" has to be left behind – pride, patterns of sin, self-centeredness, the love of money and things, selfish ambition – just to name a few. There's just not enough room on this road for all that extra and unnecessary baggage. You won't be able to get most of that extra stuff through the gate much less carry it when you start down the road that leads to life!

Here's one great result of walking down that narrow road: your life becomes simpler and more focused in one direction. Ask a professional athlete, a great musician, a gifted artist, or a successful business person how he or she reached the top, and you'll hear that he or she deliberately narrowed their interests in life so they could excel and become effective in a chosen, specific area. Celebrate the power of the narrow not the

broad! When a little gasoline is confined to the narrow walls of an engine cylinder, it will effectively power a car. Too much gas and it will flood the engine. When a river is channeled narrowly and properly, it produces electricity. Otherwise, it's just a lot of water. There's a spiritual parallel. Some people want to dabble in this spiritually and in that spiritually. They pride themselves on being broad-minded. But it's a choice that ends in destruction. A person who is in the Kingdom of God has narrowed himself or herself down to the essential reality: Jesus Christ. And that choice leads to life now and forever. Jesus said you must make a decision. He never said, "Consider Me. Respect Me. Admire Me." Instead, Jesus said, "Follow Me. Give Me your life. Give Me your past, present, and future. Trust Me for everything." You can't travel down two different roads at the same time. You must choose on which road you will walk.

Why is this choice so important? Because your decision determines your destination. If you choose the wrong road it will lead to Hell – a very real place where God is absent, where sin, evil, and bitter regret reign supreme, and where unimaginable anguish and loneliness are experienced eternally. If you choose the right road it will lead to Heaven – also a very real place where God dwells eternally, where peace, love, joy and contentment are always present, and where sin, pain, and tears of sadness never make an appearance. That's the primary reason we're encouraging you to pray for and then invite people who need Jesus to any and all of the Christmas events. The fact is that they're on the wrong road of life and they're headed for destruction. No, the Christmas events themselves won't save them. But as you intentionally develop an authentic relationship with them by doing something fun and uplifting together, God might just give you the opportunity to help them pick the right road eventually. If you want to live a productive life, you must get and stay on the right road. And to get on the right road, you have to go through one very narrow gate: Jesus Christ. A second image leads to a second truth. Your life will be truly productive if ...

YOU BEAR THE RIGHT FRUIT.

That's the prevailing image in v. 15-23. Jesus warned us against false prophets in those verses. What's a false prophet? A crooked spiritual leader. Jesus pointed out an uncomfortable truth. While many spiritual leaders – from pastors of local churches to authors or speakers who have a national audience – are sincere men and women of God, some are twisted. These spiritual leaders aren't sent by God at all, but rather by the devil himself. Jesus said these false prophets look like fellow followers of Jesus – like fellow sheep in the Christian flock – but in reality they're like wolves dressed up in disguise to look like sheep. A wolf wants to kill and eat sheep. A false prophet wants to destroy and take advantage of God's people.

Not every spiritual leader is sent by God. What should you look for? The first and greatest requirement is evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in that leader's life. Do you see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control? Do you see integrity? Do you see godly character? Sometimes people become spiritual leaders because they're great communicators, or they possess charismatic personalities, or because they have tremendous organizational abilities.

Those can be very useful attributes, but they're no substitute for the fruit of the Holy Spirit, or for integrity, or for godly character.

Is Jesus just talking about spiritual leaders here? Absolutely not! Jesus said something here that every one of His followers needs to come to grips with. For instance, Jesus implied that just believing certain truths about God is not enough. On Judgment Day there will be people who believed the right things and yet Jesus will turn to them and say, "I never knew you." Isn't believing the right things about God important? Of course! But it's no substitute for an authentic relationship with God through His Son, Jesus.

Jesus said serving God is not enough. He implies that on Judgment Day there will be people who seemingly did great things for God and yet Jesus will turn to them and say, "I never knew you. Who are you?" Imagine that! Men and women who preached stirring messages, or built great churches, or helped create Christian colleges or hospitals, or even dabbled in the miraculous like casting out demons or healing people, but Jesus will say to them, "I never knew you. You don't belong to Me." That's a sobering thought! I can only conclude from Jesus' words that believing or even doing the right things can never substitute for being a certain kind of person before God.

Or let me put it another way. Jesus taught that who you are in Him matters far more than what you believe about Him or what you do for Him. Isn't that the essential point behind this image of trees and the kind of fruit they bear? God's priority is always about the transformation of your character. More than anything else, He wants you to be like His Son, Jesus, in your attitudes and in your actions. True productivity in God's eyes is measured by how these questions get answered: Is your relationship with Jesus real and alive today? Is that relationship growing? Are you more surrendered to Jesus than you were a year ago? Are you easier to live with? Do others truly see the life of Jesus in you? Is finding out and doing the will of God your supreme concern?

Danny Foley just wanted to be part of the University of Virginia's men's basketball team—even if that meant faking his way onto the court. Danny noticed that all of the team's assistant coaches wore the same suit with a bright orange tie. So, about a year and half ago, before Virginia's conference championship game against Duke, he and his friends went shopping. He found everything he needed at Walmart—a suit, dress shoes, a white dress shirt, and that orange tie. The next morning, he bought cheap tickets just to get in the door and headed to the game. During a TV timeout, Danny made his move, confidently marching past an usher, behind the cheerleaders, and onto the court where he joined the team's huddle. Virginia won the game, but Danny went for an even bigger thrill. Danny joined his "teammates" in the handshake line. As the confetti fell around him, Danny got to shake hands with "Coach K," the legendary coach for Duke. Here's Danny wearing a championship t-shirt over his suit and smiling in the middle of the confetti-covered arena. After celebrating with coaches and players, Danny's prank was finally exposed by a member of Virginia's staff. But Danny quickly climbed the railings and disappeared into the stands.

I wonder if you're faking your way through the Christian faith. Have you just bought the suit and tie and never really joined the team? Are you really a new person in Jesus, or are you just the same person with a new tie? Is it possible that there's a person here today who believes the Bible is true, believes that Jesus died and rose again, who attends church regularly, who's a member of this church - a moral, decent, upright person -, but to whom Jesus will one day turn and say with great sorrow, "I never knew you"? Sadly, it is possible. The founder of the Salvation Army church and organization was a man by the name of William Booth. When he was asked the secret of his amazing life and of his great ministry for Jesus, he made this simple statement, "I told the Lord that He could have all that there is of William Booth." That's what God is after. That's what Jesus is talking about here. You have to be the right kind of tree to bear the right kind of fruit. Only God can ever change you or me from the wrong kind of tree into the right kind of tree so that you bear the right kind of fruit. Consider a third and final image. Your life will be truly productive if ...

YOU BUILD THE RIGHT HOUSE.

Jesus closes His sermon by telling a story about houses and hurricanes. During the bone dry summer months in Palestine, rivers often dry up and leave sandy stretches of real estate. It was an inviting place to build a house. Two men decided to build homes on a dry, sandy riverbed. One guy just built his house on the sand with little or no foundation. The other man realized sand wasn't the proper foundation for his new home. He dug down until he hit rock and then he built his house. When the winter months came, rain returned to Palestine and those dry riverbeds sometimes became raging torrents of water. Both houses flooded, but only one stood up to the flood water because it was built on rock.

Notice some interesting similarities between those two houses. Both houses were built in the same area and looked alike at least from the foundation up. Both homes faced the same crises – rain, floods, wind. The houses are a symbol of your life and mine for Jesus. All of us here today have lives that are more similar than different. We have the same basic needs in life: to love and be loved, purpose, forgiveness, contentment, joy. We face the same sorts of storms in life: illness, loss, disappointment, stress, broken relationships, and grief. But there are some differences between the two houses in Jesus' story. One was built inadequately because its builder wanted to avoid the hard work of putting in a proper foundation. He was in a hurry. Digging out a foundation was hard work – tedious, back-breaking, sweaty. This man said to himself, "Everything's going to be OK. No need to get bogged down worrying about a foundation." The other house was far sturdier and better built because its builder understood the importance of a proper foundation. He knew that if the foundation was wrong, the whole house would be wrong. He said to himself, "I may not know everything about construction, but I know that a proper foundation will ensure that my house lasts."

What is Jesus saying? The most important part of your life is the foundation upon which you're built. The Bible says, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 3:11 NLT) Well, the fact is that you can, but not a

life that will last! That's the point. Fools build their lives on the shifting sands of their own intelligence, ability, and hard work. Fools are too busy for God and the things of God. Fools never want to work hard at anything spiritual. They think they're too busy to pray, too much in a hurry to study the Bible, and too preoccupied to share Jesus with others. They say to themselves, "I'm OK, spiritually. My biggest priority is just to enjoy life. After all, God exists to love me and take care of my problems." The wise, however, know that without Jesus as the foundation of their lives, nothing about their lives will ever be sturdy or sure. They confess their need for Jesus. They obey Him from their hearts. They're all about God's mission and purpose. They love God for God's sake. The wise are never lazy, but they're never too busy for God either. They say to themselves, "I know I have very little real control over my own life, but I know if I build my life on Jesus, it will survive any storm."

Storms hit both houses in Jesus' story. Storms in life are inevitable. Storms will blow into your life, my life, and every life. And the storms of life will reveal the foundation upon which your life is built. If you haven't built your life on Christ the solid Rock, you'll crash and people will be able to hear the crash for miles around. But if you've built your life on Christ the solid Rock, your life might sway and creak a bit under the stress of life's storms, but you won't crumble. There's no such thing as a storm-free life. The rains, the floods, and the winds of life will reveal the truth of where and in whom you stand. My friend, what will happen when the storms of life come blowing and blustering their way into your life? You can't dodge every hurricane in life. Illness, death, divorce, disappointment, problems with your kids, loss of a job, financial setback – just to name a few storms in life. When the winds and rain come at you with hurricane force, will your life stand up? Storms reveal if you're built on Jesus or not.

Wilson Chen was an officer in the South Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War. After the Viet Cong takeover of the entire country in 1975, Chen was sentenced to go through a ten day political and labor course. Those ten days turned into five years of imprisonment in the harshest kind of conditions. Chen was a follower of Jesus, but he soon discovered that his faith didn't save him from torture and dehumanizing treatment. Every day he spent long, hard hours planting crops. He was given just enough rice to sustain his life. Malnutrition attacked his body. To avoid starvation he ate rats, toads, and insects. He was cut off from his family – allowed only one letter a month and two visits a year. While Chen was in prison, he learned that his fiancé gave up on him and married someone else. But somehow in the midst of all that pain, heartache, and hopelessness, Wilson Chen hung on to Jesus for dear life. He managed somehow to get a Bible and he read it. He witnessed to and prayed for other prisoners. In fact, three prisoners chose to begin walking on the Jesus road because of Chen's witness. After his release, Wilson Chen said, "It was hope in the Lord Jesus Christ that kept me alive. Looking back, I can see that I experienced God's love more when I was in the concentration camp than at any time in life." You ask, "How is that possible?" Because Wilson Chen built his life on and into Christ, the solid Rock. Jesus was his foundation. And when the storms of life came up against him, he stood.

Don't let the words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount go in one ear and out the other. If you want to live a truly productive life, you must choose the right road. You must bear the right fruit. You must build the right house.