

Discerning the Voices
A Prep Guide for Session Seven of a Scholarly Stroll
Matthew 7.13 -23
 Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton

There are more voices and more information available to us than to any generation in the history of the world. Add to this the audio -visual technology and artificial intelligence that make it easy to execute what have become known as “Deep Fakes” – the deceptive audio or video recordings that feature people saying things that they have never said – and our task of discerning truth from falsehood has grown awfully complicated!

On Monday evening, we will consider together this confusing complexity of our current cultural moment as we turn our attention to Jesus’s very welcome counsel on this very thing. In the middle of Matthew 7, he offers advice to his disciples about how they might discern which voices in their world to believe and which to reject.

So, this old Sermon is new again...again.

The Narrow Gate – Jesus and Exclusion

Before we explore the cacophony of sound around us, Jesus begins this part of the sermon with a striking exhortation:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 5.13-14)

We’ve watched Jesus set a high bar for his disciples – exhorting them against, not just murder but anger, not just adultery but lust, calling them to integrity and simple trust, forbidding them to condemn people with harsh judgment. But there is a jolt to this reality check about how many people will actually choose the difficult, flourishing life he has pictured.

Jesus’s juxtaposition of Two Ways appears in different ways within the Hebrew scriptures that were his only Bible. (i.e., our Old Testament) First, look at Moses’s words that come near the end of Deuteronomy, which identify for Israel two options for responding to the Law of God.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life, in order that you may live.” (Deuteronomy 30.19)

Also consider the binary picture Psalm 1 paints:

*Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
 or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
 2 but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
 3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither —
 whatever they do prospers.*

*4 Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.
 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

*6 For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

And Jesus himself famously confronts a rich young man with a stark decision:

A man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

“Which ones?” he inquired.

Jesus replied, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother, [c] and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

*When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.
 (Matthew 19.16-26)*

Any one of these passages can seem exceedingly harsh at first. But then we stumble upon the common thread that runs through them all: Moses, the Psalmist, and Jesus all present their audience with a choice. They are granted the freedom to choose.

This freedom C.S. Lewis picks up in a striking way in his *Screwtape Letters*. The letters were Lewis's artful inroad to ponder the psychology of temptation. In them, a Senior Tempter from hell, called Screwtape, writes instructional missives to a Junior Tempter called Wormwood. These notes are intended to help Wormwood more effectively tempt and distract his human subject from the Way of God. Letter 8 takes up the question what it costs God to grant humans freedom, as Screwtape probes how Wormwood can take hellish advantage of his "client's" emotion or spiritual troughs, when faith's objects are unclear. He writes,

"One must face the fact that all the talk about the Enemy's [i.e. God's] love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth.... You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses and at any moment. But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will (as His felt presence in any but the faintest and most mitigated degree would certainly do) would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo." (The Screwtape Letters, p. 38 -39, HarperCollins.)

God cannot ravish. God can only woo. Beautiful! But costly. This God who loves enough to afford his children free choice must abide the grief when they/we choose badly or, more often, do not even listen for God's voice.

All of this and a second read of the "Narrow Gate" passage turn our heads back to Jesus's first words of the Sermon. The realm that Jesus has pictured in these chapters, the path to flourish that isn't always obvious, the Way of Jesus is most open to those who know they need it.

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit," says Jesus, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.3)

False Prophets – Discerning True from False Voices

Now let's turn to those myriad voices that we face by entering the confusing world of our earliest ancient brothers and sisters. To get a glimpse of the complexity they faced, we must picture a plethora of itinerants traipsing from town to town purveying a message that included aspects of Jesus's teaching – and not always sounding like the last one who came to town.

We see this practical need to discern the voices arise in the Hebrew scriptures, where Jeremiah and Ezekiel both decry the work of NAVI SHEKER – false prophets who

abound in Israel during their time. The early Christian writings also feature the phenomenon, in the Gospels (e.g., Matthew 24.11 - PSEUDOPROPHETON); in Acts (20.9); in Paul's Galatians (1.2-5); in 2 Peter (a lengthy harangue in chapter 2); and in the Book of Revelation (Jezebel in 2.20 - 23).

These early Christians apparently weren't always very good at making such discernments – at least as viewed by outsiders. The 2nd -century Greco-Roman satirist, Lucian of Samosata, pilloried the early Christians for their gullibility in his story called "The Passing of Peregrinus". There, Lucian tells the story of a man of the Cynic philosophical school who found a way to ingratiate himself with a group of Jesus people and live on their dime with their reverent admiration for a long while.

Here are Lucian's words.

"It was then that Peregrinus learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And —how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult -leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world." ("The Passing of Peregrinus" 10 - 11)

From the satirist's perspective, this capable deceiver "made [the easily -duped Christians] look like children".

Jesus seems to have seen this weakness coming, because his Sermon now swerves to a cautionary tone as he addresses the issue of gullibility.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

Notice Jesus's criterion for a prophet's or teacher's authenticity. "By their fruit you will recognize them," he says twice. On Monday night we'll have to sort out what the good Lord meant by fruit, but it seems to be some output that people can notice and appreciate. Is it the quality of the prophet's life? The impact of her or his message on other lives? Something else? We'll engage this question when we gather.

On Monday, we'll also compare Jesus's strategy to Paul which is more focussed on the content of the message than on the goodness of the messenger. We'll also range over into the terribly challenging task of discerning voices in the 21st -century U.S.

Authentic Discipleship

In the last section of our passages for this week, Jesus moves from false prophets over to false followers of Jesus.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (7.20-23)

Here, the trappings of Christian faith can be mimicked by someone who walks without its substance. And so we’re on to Hypocrisy Type 2 from Session 3, where we saw that Jesus uses the term to cover both showy righteousness (“no good deed goes unpublished”) and saying one thing and doing another (“not walking the talk”)

More on Monday night.

Resources

[The Bible Project, “True and False Prophets”.](#)

Any of you who teach Bible among youth or adults ought to tap this resource. The Bible Project brings smart biblical scholarship into accessible form. This 45 -minute audio recording, treats the question of authenticity in some detail.

[Francis Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*](#)

This is a thesis written at the University of Durham in the U.K. Dr. Shaw’s interests took her to the topic of our week – how do spoken claims achieve the status of revelation in Matthew? It’s a dissertation, so don’t set out to read it all. But even the table of contents will introduce aspects of our work for Monday evening.

[Donald Carson, “Two Ways”](#)

Dr. Carson researched and taught and is now a Professor Emeritus at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. He has authored a slew of articles and books interpreting the New Testament. This is a sermon he preached at Cambridge University in the UK.

Our Class Reading Schedule

05JAN26

Blessed

Matthew 5.1 - 16

12JAN26	Deepening Torah	Matthew 5.17 -30
19JAN26	Chasing Perfection	Matthew 5.31 -48
26JAN26	Building Integrity	Matthew 6.1 - 18
02FEB26	Non-Anxious Presents	Matthew 6.19 -34
09FEB26	The Gold Standard	Matthew 7.1 - 12
16FEB26	Discerning the Voices	Matthew 7.13 -23
23FEB26	Solid Ground	Matthew 7.24 - 29