

# ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES

by Steve Zeisler

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Every year at this time I am struck by what I have come to consider one of the great fables in western culture. It is *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the account of Ebenezer Scrooge and his transformation on the night before Christmas. The fact that so many know this story is good for the cause of the gospel. It is a story that rings true. It has at least three important themes: One is that this life is preparatory for the next. Decisions we make in this life qualify us for eternity, either to wear the chains of Jacob Marley or to enjoy freedom in Christ. A second theme is that even for the most sin-encrusted and hard-hearted person you can imagine, redemption is still possible. Scrooge is as bound up in his own selfishness as anybody could be, and yet even he is not beyond the possibility of redemption. Truth can break into such a person's experience and revolutionize them in a moment.

## **Little choices that accumulate**

A third theme, and one I would like us to keep in mind in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, is that little choices made on a daily basis throughout our lives are what make us who we become. Very few of us experience tragedy as a blowout. It's almost always a slow leak, a little bit of air lost every day over a lifetime, until all is gone. We make small choices-little pamperings, little sellings out, little impurities-that accumulate day after day until we become our own version of Ebenezer Scrooge.

In *A Christmas Carol* the ghost of Christmas Past came to Scrooge and took this angry, hard-hearted, dry, and greedy man back to his boyhood. He had been in love with a woman once, he had had friends once. He had danced at Christmas parties. He had had a future that was filled with possibilities of love and fellowship and warmth. And he had rejected them one by one, slowly, over a lifetime, until he became who he was when the story begins, the old man who is making life miserable for Bob Cratchett, Tiny Tim, and others.

In the second half of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching focuses on choices made day in and day out concerning ordinary affairs. Choices establish patterns, patterns become habits, and habits harden into character. There are three statements that gather up what we'll find in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, three challenges for us in these day-to-day choices: Don't quit too soon, don't take the easy way out, and don't let talk substitute for action.

Let's review the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. Jesus has gathered before him those he is training for life, his disciples, to teach them some very important things. He begins with a description, in what we call the Beatitudes, of what it means to be human: Where is real fulfillment? What were human beings made for? "Blessed are the poor in spirit," "Blessed are those who mourn," and so on. Then he takes back from misinterpreters the transcendent truths given by God in the Law of Sinai and throughout the history of the nation Israel, and tells us how we should understand what God has spoken. In the first half of chapter 6 Jesus speaks to those who are concerned to practice righteousness in worship, who will give alms, pray, and fast for God's sake.

Then beginning in the middle of chapter 6, the Lord moves away a bit from these 'spiritual' themes, and turns to the experiences of dealing with our ordinary affairs. "Don't lay up treasures on earth but in heaven." Every one of us has to deal with money. So his teaching is how you will deal today with the temptation to love money rather than love God. "Don't be anxious for anything, what you should eat and what you should wear." Every one of us will be anxious about life. We have anxieties that crash in on us every day, whether we are students who are about to take exams this week in the universities, or those who are wondering what it will be like in our tension-filled homes during the holidays. But Jesus says, "Don't be anxious, your Father is taking care of you."

In the middle of chapter 6, you'll notice that the illustrations Jesus uses become a bit homier or earthier. Instead of being about law courts and public prayer, they are about animals-moths, birds, pigs, dogs, snakes, fish, and wolves. They are about plants-lilies, logs, grapes, and thistles. They are about rust, failing eyesight, and the burning of dead grass and lifeless trees. Yet they are important, none-the-less because when we make decisions in these matters we are becoming either like Ebenezer Scrooge or like Jesus Christ. We're accumulating either Marley's chains or the freedom of Christ.

In our study of Matthew 7:1-6 (Discovery Paper 4414), Dorman Followwill's message highlighted, "Don't judge lest you be judged." That spoke of our foolish tendency to focus on failure in our brother as a way of escaping discovery of ourselves. Every day the opportunity to judge another and run from it in our own lives is before us.

### **Don't quit too soon**

And now we've come to another of Jesus' teachings. Matthew 7:7-12:

Ask and it will be give to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

This paragraph brings before us the first of the three challenges I mentioned earlier: Don't quit too soon. What our Lord is talking to us about here is persistence, refusing to be defeated, not giving up and accepting an average substitute for something that is great.

Many of us, when we were young in Christ, had hopes that our lives would amount to something for Jesus. Slowly but surely those hopes have petered out; the flames have been banked. Many of us, when we were first in love with the Lord, began to read the Bible as a love letter filled with great riches. We looked forward every day to spending time in Bible reading. But eventually other things encroached and quiet time became difficult. And now the idea that we might set aside a time for study is a memory. We'll go to church when we can and hope that someone else has something to say, but we're not as engaged in studying the Bible ourselves anymore. Many of us, when we were young in Christ, had a dream of going where we were needed to serve the Lord, and we would give our life away for the Lord's sake, for hurting people, and for those who didn't know the gospel. But those dreams, too, have faded.

Perhaps you will hear the music of a Christian group and realize that you love music and would love to sing for the Lord's sake, write great poetry or music, or in some other way express yourself in gratitude. But it's so hard to do, given everything else that is demanded of you. You've tried some things, but they never seem to work out. Your best efforts were set aside anyway. So you give up trying.

We don't ask anymore, "Lord, make my life worthwhile. As my Father, give me the sustenance I need, true food and true drink, so that my heart will be on fire for you and I will have a sense of purpose." We don't seek anymore, assuming that the undiscovered things could be discovered. We don't knock anymore, because too many times the doors have closed. Once we hoped to have friends and community, but we've settled for acquaintances. We used to repent, but now we just live with remorse. We used to hope for love, but now we put up with good intentions.

### **We are rich**

Jesus is saying, "Don't quit too soon! Ask day after day for life. Seek what is lost or as yet undiscovered. Knock on the doors and knock again, and go on to the next door and knock again. Your Father loves you, and neither of two lies can prevail—one that says you're not a child of God, and one that says your Father is not generous. If ordinary, woebegone human fathers know how to give healthy food and good gifts to their children, won't your heavenly Father give to you? If he has made you long for spiritual depth, reality, and usefulness, and if he has given you gifts to use, won't he answer these longings if you don't quit too soon?"

Remember Tevye the milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof*? He is a Russian Jewish father of three daughters whose traditional world is about to be destroyed. The musical goes on to tell the story of their lives. At one point Tevye imagines what it would be like to be a rich man. He says, "My wife would be happy. Our house would be big, and the turkeys and geese would squabble. I'd be an important man, and all would come to me to ask for advice." But the most poignant line in that song comes near the end. He says, "If I were rich, I'd have the time that I'd like to sit in the synagogue, pray and maybe have a seat by the eastern wall. And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men seven hours every day. Ahh, that would be sweetest thing of all."

Tevye says, "If I were rich, if all the cares of life didn't crowd in, I'd have time for God and prayer." But what Jesus is saying here is that we *are* rich: "Doesn't your Father know about you? Doesn't he care? Won't he give you the riches he has stored up for you?"

I got to hear John Stott preach a couple of weeks ago. He is well into his seventies now. He has ministered faithfully for decades in London and in recent years, all over the world, caring for pastors and Bible teachers and evangelists who don't have a lot of support. He has as much passion now as he ever did.

Remember the story of Caleb in the book of Joshua? He was one of the only two Exodus generation adults who got to experience the conquest of the Promised Land. All the other older people died in the wilderness. And Caleb came to Joshua and said, "I've been to Hebron as a spy. It is filled with giants. It is also filled with the presence of God. At eighty years old, I am as vigorous now as I've ever been for the Lord's sake, and I want to go fight the giants in Hebron as an old man, because that is God's place for me."

I got to meet Corrie Ten Boom when she came to preach here a number of years ago, a marvelous woman whose courageous faith in Nazi prison camps led to world-wide ministry. She was an old woman when I met her. She called herself a tramp for the Lord at the end of her life. I remember Corrie sitting on the PBC platform with Marge Snyder, a young singer and song writer, talking with great familiarity about the ministry of angels. The elderly tramp for the Lord made an impression on me I'll never forget.

Some don't quit; they keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. They assume their Father has something good for them. That is what our Lord is reminding us of here.

Verse 12 is in some ways a curious conclusion to these thoughts. It's hard to know precisely how the ideas fit together. But I think the point is this: We are to be learning that our Father is good to us, and we are to be receptive of his gifts, unwilling to live without his blessing, persistent in our knocking, and continually expressing our longings for what he would give us. A deep commitment to these truths will make us like him, a gloriously good Father who is marvelous in his gift-giving. We should be the kind of people who actively seek to be a blessing to other people. We should treat others as we would like to be treated. Each child of God should be an activist, a seeker of giving blessing to others, because our Father is that way. "...This sums up the Law and the Prophets."

### **Don't take the easy way out**

Verses 13-14 bring us to the second challenge:

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.

Imagine a very broad highway, so wide that you might not even notice the gate that you pass through. It is filled with people all going the same direction. There are no hard decisions to make, either in relationships or in what you travel with. You can take everything with you, fill a moving van with everything you ever wanted and travel down the broad road.

But there is also a narrow gate that leads to a narrow road. You must make decisions to find the narrow gate first of all, then to go through it, and then to stay on the road that travels off beyond the gate. Two things are apparent: First, you're going to have to disappoint people to go through the narrow gate. There are many on the wide road, but only a handful, relatively speaking, on the narrow road. So you have to leave some people behind, say no to their companionship, and stop being like them. You have to go in a different direction and stand for different things. It will involve some risks in relationships to make it through the narrow gate onto the narrow road. Secondly, you can't take as much with you. If the track is very narrow, you can't take great carts of things; you can only carry a few essential things.

Traveling east from here, you could end up at a trail head in the Sierras with a backpack on, and the trail lead could lead to a beautiful high lake, clear air, and sincere fellowship with some close friends. Or you could load up the RV with everything you've ever owned, all your work and all your pleasure, and drive to one of the RV lots in Las Vegas where a monstrous casino holds acre-size rooms. Room for everybody. Everything you've ever wanted seems possible, and nothing difficult is ever asked of you. Despite its accomodating welcome, a casino is not a place to find life.

Remember the story of Eric Liddel? The movie *Chariots of Fire* was made about this Olympian and future missionary to China in the 1920s who, for God's sake, refused to run a race that for him would have dishonored the Lord, even though he was the favorite to win a gold medal. He was under pressure from his nation and everybody else to do what his convictions wouldn't let him do. But earlier in the story, he and his sister were speaking about his life as a sprinter. He said, "God made me for a purpose-for China-but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure."

That was enough for him, and people on the narrow road have that benefit at least. We may have to say no to some people. We may have to be peculiar and different. We may lose out on opportunities. We may have difficulty of all sorts. We may have to leave behind things that we like and want. But we have the pleasure of God. He made us for a purpose, and we have his approval. We will discover that it is enough for us.

### **Don't substitute talk for reality**

The third challenge, and the third arena in which we will make choices that make us either more like Ebenezer Scrooge or more like Jesus Christ, is to refuse to substitute talk for reality. The two paragraphs below are about speech that is elevated higher than the heart. John wrote in 1 John 3:18, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth." I've heard Texans speak of people who are all hat and no cattle, or all sizzle and no steak. They have talk, appearance, flash-the outward things-but nothing on the inside. Verses 15-23:

"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.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he 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 perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

The first problem consists of those who say they are prophets, who appear to be sheep, who claim with their words that what they are saying is of God; but it is a lie. They are ferocious destroyers; they are using religious

speech to deceive and take advantage of people. You can't always immediately detect such people. But Jesus says the final test is this: What are the results of the things they say and teach?

Language is curious in its power. All of us probably find certain speech patterns or accents or ways of saying things compelling. Some people love an English accent. Any time they hear an English accent, they assume the person knows what they are talking about. There are those who have grown up in urban settings who are responsive to rappers' speech. For them such language, rhymes, and meter are captivating. The rapper's call suggests that what is being said is something important, whether it is or not. For some, the language of great learning, sprinkled with quotes from Latin and Greek and German, with a large vocabulary of long words, makes an impression. They think, "This person must be telling the truth."

### **Test the fruit**

But Jesus says we are to look at the reality: What kind of fruit is there? There are three ways we might measure fruit. First, look at the Scriptures to see if what the person says is true. They may have brilliant, marvelously illustrated homiletics, but is what they say in the Bible? Do the conclusions they're drawing or the cause they're advancing resonate with what God has already taught us?

Secondly, look at their lives. Do they live what they say, do they "walk their talk"? Are they one kind of person saying great things on TV, behind the pulpit, or on the stage in front of the crowd, and somebody else when they live their real lives? Do they mistreat their family, embezzle funds, or run off with the secretary? Or do their lives back up what they say?

Thirdly, look at those who follow what they teach. Part of the fruit will be what happens in the lives of the people who listen to them. Are they more mature? Are they free? Do they love Christ? Are they growing in a sense of purpose and direction? Or are they everlastingly dependent on their teacher? If month after month and year after year people are more and more slavishly dependent on their teacher, needing more and more to be told what to do, you are seeing very bad fruit indeed. The truth sets people free, it doesn't create slaves.

The second place in which talk can be a destructive substitute for reality is in our own lives, not just those of false teachers. On the Day of the Lord some will go before the Lord Jesus and in a familiar way say, "Lord, Lord," and get no response; and they will say more loudly, "Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons, and perform miracles?" And Jesus will say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

I used to think this passage was about people who did in fact prophesy, drive out demons, and perform miracles in Jesus' name. But the Lord does not say, "Yes, you've done those things, but you were not true disciples in any case"; he does not agree that what they say happened. He just says, "Away from me."

It is easy to generate apparent miracles, phony demon bindings, waves of emotion, barking, staggering, and forms of rapid speech, none of which have anything to do with discipleship, hearts' being changed, or Jesus' being Lord. We can sing songs about Christ, speak eloquently of him ourselves, or feel emotional stabs. But is there internal change that underlies the visible, or have we learned to substitute talk for reality?

### **Scrooge or Christ**

To review, every day we are becoming either more like the hard-hearted man, Ebenezer Scrooge, or more like the free man, Jesus Christ. It happens in small stages, in the many decisions we make today about who we'll be, not in great leaps across chasms from one reality to the next. Finally we will either be the kind of people who quit too soon, take the easy way out, and let talk substitute for action; or we will not.

This is an important time of year to make decisions. The true meaning of Christmas is something any thoughtful person wrestles with after awhile. It is a good time to review the consistency of our discipleship. God become human. We can know for sure that the light has been sent into the darkness, and the darkness is going to be rolled back. And we can be the sort of people who continue to ask, seek and knock rather than quit too soon; who find the narrow gate and choose the narrow road rather than take the easy way; whose speech is

backed up by inner reality. We can say, "Lord, make the truth real to me. Drive it home. Transform me from the inside."

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