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ROUTES AND FRUITS

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

By Danny Hall

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 caught us all by surprise. None of us imagined that anything like that could happen in America. Now there's a lot of hand-wringing going on about why we didn't anticipate it. Blame is passed around as to who should have known what. In 20/20 hindsight we realize we ought to have been alert to the dangers that were around us. But the truth is, very few of us ever are; so many times in life we are caught by surprise.

I would suggest that one of the major issues that you and I face as we seek to follow Christ is becoming alert to the ways that our spiritual lives can be in danger. How can we be prepared for this battle that we are in?

We are approaching the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. In 7:13-27 Jesus gives us four words of warning. We'll look at the first three in this message and the last one in the next message as we wrap up the main teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, Jesus has been building the case that the kingdom of God is something other than what his followers thought it was. He radically redefines the kingdom of God not as those who are ethnic Jews, but as those who are committed to him—King Jesus, the One who is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law and Prophets. Jesus sets himself apart as the One to whom all loyalty is due. He lays out a picture of what we as his followers ought to be like and how we ought to live: We are loyal to him, seeking to develop a personal relationship with him that then transforms our lives in such a way that we make a difference in our world. We shine out as lights in the darkness; we're the salt of the earth. The transforming power of his grace in our lives having made us visible in our community, we direct people (as the nation of Israel was originally intended to do) to turn their eyes not toward us but toward Jesus. But as we live out our faith, we have to assume that there's going to be radical opposition and persecution. These are defining characteristics of being part of the kingdom of God.

Jesus goes on to say that the life of the kingdom is one of radically trusting God for everything that we need, because he is absolutely trustworthy. We must also be radically dependent on one another. As a community that is vibrantly alive in faith and commitment not only to Jesus Christ but to each other, we build one another up and also challenge one another, but in ways that are productive, not destructive. United together as the body of Christ, we truly make a difference.

Now in his conclusion, he will tell us that there are things that can trip us up and cause us to miss the kingdom of God. These three warnings that we're going to look at concern different challenges that you and I will face as we seek to be kingdom people. The first challenge is that of the world.

The way of the world

Verses 13-14:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and

there are few who find it.

Jesus proposes that there are two gates that lead to two respective ways, which in turn have two respective outcomes. The entrance into the kingdom of God is a narrow, tight gate. It leads to a narrow way that, even though difficult, has a glorious outcome: life itself. In contrast to that, there's a wider, more appealing gate, one that is easier to get through. It leads to a way that is easier, broader, less fraught with peril. But its outcome is destruction. Let's examine the two ways.

The whole Sermon on the Mount up to this point has been describing what the narrow way is: a lifestyle of loyalty to Christ, which means suffering, persecution, and difficulty most of the time. Many times I have heard people talk about the blessings of God if you come to Christ. But you seldom hear that there's a cost to following Christ as well. There are enormous, immeasurable benefits to knowing God in Christ, but it is also true that there are many, many difficult things. Coming to Christ complicates our lives in ways we never anticipated.

When we come to Christ, all of a sudden we have a different set of priorities. It requires a transformation of the way we think and act, even the way we process truth. We're challenged continually to try to find the mind of God and to live it out. When we do, there are people who misunderstand us. They think we've gone off the deep end. There are all kinds of ways that following Christ complicates our lives.

In contrast to that, Jesus says there's a broad way, the way of the world. It is much more attractive to us because it appeals to our flesh. It offers us things like self-fulfillment, pleasure, achievement, and affirmation from the world system. Glory and attainment in the world system is a very heady thing. It is an easier path because so many go that way, and because it offers tangible, immediate gratification. Many times the idea of self-denial for the sake of Christ is very unappealing. Sometimes our lives are painful enough that we just long to feel good for a moment, and as that whole enticing smorgasbord of the things of this world is laid out before us, it looks really good! Why would I choose a way that places demands on my life, even if, at the end of it all, there's supposed to be this wonderful thing called eternal life? Those who have followed Christ may say, "My life in personal relationship with Christ has been rich." But for so many people staring that idea in the face, it seems a lot easier to grasp the things around them that are more tangible, more appealing to their flesh, that will make them feel happier and more successful in the moment.

Jesus raises this enormous challenge: "Choose. There are two gates: a broad one that's easy, comfortable, and enticing, and a narrow one. But the narrow one is the one that leads you to real life."

Jesus' second warning is about the challenge of false teachers or false prophets.

Wolves in sheep's clothing

Verses 15-20:

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Jesus understands that his followers will quickly be surrounded by other voices offering different solutions to life, proclaiming that they have the truth. So as kingdom people they will have to discern the difference between God's truth and different ways proclaimed by others.

Now, these false teachers are by nature very seductive. Notice how they are described: “who come to you in sheep’s clothing.” In other words, they are disguised in ways that allow them to easily infiltrate our world. There is often a bait-and-switch going on. Their presentation is very enticing and appealing. It sounds good, looks good, and often is framed in language that is very accessible to us. Yet underneath, not only are these false teachers seductive, but they are destructive. Notice, Jesus says inwardly they are ravenous wolves, set to devour us.

Throughout the New Testament there are many references to the problem of false teaching, a spiritual message or an explanation of reality that sounds wonderfully enticing, but is hollow and is meant to lead us astray. Often those who make such proclamations have their own agendas in mind. Paul addresses this when he is sharing some instruction about ministry with Timothy. In both his first and second letters to Timothy he speaks pointedly about the problem of false teachers:

“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.” (1 Timothy 1:5-7)

He warns Timothy that there are going to be people who come and act like they know what they’re talking about. They’ll have a well-designed presentation about spiritual matters. They’ll even use the Scriptures and spiritual language. But, they’ll begin to twist it, thinking they understand it, but they really have no clue what they’re talking about. And the agenda they’ll be committed to is drawing people’s attention to themselves and away from Christ. Their voices will be powerful, seductive.

But how are we going to discern them? Jesus gives us a formula. It’s complicated to apply, but simple to understand: “You will know them by their fruits.” They must be found out by looking at their lives. Paul told Timothy that the goal of their instruction was love from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and a sincere faith. The goal of the true teaching of God is to produce people who are in love with God, whose lives are pure and holy, and who are being transformed by God’s grace. True teachers of God’s word are people who care that you find God, find his truth, grow in understanding of him and in relationship with him, and be transformed by his powerful grace.

False teachers are more concerned about attracting you to themselves. One of the dead giveaways of false teachers is how they live their own lives: *not* with a pure conscience, *not* with a loving heart toward you, but with a heart of selfish hunger for power that is designed to make them the center of attention or to lift them up as someone who is an authority in the spiritual realm, appealing to you to go along with them as they seek their own self-fulfillment apart from God. I believe the fruit by which we can know false teachers is the totality of who they are: the combination of how accurate what they teach is according to God’s revealed word, and what it produces in their lives. Passage after passage in Scripture describes false teachers. Second Peter 2:1-22 lays out an ugly picture of the lifestyle of some of the false teachers with whom Peter was contending: they were given to all kinds of immoral acts and destructive behaviors. Their teaching had an air of spirituality about it, but their personal lives were a mess.

So the call for us is to be discerning and wise, to understand that there are false voices arguing that their way is the way to truth. And the way to figure out what’s right and what’s wrong is to simply pay attention.

What are these voices like in our own day? Down through the history of the church there have always been false teaching, cults, and various permutations of truth. Some of these ideas about God have been continually recycled and challenged by the church. I think the climate in which spiritual issues are talked about in our day is interesting. We see a merging of truth with pop spirituality. Biblical language is used in this pop spirituality. We live in an age when people are very interested in spiritual things. On one level that’s really good news, because

it allows us to participate in a broader discussion of spirituality that's at the forefront of our society. Hopefully we can speak and live truth in that mix, and demonstrate the greatness of God's grace in Christ.

One of the most important spiritual influences in America is Oprah, who has made a career of being the high priestess of pop spirituality. In our society as well as many other societies, women tend to be more in tune with the spiritual side of their lives than men are, so the influence of someone like Oprah is tremendous. It amazes me. She comes out of a Christian background, and almost all of her own personal spiritual language is Christian. But it is now wedded with a wide variety of other spiritual movements. The problem I see with that is that we are easily seduced into thinking that it doesn't matter what anybody believes or does, as long as they're "spiritual." That's the seductive nature of false teaching. It somehow assures us that it's okay to stray away from the truth of who Jesus Christ is.

But our concern is not winning an argument. That is what's sometimes wrong with a Christian response to this. The concern is that people understand the nature of reality: that we all need a personal relationship with God because we've been created for it, but that this relationship has been blocked because of our sinfulness, so that we need a special kind of Savior. The reason we contend for the faith and lift up the name of Jesus is because we understand that the deepest need of our hearts is to be connected to God, to be forgiven of our sins, and to live in the kind of eternal fellowship with God for which we were created; and there is no place where that is found except in the sacrifice of Christ.

Another example of pop spirituality is Cabala, which is based on an esoteric interpretation of Judaism. Madonna practices it, and it's very popular. One problem with the pop spirituality of our day is that it's often attached to celebrity names, which creates a certain curiosity in people's hearts about it.

All of this is appealing because it allows you to construct a spiritual life for yourself, the moral component of which is self-determined. It's not rooted in the transcendent God of the universe who has revealed his holy character to us and invites us to participate in his holiness, to know it and to be transformed into it.

In 2 Timothy 4:1-4 Paul also challenges this kind of spirituality:

"I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

That's Paul's description of the world that Timothy was going to minister in two thousand years ago. How incredibly relevant those words are to us today! People want a sense of spirituality with spiritual language that tickles their ears, that allows them to construct their own spiritual kingdom and spiritual direction apart from the word of God.

Jesus' third challenge warns against relying on what I call our own spiritual constructs.

Self-defined obedience

We have to be careful that we don't miss the kingdom of God because our measure of whether or not we are living as kingdom people is merely what we think it ought to be, apart from what God tells us it ought to be. Notice how Jesus expresses this in terms of its outcome in verses 21-23:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

There is an irony here. The word “lord” had a broad range of meanings, the most common of which was teacher or rabbi. It was very common for people in that day to find a spiritual teacher or leader, form a little group around him, much as Jesus’ disciples themselves did, and follow that teacher around. He would be their mentor in life. Probably the title “Lord, Lord” addressed to Jesus would connote that he was their teacher.

What Jesus has been doing all along is radically redefining terminology, and he’s filling in the term “lord” with a content deeper and broader than the common usage. He’s filling it with the idea that he is far more to his followers than just a teacher. There’s a deeper reality here that Jesus is pointing to: he is *the* Lord, *the* Master, and he calls those who would follow him to absolute loyalty to him.

Notice, he points them toward the Father. They say, “Lord, Lord, I prophesied for you! I cast out demons for you! I’ve done miracles in your name!” But what he is highlighting is a tendency for us to evaluate our lives based on self-determined criteria. As I’ve mentioned before, everywhere I’ve ever been in the Christian world, there is some definition of what it means to be a good Christian. We all have our own view of what that is. We measure how good we are by this rather narrow little list of things. Jesus says, “Sorry, but there’s something deeper and more important than that: Are you doing the will of my Father?”

The only way to understand the will of the Father is to know the Father personally. So once again we’re driven back to the idea of a deep, powerful, personal relationship with the Father, from which a total willingness to simply do his will issues, wherever that may lead us and however it may manifest itself in our lives. You see, the creation of our own spiritual comfort zones helps us to rely on certain kinds of performance rather than on a personal relationship with the Father. But we need to see our faith in terms of this multi-faceted relationship. The most powerful imagery for this relationship, as we discussed in the last message (Discovery Paper 4914), is that of father and child. But another powerful image of our relationship with God is that of master and servant. And while the Father calls us into fellowship with himself, and loves us and cares for us as his children, he also is our Master, and invites us to serve him with our whole heart and with absolute loyalty. It is when our heart is given to God and his agenda becomes our own life agenda that we have found the true way of the kingdom.

Recently I had a wonderful personal example of how easy it is to be so caught up in your concerns that you miss the big picture. I have a men’s group that I’ve been hanging out with for about a year. Three of the men, Richard Kramer, Randy Rubingh and Rod Vance, are all avid kayakers. They had been after me to join them for a long time, and they finally got me out on the water at Seaport. I was a little nervous about it, because I had never been in a kayak. At first I was doing okay, and I was starting to feel pretty good about myself. Then I did the obligatory dunk—rolled the boat and fell out, and had to learn how to get back in the boat. They were all cheering me on and giving me great instruction. We were having a grand old time. I began to get the hang of it, so we were headed out of this inlet toward the mouth of the main part of the bay. It was about 6:45 PM, so it was getting steadily darker, but it was a gorgeous, warm night. At the mouth of the bay, Randy and Rod went a little farther out so they could play in the waves in their boats, but Richard was feeling sorry for the poor guy who was still struggling, and hung back with me a little bit.

When I tried to turn in the waves, I would get slapped by one and get knocked out of the boat. The second time this happened, we were trying to get the boat righted and get me back into the boat, when we noticed Rod paddling back to us as fast as he could, screaming at us. He was flicking his flashlight and pointing over our heads like crazy. We looked up, and there was a gigantic barge being pushed out from the port. Rod could see that Richard and I were directly in its path. I had been so caught up with my own little problems that I wasn’t paying a lick of attention. In fact, I didn’t even know that big ships came through that channel, and they had assumed that I knew more than I did. Richard and I were still thinking that I could right the boat, get in, and paddle out. But Rod ordered in a very firm voice, “Danny, grab the back of my boat now and let me paddle you out of here!” So I grabbed onto the back of his boat and he and Richard paddled away from where we had drifted into the main channel as the barge went by.

I’ve thought about that since then (many times). I realized how typical that was of our lives. God’s voice comes out to us over and over again the same way Rod’s voice came to me. We’re drifting into the channel of

destruction, and he's watching us and saying, "Grab the back of my boat now! Let me pull you to safety where you ought to be."

This is what Jesus is warning us about. We all need to realize that we easily drift into harm's way, and when we do, we need to grab onto God and let him pull us to safety. If we want to be people of the kingdom of God, we must heed these warnings.

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