

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

July 4, 2021

Text: Luke 5:1–11

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today's appointed gospel reading teaches us the crowds were pressing in upon Jesus because He was preaching the word of God. He has already performed miracles. Certainly this grabbed people's attention. But Luke wrote the crowd wanted to hear God's Word. The preaching of Jesus was different from the teaching of the Pharisees. He spoke with authority. And Jesus proclaimed God's love, grace, and forgiveness. So they pressed in upon Him all the more. They were hungry for the Gospel.

Jesus borrowed Simon Peter's boat so that He could preach more easily to the ever-growing crowd. Peter's boat became a floating pulpit on the Sea of Gennesaret, better known to us as the Sea of Galilee. We don't know exactly what Jesus said nor do we know how long He preached. At this point in Luke's gospel, those details aren't important. This miraculous event has different purposes. It teaches us 1) what kind of people Jesus calls to be His disciples and 2) how people become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. And these are power lessons indeed, so powerful, they impact each one of us to this very day. Let's consider the details.

Once Jesus had finished His preaching and teaching, Jesus turned to Simon and, according to vs. 4, instructed him to "put out into the deep and let down the nets for a catch." Peter was confused. He's a professional fisherman. He knows from past experience when to fish and when not to fish on the Sea of Galilee. And the daytime is definitely NOT the time for fishing. In vs. 5, Peter says, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." It's a fool's errand but Jesus did heal Peter's his mother-in-law (Luke 3:38–39), so the least Peter can do is humor Jesus and do what He says. Even at this point, we need to recognize that things happen because of Jesus' word. When He speaks, no matter how non-sensical it may seem, wondrous things happen.

Peter let down the nets. Suddenly, they became incredibly heavy. They're filled with fish to such an extent they are starting to break (vs. 6). This is a catch of a lifetime. Peter signaled to his partners to come quickly and help him lest he lose this great

catch. The second boat arrives. The men worked feverishly to get the fish out of the net into the boats. But the fish keep coming. According to vs. 7, both boats began to sink because they were so full of fish caught in obedience to Christ's Word even though it was the wrong time of day and in the wrong part of the Sea of Galilee.

Peter had been working feverishly to bring in the fish. And suddenly, in a moment of transcendent clarity, Peter realized that Jesus was no ordinary man. And this great catch of fish was no ordinary stroke of good fortune. This is a divine encounter. God is up close and personal, Jesus the incarnate Son of God. He's in the boat looking at Peter. In one sense, Peter's trapped. He's in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. You just can't walk or run away.

Peter was terrified. What started out as a dream-come-true catch of a lifetime has now spiraled out of control. Peter's afraid because he's starting to get an idea of who Jesus really is. He's holy, righteous, and pure. He has power over demons and diseases—he's seen that already— but now, Peter witnesses Jesus' power over creation itself. He knows where the fish are, commands them to enter the net, and they obey. All these things are telling Peter that Jesus is God.

And Peter definitely knows who he is. He's a sinner, a man who breaks God's commandments and does things that are not pleasing to our Lord. In fear and shame, Peter fell to Jesus knees and prayed, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (vs. 8).

All of this divine power is scarring Peter witless. The powerful teachings, the miracles, the healings, the great catch of fish bring no comfort to Peter. At first, this might seem strange to us. We'd like to see some of God's divine power every once in a while. Peter's reaction teaches us something about God and about us human beings. God's divine power always terrifies us, and I stress the word *always*.

Anytime the Bible tells us about someone coming into God's presence or experiencing God's divine power up-close and personal, those same people are terrified. Elijah wasn't afraid when the Lord sent a mighty wind or an earthquake or a fire. But when that great prophet heard a low whisper (I Kings. 19:12–13), he covered his face for he knew the Lord was present. Other examples include Adam and Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit, Moses on Mount Sinai, Samson's parents, Mary the mother of our Lord, Paul on the Damascus road, and others. Peter realized that he's in

God's presence. He can't hide or runaway, so he begs Jesus to leave. I'm a sinner. I'm afraid. God get away from me lest I die!

Yes, you must know, and I suspect that you already do, that to come into God's direct presence creates fear, doubt, terror, and shame. That's one thing our Gospel reading teaches us. But there is something else it teaches us and it's found in the words of our Lord Jesus. He says, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (vs. 10). Peter was afraid of God's presence and power. But Jesus speaks to Peter and says, "Don't be afraid. I have not come to condemn you. But to set you free from the darkness of your sin and its misery."

There are few things you need to notice about how Jesus' deals with Peter. First of all, Jesus doesn't argue with Peter's confession about being a sinner. There was no "Ah Peter, you're really being too hard on yourself. You're a good guy." No, Peter spoke the truth. He was a truly sinful man, conceived and born in sin. A vessel worthy of God's wrath and judgment. But you should also notice that Jesus does not grant Peter's petition and leave. Nor does Jesus tell Peter that he'd better skedaddle. Jesus did not and will not abandon Peter or you or any of His children in their sin. And we must also notice that Jesus does not give Peter a few steps at self-renovation or self-improvement. Thanks be to God, Jesus spoke a word of absolution, of calm, of grace. "Don't be afraid." When Jesus speaks, things happen. Wondrous things like the complete and total forgiveness of our sins. We know what stands behind those words. The blood of Jesus that atones for them. And His triumphant victory over death and the grave. This is the God who speaks forgiveness. He has the authority and power to cast out fear and replace it with His love and peace.

We Christians face a frequent temptation to become fearful and think we can't come to church and expect to receive the good things of God; at least, not until we get everything all straightened out. We sometimes act as if Jesus quit saying, "Don't be afraid," as if our baptism stopped being true, as if the body and blood Jesus shed for the forgiveness of their sins lost its effectiveness, as if the Lord's Prayer which Jesus Himself commanded us to pray would go unheard. But none of that's true.

Thanks be to God Jesus doesn't do what Peter says. Instead, our Lord speaks words of grace, forgiveness, and peace. Don't be afraid. His love and grace are greater, infinitely greater than our sin, shame, and fear.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He calls Peter to discipleship, and ultimately into the apostolic office, out of pure grace. "From now on you will be catching men" was Peter's call to discipleship. We should not overlook the fact that Jesus isn't ashamed to call sinners to be His followers. It's sinners who are afraid of God's divine power that Jesus wants to be with Him. If you take a quick look at those who follow Jesus in the NT gospels you'll find He attracts sinners of all sorts to Himself: ordinary people like fishermen, social outcast like tax collectors, prostitutes, the demon possessed, the infirm, the poor, political terrorists, soldiers, adulterers, betrayers, and so forth.

These are the kinds of people Jesus calls by grace into His one, holy Christian and apostolic church. Sinners. Poor, miserable sinners. Sinners like you and me. And He says to us all, "Do not be afraid." To be a member of His Church is to receive in faith His invitation to walk in His forgiveness, to be filled with His love and grace, to be guided by His Holy Spirit in discipleship, to become a new person altogether, born anew in righteousness, peace, and holiness.

Remember I said today's gospel reading from Luke 5 teaches us 1) what kind of people Jesus calls to be His disciples and 2) how they become His disciples. It's sinners that Jesus calls to discipleship, and only sinners. That's the who. By grace through forgiveness Jesus calls them to discipleship. That's the how.

Peter, James, and John left everything and followed Jesus (vs. 11). I wish I could say those men never faced another trial or any form of hardship. But they did. All of them suffered for following Jesus. So did the people who believed their gospel preaching. Peter wrote his first epistle to Christians suffering because they were Christians. His word of encouragement was to remain faithful in the face of suffering. Peter must have remembered the words Jesus spoke to him in the boat. He wrote to those suffering Christians, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled" (I Peter 3:14). Dear and beloved saints of the Lord, you must always remember that the Lord Jesus speaks words of truth and comfort to you and for you. Don't be afraid, He says. You belong to Jesus. His nail-scarred hands will not let you go especially in times of difficulty. Don't be afraid. He hears your prayers. You are His. And He is yours for all eternity.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixth Sunday after Trinity

July 11, 2021

Text: Matthew 5:17–26

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The context and the content of the 10 Commandments reveal a great deal about the character and nature of the God we worship and adore. The context is described in Exodus 20:1:

And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'

God Himself saved His people from Egyptian slavery and bondage. Only after He saved them did He give the 10 Commandments. After the plagues that devastated Egypt's power and pride, after the shedding of lamb's blood and the eating of the Passover Lamb, after the crossing of the Red Sea in which God defeated hardhearted Pharaoh and his mighty host, after feeding Israel with manna from heaven and satisfying their thirst with water from a rock, and after He led Israel to Mount Sinai in triumph. The 10 Commandments were given to Israel in the context of God's mighty works of triumph which He performed in fulfillment of His promises given to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and now, in loving faithfulness to their descendants. The 10 Commandments reveal God's good and gracious will for His people who are the apple of His eye, His chosen portion, His eternal inheritance.

I am spending some time on the context of when and where the 10 Commandments were given in order to emphasize a most important point. God's Law, as summarized in the 10 Commandments, describes the life of the redeemed. The Commandments aren't the way of entrance into fellowship with God. Rather, they reflect the way of life, thought, and emotions of those saved by God's almighty power. God must do the saving work first. The commandments are God's good and gracious will for His redeemed and beloved people whom He saves by His mighty power and grace.

The content of each of the specific commandments reveals much about our God, His eternal will and purposes. The first three commandments, the First Table of the Law, reveal that God desires to have a loving, on-going fellowship with His people as they

continue to grow more deeply in the knowledge and experience of His name and His Word. Commandments four through ten, the Second Table of the Law, reveal that God desires that we have loving, on-going fellowship with our neighbors. Our interactions with our fellow human beings are based upon the recognition of the authorities God has placed over us as well as the inherent dignity and respect each person requires for their life, property, and reputations.

The apostle John wrote in his first epistle that God is love (I John 4:8, 16). The commandments help us understand better the nature of God's love. It is based upon respect for the other person, the sacrificial giving of oneself for the good of the beloved, and the desire that their lives are filled with joy, peace, and happiness.

The context and the content of the 10 Commandments reveal God's nature. He is the God who saves and loves. For His steadfast love endures forever writes the psalmists a multitude of times in many, many different psalms. The entire witness of Holy Scripture is that God is love and calls us to love one another.

God's mighty deeds of salvation recorded in the Old Testament are glorious and continue to enrich our understanding of God's love and power. But the greatest, mightiest acts of salvation are revealed in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Everything in the Old Testament, the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, the various institutions of worship, all of it, point to Jesus. The 10 Commandments describe the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us consider who the 10 Commandments describe. Who is the one who fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things? Who never misuses God's name, who loves God's Word as the greatest joy and treasure, who honors all authorities in heaven and earth, who loves and protects His neighbors' life, sexuality, marriage and family; who guards and protects His neighbors' property, reputation, speaking the truth in love in every situation, and helps his neighbor remain faithful to his various callings and obligations? The 10 commandments described the Lord Jesus Christ.

In today's gospel text taken from the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to destroy them but to fulfill them" (vs. 17). The entire Old Testament points to Jesus. He is its fulfillment, the final, ultimate context and content of the commandments. He is God's mightiest act of salvation. He is the incarnation of the God who is love. God's Law reveals His eternal will. And it describes the person and work of Jesus.

God's will for us is to participate in His life and love and to live in His blessings with our fellow human beings.

But God's Law also reveals how far we have fallen short of God's glory. The Lord Jesus Himself used the Law in the Sermon on the Mount to expose the depths of human corruption. Vs. 20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The scribes and Pharisees were the most scrupulous keepers of the Law. We know from the Biblical gospels that they fasted regularly, memorized Scripture, gave tithes on everything including their garden herbs, and lived outwardly moral lives. But we also know it was only external. Inside, they were filled with malice, pride, greed, and every form of sin and unbelief. The Lord Jesus Himself described them as blind guides, white-washed tombs, and children of hell (Matt. 23:15).

The scribes and Pharisees had reduced God's good and holy Law to mere external behavior. God's Law was meant to guide and direct our entire life, every thought, word, deed, and intention. Jesus teaches this in vs. 21–22. The 5th Commandment says, "You shall not murder." This commandment obviously forbids murder, the unlawful taking of human life. The scribes and Pharisees taught that as long as you didn't actually murder someone, you were keeping the 5th Commandment. But Jesus teaches that the commandment also speaks to the heart. Unjust anger against another person is equivalent to murder in God's sight. Secret malice stored in one's heart against another person is a violation of the commandment even when no physical harms has been done.

What the scribes and Pharisees failed to understand about the Commandments was they require love for God and love for one another. God's will for all of us is love. For He is love. And Jesus is the incarnation of perfect, divine love. We are Christians, people who have been cleansed from sin by the precious blood of Jesus. Having been so loved by God, we seek to love one another. If there is some form of disagreement between believers, as they inevitably arise from time to time, we seek to resolve the dispute. Through mutual forgiveness and grace, we seek reconciliation. The Lord Jesus teaches in vs. 23–24, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." The fulfillment of God's law is love. We seek to be reconciled with anyone who has something against us, but we especially seek reconciliation with our fellow Christians because of love.

Matthew 5:21–24 that informs the Church’s teaching on being at peace with one another before receiving Holy Communion. If we know that we have hurt our fellow brother or sister with our words and deeds, then we ought to seek reconciliation through repentance and forgiveness. And if that reconciliation hasn’t happened, then it is right to refrain from Holy Communion until reconciliation is achieved. This is the general teaching. The application of this doctrine to specific situations requires humility and prudence; your pastor is here to provide guidance and council in such situations. But remember God’s will is the peace and freedom that comes from love which forgives, protects, and cherishes.

In and of ourselves, we will never keep the 10 Commandments perfectly. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. We need a righteousness that must come from outside of ourselves in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. We absolutely need Jesus. His righteousness. His love. His forgiveness. He is our only hope of knowing and receiving perfect love. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law in thought, word, action, and intention. Through His perfect life and by His redeeming death and glorious resurrection, we believers are redeemed from the Law’s condemnation. All that Jesus did in fulfilling the Law He gives to us graciously and freely. We receive it by faith alone as His gift of love.

We Christians do not set aside God’s Law. God forbid. We seek to live according to it all the more earnestly because of Jesus; He is the Law’s fulfillment. God’s love is most clearly and beautifully revealed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. All that He did and does is because He loves us. We love Him and one another in return because He first loved us.

The life described in the 10 Commandments is the life of Jesus. And now by faith in Him, that life of love describes us. You are the beloved of the Lord Jesus. Live in His joy and in His love ...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventh Sunday after Trinity

July 18, 2021

Text: Genesis 2:7–17; Mark 8:1–9

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

God made Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life; his body and soul were perfect in harmonious union. The Scriptures teach that man was created in God's image, which was reflected in and through the union of man's physical and spiritual natures. The Garden of Eden was created by God for the purpose of sustaining man. It was a place of abundance. Every tree was good for food and pleasant for sight. No thorns or thistles. No curse. The food from these trees and the fruit of the tree of life were God's gifts to sustain and enrich man. Lest we get the wrong idea that humanity was created for indulgence and idleness, you know, laying in hammocks under shade trees eating grapes all day, we should notice God's command that Adam work and keep the Garden (Gen. 2:15). God created man for meaningful work from the very beginning. As the image-bearer of God Himself, Adam served the creation in love through work and tender care. From the beginning, man was created for love, love for God and love the rest of creation.

But questions have been raised through the centuries as to why God planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden when its fruit was forbidden. Genesis 2:17, "... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Why such a devastating consequence for what appears to be, from our limited human perspective, a relatively minor transgression? Various answers to these questions have been proposed and debated. But the Bible does not give us insight into God's secret will regarding His plans and purposes with Adam, Eve, and those two trees in the Garden of Eden. We must remain content with God's revealed word. "You may eat from the fruit of all the trees of the Garden, including the tree of life. But you may not, on the pain of death, eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

We also know, without any doubt, what happened regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The devil tempted and deceived Eve. She ate and then gave to her husband who was not deceived (II Tim. 2:14) but simply listened to the voice of his wife and obeyed her rather than God. It all came down to desiring food that God had

forbidden. By so doing, they asserted their own will over God's will. They defined "the good" in opposition to God's Word; they sought "the truth" through means other than strict obedience to the word of the Lord; they believed something more "beautiful" was possible for them if they formed a world after their own desires rather than God's.

That's the big lie: human flourishing can be better achieved on our own terms in our own way. God's will and ways are not the means of achieving our full potential. Rather, God is a restriction and impediment. The devil countered God's promise of full life lived in love and harmony with a lie promising god-like status. You shall not die knowing good and evil, so went the devil's deception, for you shall be like god. The tragic irony in all this is that man was already created in God's image; he bore the likeness of God in him from the moment of his creation. Adam and Eve already knew what was good and what was evil. The truth is that disobedience to God's Word is the evil that kills. Faith and trust in God and His Word resulting in obedience to God's will and purposes are the good, the true, the beautiful.

Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. And we know the results. We're living in those results. All creation groans under the weight of humanity's sin. We too seek the redemption that awaits us who have hope and trust in God's promise of redemption through His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We live in faith, hope, and love. But there is still the afflictions of sin and the corruptions of this world. All Christians, from Adam and Eve until the last saints of the last days, groan inwardly as we await for our adoption as sons culminating in the redemption of our bodies unto everlasting life (Rom. 8:18–25). The truth is that life is found only in God's Word. It was true in the Garden of Eden. It remains true today, and into eternity.

The presence of the two trees in Garden of Eden teaches us the most important truth, the foundational truth. In, with, and under God's Word there is true, abundant life. Outside of God's Word, there is only misery and death. Both trees had God's Word attached to them. The tree of life possessed God's Word of permission and promise. "You may eat freely of all the trees" but especially of the tree of life, located in the heart of the Garden. The tree of the knowledge of God and evil also had God's Word attached to it. "You shall not eat (of it), for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Both trees had God's Word attached to them. The kinds of trees they were, or the nature of their fruit is immaterial. What is of extreme importance is knowing God's Word, believing it, and living according to it. No matter how strange it may seem to us.

Christians throughout the centuries have long pondered and imagine what life must have been like in the Garden. Work that isn't burdened with sweat and frustration. Man living in perfect harmony with creation. Food provided freely from the trees of the Garden that perfectly sustained life and happiness. It was paradise.

But even there in the Garden, living by God's Word was the primary thing. It was more important and provided more joy than living from the abundance of the Garden's produce. Through God's Word, Adam and Eve understood who they were. Who God was. Their relationship to each other as husband and wife; they knew their rightful place as lords over creation; and they had the joying of being beloved children of God the Father almighty. All these great and glorious things came from life in, with, and under God's Word. Paradise was defined, not by the produce of the Garden, not by the harmony between man and creation, but by God's Word.

The Lord Jesus teaches the same foundational truth in today's text from Mark 8. He taught God's Word for three days to the crowd of 4,000 people. On the third day, Jesus commanded His disciples to arrange the crowd so that they could be fed miraculously with bread and fish. They needed physical food to fill their stomachs. This is most certainly true. But they had a greater need, the most important need. To hear God's Word preached to them and for them.

Dear saints of God, make God's Word your primary concern. The priority in ordering your days. And having done that, be assured that God will also provide you with all that you need to support your earthly life. In Matthew 6:33, the Lord Jesus beautifully summarized how we should think about the things of God and of this world. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." Our chief concern is God's Word. And through the promise and power of His Word, He will also provide all that you need for life in this world.

The Bible doesn't tell us why Jesus taught for three days before feeding the crowd of 4,000. But the evangelist Mark highlights Jesus' love and compassion for them. Thus, we must make a very simple conclusion. Jesus knew they needed three days of teaching. They had been starved of God's Word. And He, the faithful shepherd, would provide for all their needs beginning with the most urgent. Only when their hunger and thirst for the good news of God's kingdom was sufficiently satisfied did He fill their stomachs with bread and fish. And vs. 8 reveals that this real need was abundantly met. And when it was all over and the crowd had been dismissed, they had seven baskets full of leftovers. There more at the end than there was at the beginning.

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.

Your life in God's spiritual kingdom as well as your physical life in this world are defined by God's Word. You live in, with, and under God's Word. The justification you have through faith in Christ. The hope of the resurrection unto eternal life. The love you have for God and for one another. Every meal you eat. Your families, jobs, health, clothing. All of it finds meaning in, with, and under God's Word.

There is no greater gift you can give to your friends and loved ones than God's Word. Each of us have our vocations and callings that we must fulfill. Farmers must sow and reap. Teachers must instruct. Construction workers must build. Doctors and nurses must heal. Parents must nurture and train their children. All these are divinely appointed vocations of love. But they must also be nourished by God's Word. Otherwise, we fall prey to the devil's lie: your life is your own and you can be your own god, your own source of goodness, truth, and beauty.

But the truth is that true human flourishing can only be found and experienced in and through God's Word, especially the holy and precious gospel of the redemption we have in Christ Jesus. Through Him, the image of God so marred and broken because of sin is restored. A greater perfection than the paradise of Eden is now ours. For Jesus, the very Son of God, is our rest, our hope, our joy, and our confidence. His Word of grace defines who we are, what we do, and the hope we have for life now and forever.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars
St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Eighth Sunday after Trinity
July 25, 2021
Text: Matthew 7:15–23

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today's gospel text is from the conclusion to Lord's Sermon on the Mount. And a weighty conclusion it is. To understand better its depth, I want to read the two verses just before the gospel reading you have in your bulletins. Matthew 7:13–14:

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. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Those are indeed sobering words. The narrow gate refers to entrance into God's kingdom, the kingdom which, according to Matthew 6:33, we are to seek first, above all things. The wide gate refers to entrance into God's eternal judgment against the devil and his evil angels. Entrance into God's eternal kingdom is through a hard, narrow gate while entrance into the judgment of hell is both wide and easy. Few are the ones who find eternal life. I trust you can see the gravity of what Jesus teaches concerning the hard realities resulting from man's rebellion and sin.

Do those words of Jesus make us stop and ponder? Being a Christian is difficult. Being an unbeliever is easy. Few find the way of eternal life. Many easily travel the road of destruction. These are most alarming words. They are a call for deep self-evaluation leading to humble repentance and unswerving faith in the salvation promised in and through the death and resurrection of the Jesus.

We need to consider why the path to eternal life is so narrow and difficult. In the appointed reading from Matthew 7:15–23, the Lord Jesus gives us further teaching about why entrance into God's so difficult and so easy into eternal judgment. The first section deals with false teachers (vs. 15–20). The second section deals with the problem of self-deception (vs. 21–23).

We begin with the first section, vs. 15–20. According to these verses, false teachers infiltrating the Church make it hard to enter God's kingdom. There are two things that

we must note here. First, false teachers will be a perennial problem in the Church until the end of time. Second, we will know them by their fruits. Both points cannot be forgotten lest we endanger our immortal souls.

First, listen to vs. 15 again, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” The Lord Jesus warns us, His people walking on the hard, narrow path leading to eternal life, that false teachers will come into the church looking every bit like genuine Christian teachers. They talk a lot about Jesus. His name may be on their lips with great frequency and fervency. But inwardly, they are wolves greedily seeking to devour the Lord’s flock.

The New Testament describes various false teachers and their corrupted teachings in the early Christian Church. Jude wrote (vs. 4), “For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” Jude goes on to compare these people to Sodom and Gomorrah, to the murderous Cain, to the rebellious Korah, and to the greedy Balaam. These false teachers of the New Testament were compared to the worst of the worst from the Old Testament. But Jude would not leave the early Christians without hope and courage. He wrote:

²⁰But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life...²⁴Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, ²⁵to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (vs. 20–21, 24–25).

More examples can be given. The apostle Paul had to contend with false teachers in the churches of Galatia who denied that salvation was received by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Or in Corinth, there were those who denied the bodily resurrection. The apostle John fought against teachers who denied the incarnation of God’s Son in the person of Jesus. In the book of Revelation, two of the seven churches of Asia Minor held and believed the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which the Bible records Jesus as saying these were works and teachings which He Himself hated (Rev. 2:6, 15).

Dear saints, the Lord Jesus warned us about false teachers. He command us to beware of them! Not tolerate them, or give them a place in the Church. These false teachers are part of the reason why entrance into God's kingdom is through a hard, narrow gate. Beware of them.

In the vs. 16–20, Jesus teaches us that we will recognize the false teachers (vs. 16) by their fruits. The fruits here refer to their doctrine and their life. Some of the examples I listed above were teachers who denied that Jesus was truly God. Others denied that Jesus was fully man. Some taught that people were saved by a combination of Christ's work and man's work resulting in severe forms of ascetism and bodily punishment (circumcision in adults, rigorous fasting, strict diets, etc.). Others denied the bodily resurrection on the Last Day resulting in a hyper-spiritualized faith that allowed for Christians visiting prostitutes, getting drunk in church, Christians taking one another to court, confusion in the martial relationship between husbands and wives, and even one case of gross incest!

False doctrine always leads to ungodly living. You will know the false teachers by the fruits of their teaching and their lives. According to Jesus, a healthy tree bears good fruit. And a diseased tree bears bad fruit. Vs. 19–20, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Don't buy their books or listen to their programs. They make entrance into God's kingdom difficult. For they appeal to our sinful nature. With soothing words and appeals to the passions of pride, lust, self-esteem, greed, and worldly pleasures, they seek to devour us upon their own carnal craving. Stand firm dear saints of God in the purity of Christ's gospel revealed in Holy Scripture and proclaimed by men who love the truth without regard for worldly praise and advancement.

As startling as the first section (vs. 15–20) is about false teachers, I think this next section is even more. It's one thing to be on guard against false teachers. It's quite another to be on guard against oneself. Self-deception makes entrance into God's kingdom difficult.

The Lord Jesus describes people who say they are Christians but don't do His will. Vs. 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." The will of God the Father almighty is to believe in the one He sent to be the Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 6:29). But it also includes following Jesus. Luke 9:23–24 records these words of Jesus about being a Christian disciple:

²³ ... “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

The self-deception comes in various forms of saying, “Yes, I believe in Jesus. But I get to choose how I live my life, not Jesus, not His Word especially when it proves difficult.” The result is that sin is not resisted and fought but excused or even celebrated. Remember all those examples I listed earlier? Drunkenness, lust, pride, hatred, greed, and all sorts of evils were celebrated. They claimed to be Christian but lived lives contrary to God’s Word.

The NT writer, James, also warned the early Christians of his day about self-deception. Listen to this excerpt from James 1: without being a doer of Christ’s word (James 1:19–27):

¹⁹Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger ... ²¹Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. ²²But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.... ²⁵But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. ²⁶If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Some who say “Lord, Lord” but refuse to do His word will hear this terrifying judgment from Jesus on the Last Day, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (vs. 23).

What are we to do in light of our Lord’s strong teaching? Flee to Jesus who followed the narrow path of Calvary’s cross for your salvation. He is the one who bore your sins and the sins of the whole world. Listen to Jesus. He alone won for us forgiveness, life, and salvation. Give no heed to anyone or anything that takes your eyes from Him and His will for your life. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to eternal life. But the joy and confidence we have is that Jesus Himself is the gate and the way. He is our Good Shepherd, leading and guiding us by His Word and Spirit, to the green pastures of eternal life.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.