

“Being Recognized”

Reading: Matthew 7:1-29

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Does God know who you are? That might seem like one of those questions that's easy to answer; of course God knows who you are because God knows everything and God loves everyone, right? And while that's true, it's not really the whole story. In the middle of our reading for today Jesus speaks of some people who have performed miracles and uttered prophecies, people who have done amazing things apparently in God's name, and yet when those people stand in front of Jesus one day they will be surprised to hear Him plainly say, "I never knew you." Jesus is obviously talking about a certain kind of knowledge here, knowledge that comes from relationship and intentionality, knowledge that comes over time. It's the image of someone standing in front of a ruling king: even if the king has some knowledge of who you are, the real question is whether they *recognize* you. Does the king welcome you into His presence, give you a place in His court, greet you as one of His own?

Have you ever noticed how politicians approach a lectern when they're about to give a big speech or a debate? Almost invariably, while things are warming up and the crowd is applauding, right before they begin their speech, the politician spends a minute or two pointing to specific people in the crowd and waving or smiling right at that one person. I've always wondered if they're actually recognizing a friendly face in the audience, or if that's just something they do to make it look like they have friends in the crowd. Are they actually recognizing anyone, or just pretending? But maybe that's an image of the distinction Jesus is making: in a crowd of faces, all of whom might be known to the king, only some are truly *known*, recognized.

So does God *know* you? That's getting at the heart of what this Sermon on the Mount is all about. We've spent a few weeks now working our way through this extended teaching from Jesus, and we began by pointing out where this sermon falls in the story of Jesus' life as told to us by Matthew. Matthew has been carefully showing that Jesus is the Messiah-King we've all been waiting for: Jesus has royal lineage, His birth was announced by angelic heralds and the skies themselves, He was honored by foreign dignitaries, He was anointed by a prophet, He announces that His kingdom is at hand, and He demonstrates that He has power over His dominion by casting out demons and healing the sick. This sermon is then His inaugural speech laying out how His kingdom is going to work, and all along the message has been that His kingdom works by trusting God and practicing love. And in this last chapter that we're focusing on today, He's wrapping it all up: if you want to be recognized by the king, if you want to have a place in the king's presence, this is how you do it. This is not just a discourse on ethics or how to be a good person. It's not a new list of laws to follow because following the law builds credit with God and earns your way to heaven. It's not a practical list of secret instructions for getting ahead in life, as though loving your enemies is some undiscovered tactic for winning. No, this is guidance on being known by the king, being marked as one of His, having a place in His presence rather than being a rebel on the outside. It's like the Torah or instructions given by Moses in generations past: following all of those laws didn't earn your way into the people of God, it marked you as belonging to the people of God.

Let's work our way backward through this part of the sermon to get the essence of what Jesus is saying. The conclusion of the matter is to build your house on a firm foundation, on the solid rock of Jesus' word. This passage is the basis for a classic children's song about "the wise man built his house

upon the rock," a song that has been getting a lot of mileage in our house in recent months. As usual, Jesus uses simple but memorable imagery to make His point; we can all picture a house sinking into sand from an unstable foundation, versus a house built on rock standing tall and solid in a storm. But let's pay attention to what He actually says: "everyone who hears these words of mine *and puts them into practice* is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." The firm foundation comes not only from hearing the words of Jesus, and in fact not only accepting the word of Jesus, but also in putting them into practice. We sometimes have the idea that if I can cognitively accept Jesus' word as true, if I mentally bow the knee before Him and sign on the dotted line, then I've given Him my life. But that's not the loyalty He's looking for. How can we claim Him as our Lord if we don't do what He says?

Both the wise man and the foolish man have a house, and for the sake of argument let's say their houses are even identical. They've both heard the word of Jesus, and maybe they've both accepted that it's true. That foolish man's house might be elaborate and beautiful. He might know the word backwards and forwards; he might have a PhD in the words of Jesus and be able to teach and quote and study those words. But that's not the foundation that will last through the storm, as important as it is to study. What will last through the storm is the experience of putting those words into practice. Hearing the word and knowing the word are crucial first steps, but you can know the word and still keep it under your own control. *Doing* the word requires you to set aside your own will and accept the will of Jesus instead.

So what exactly is this word, this law, that Jesus is giving us that is so elusive in our actions? What's so fascinating is that the law is so unimpressive. Again, Jesus warns us about people who have done incredible, miraculous things for God's kingdom – casting out demons, uttering prophecies, performing actual miracles – and yet they're not recognized. Jesus will even say to them, "Away from me, you evildoers!" Or, maybe more accurately, "doers of lawlessness." Performing jaw-dropping acts in God's name still doesn't fulfill the law Jesus is giving us, and like we read last Sunday, performing some of those actions can actually be detrimental to your health if they're not done with the right motives. Let's keep working our way backwards: Jesus has just finished telling us that we will recognize good trees by their fruit, and He's just warned us about false prophets who are "ferocious wolves," implying that they're using God's kingdom for their own gain. These are people who have rejected the core of Jesus' law but are still trying to maintain the appearance of godliness for their own benefit. They are "lawless" because they've rejected the law of love.

And if we keep working backwards through this part of the sermon, we arrive at that law of love given to us again in verse 12. "This is the Law and the Prophets," Jesus says. This is what God has been saying to His people all along through all the ages and all the Scriptures. "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." As I read that again this time I realized that I'm not sure I had ever noticed the first part: "in everything." Usually when we hear this Golden Rule quoted, we just hear the "do to others what you would have them do to you," and lots of people can accept that. It's a good guideline to follow, a nice touchstone for an ethical life. But no, Jesus says, this *is* the Law the Prophets: *in everything*, do this, not just as a guideline or when it's convenient or to people you think are good enough, but in everything. So you can do all kinds of impressive things but still be living in lawlessness if you reject this law. You can spend your life preaching God's word and still be a false prophet if you reject this law of love.

This love has to be learned; it's not something that comes naturally. That's the lingering effect of our rebellion against God known as sin, that on our own we're suspicious and judgmental and selfish. We have to be taught what love looks like, and it gets messed up by our own impure motives and by the lies of the world and by the broken promises of other people. We ache for genuine love but struggle to find it and struggle to believe it when we do. We get caught in the trap of being judgmental, the parody of love and the parody of God's law, pretending to want the best for our brother or sister by plucking the sawdust out of their eye, when in fact we're gleefully ignoring the plank in our own eye so that we can have a reason to judge them. Jesus gives us an alternative.

For all our lovelessness, we still have hints of love in our lives, glimmers of the light of God's love breaking through the clouds. "You folks are evil," Jesus says, "you're faulty and irregular in your love, but even you know enough of love not to abuse your loving relationships and use them for harm." You're not going to trick your child into eating a stone if they ask for bread, and you're not going to surprise them with a snake if they ask for a fish. If you know that much about love, how much more does God our Father, who is completely good, know about love?

And that's the basis for Jesus' declaration of the law that "in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." According to Jesus, the Golden Rule is a logical consequence of God's goodness toward His children; God gives good gifts, *therefore* do unto others. If God is good and God takes care of His children, and if God has graciously welcomed you into His family, then it naturally follows that we can extend that love to others. We trust in the love God shows us, and that love naturally flows outward. Or as we read in 1 John, "We love because He first loved us."

We've spoken before of God's covenant love for us, and that's exactly what this is. This is God's decision to build a relationship of faithfulness with us, a grant of grace from a king who is far greater than we could ever hope to deserve. Matthew has been setting Jesus up as the Messiah-King all along, but now we're seeing that He's not a conquering king or a distant king or an angry king, He's the king who comes and invites us into covenant with Him. He's not just the king, He's the king who has thrown wide His arms to invite us and everyone around us into His family. He's not just our ruler, He's our royal Father. And as adopted children of the king, we look at the people around us and see them as adopted siblings or as rebellious children in need of inclusion. We don't lord our status in God's kingdom over others as though we're their judges, we offer them the same adoption that was offered to us. That's how our Father recognizes us as being one of His own: when we act like we're in the family.

The simple fact is that we cannot be right with God unless we are right with other people, and we can't be right with other people unless we're right with God. The end result of the coming of Jesus into our lives is not that we become holy people, if we define holiness as a list of rules and virtues that I keep in my life and keep to myself. The end result of Jesus coming into our lives is that we would be marked as belonging to Him because we put into practice the love He's shown us. We can't be holy people alone.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the season before Easter in which we set our eyes on the cross of Christ, we reflect on our own complicity in putting Him there, and we commit to following the same path in our own lives. Lent is traditionally a time for fasting, prayer, and self-examination, a time when we look deeply into the darkness so that our eyes will be that much more dazzled when the

light breaks forth. This is a chance for us to be deliberate in our lives and our love. I don't know about you, but I feel the pressures of this world to let the expectations of other people and the world around me set my priorities for me, and it's easy to lose direction. This is a season for getting reoriented toward the cross, toward that self-abandoning trust in God's goodness and that self-giving love that we see on display through the life and death of Christ. This is a time to strip away distraction, to set aside the things that impress, and focus instead on the simplicity and the magnitude of the love that is Christ's law. This is a time to embrace freedom in the law of putting love into practice.



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