The Bob Mendelsohn Digital Biblical Library Commentary Series

The Gospel According to Matthew

Matthew 7: The King Calls for a Decision

Key Verse

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.” — Matthew 7:24

Big Idea

Kingdom citizenship is tested by our response to the King. Yeshua calls us to discern humbly, trust our generous Father, choose the narrow way, recognize good fruit and build our lives upon His words. Starting well is good. Finishing well is better.

Introduction

They say the neon lights are bright on Broadway. Popularity is a valued commodity in our world. We like being liked. We notice when other people approve of us, and we certainly notice when they don't.

Matthew 7 takes us in another direction. Yeshua is not calling His talmidim to find the popular way, but the Kingdom way. Sometimes those will be very different roads.

This is the third and final part of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5 introduced us to Kingdom citizens and the rightness of the Kingdom. Matthew 6 took us into our attitudes, motives and practices before the Father. Now Matthew 7 tests that Kingdom citizenship. What will we actually do with what the King has said?

The number two keeps appearing. Two brothers and two pieces of wood. Two fathers. Two gates and two ways. Two kinds of prophets and fruit. Finally, two builders and two foundations. Yeshua keeps putting alternatives in front of us. With nods to Robert Frost, as if there are two roads diverged in a yellow wood. And choices have consequences.

The popular road is broad—Broadway, if you like. The other way is narrow. Yeshua does not disguise the difference or promise that following Him will always win the approval of the crowd. He calls us to choose Him and then to keep walking with Him.

Matthew 7 brings the Sermon on the Mount to its point of decision. Yeshua teaches His talmidim how to judge without becoming judgmental, how to trust the generosity of their Father, and how to discern between two very different ways of living.

The chapter then becomes increasingly pointed. There are false prophets to recognize, religious claims that may not match reality, and two people who hear exactly the same words of Yeshua. One builds on them. The other does not.

Hearing the King is not the end of discipleship. What matters is what we do with what we have heard.

Opening Prayer

Father, help me to hear the words of Yeshua as more than familiar sayings. Show me where I judge others while ignoring what needs attention in my own life. Give me discernment without judgmentalism, confidence in Your generosity, and courage to walk Your way even when it is not the popular one.

Challenge the way I think and live today. Help me not only to hear the words of the King, but to build my life upon them. Amen.

Commentary

Judging Others Without Being Judgmental

Matthew 7:1–6

“Do not judge, so that you will not be judged” (7:1). Few sayings of Yeshua are quoted more readily. “Don't judge me.” Sometimes that is taken to mean that we should never evaluate, never make a determination and never exercise discernment. But that's not even close to what Yeshua is saying.

We know that because only five verses later He tells us not to give what is holy to dogs or throw our pearls before swine (7:6). To obey that instruction, I must make a judgment. I must discern something about the person and the situation in front of me. Later in this same chapter Yeshua will tell us to beware of false prophets and recognize them by their fruit. That also requires judgment.

The problem is not judging. It is judgmentalism.

Yeshua warns against the harshly critical spirit that is very good at identifying someone else's faults while remaining remarkably blind to its own. “For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you” (7:2). So be careful with the measuring cup you choose.

If I measure other people harshly, critically and without mercy, I should not be surprised when that same measure comes back to me. Kingdom people know something about mercy because we know how much mercy we ourselves require.

Then Yeshua gives us one of His wonderfully exaggerated pictures. One brother has a speck of sawdust in his eye. The other fellow volunteers to fix it while walking around with a plank sticking out of his own. Some years ago, I had LASIK surgery. Before that I had worn extraordinarily thick glasses since I was about eleven. The surgery itself was amazingly quick, and suddenly I could see long distances without those Coca-Cola-bottle lenses. I could even hit a golf ball and see where it went—which wasn't necessarily where I wanted it to go.

But imagine arriving for eye surgery and discovering that the surgeon had a large wooden block sticking out of her own eye. “Have a seat, Bob. I'll take care of that eye for you.” I don't think so. That's the absurdity Yeshua wants us to consider. Before appointing myself the fixer of somebody else's problem, I need to deal honestly with my own. Self-examination must precede correction.

But notice that Yeshua does not say to forget about the speck. “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye” (7:5). There is a place for helping one another. The goal is restoration, not condemnation. I can help my brother better when I approach him as another person who needs grace rather than as the fellow who has appointed himself to fix everybody else.

Life Application

Some families, workplaces and congregations seem always to have a designated fixer and someone designated to be fixed. Before I rush to correct someone else, Yeshua invites me to look in the mirror. Is there something in me that needs attention first? Am I trying to help, or do I simply enjoy being right? Deal with my plank first. Then perhaps I'll be able to see my brother—and his speck—more clearly.

Dogs, Pigs and Pearls

Matthew 7:6

“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine” (7:6). This isn't disconnected from what Yeshua has just said. It provides the necessary balance. Don't be judgmental, but do be discerning. Dogs and pigs are hardly honored animals in Jewish biblical imagery. Pigs were unclean, and “dogs” could be used contemptuously for outsiders. But Yeshua has already been including Gentiles in Matthew's story. This cannot simply mean, “Gentiles are dogs.”

Ethnicity is not the point. Not every Gentile is a dog, and not every Jew is automatically acting like a child of Abraham. Yeshua is describing people by the way they respond to what is holy. There may even be a Temple resonance in the phrase “what is holy.” Holy portions belonged within Israel's worship and were eaten by the priests. Now Yeshua warns His talmidim not to handle what belongs to God carelessly.

Sometimes we offer God's truth to someone who simply wants to trample it and then turn on us. Wisdom knows when to continue speaking and when to stop. Kingdom love is generous, but it isn't naïve.

The Father Invites Us to Ask

Matthew 7:7–12

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (7:7). Having told us to look carefully at ourselves and to exercise discernment toward others, Yeshua turns our attention back to the Father. Ask. Seek. Knock. The language is wonderfully uncomplicated.

The Greek verbs imply continuing action. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. This isn't because God is reluctant and needs to be worn down. Prayer isn't an attempt to overcome the Father's unwillingness. It is the continuing expression of our dependence upon Him.

Then Yeshua introduces another comparison—two fathers. “Suppose a son asks his father for bread. What father hands him a stone? Suppose he asks for a fish. Does his father give him a snake? Of course not. The questions are deliberately ridiculous. I understand this even better as a

grandfather. A granddaughter asks you for something and your natural inclination is to give it to her. If she asks for lunch, you don't hand her a snake.

Then comes the kal va-chomer, the familiar Jewish argument from the lesser to the greater: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” (7:11). How much more. We've met this way of reasoning before. If ordinary, imperfect human parents know how to give good things to their children, how much more can we trust the generosity of our heavenly Father? We don't have to persuade Him to care. We ask because He has invited us to ask.

The Prodigal Father

This generosity reminds me of the story we usually call the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. We normally attach the word prodigal to the younger son because he spends his inheritance extravagantly. But watch the father.

The younger son effectively says, “Dad, I'd rather have your money now than wait for you to die.” And remarkably, the father gives him the inheritance. The son takes it, wastes it and eventually finds himself in a pigpen—a particularly miserable picture for a Jewish son. Finally he turns toward home, rehearsing the speech he intends to give his father. He'll confess what he has done and offer to become a servant. But before he can get there, his father runs to meet him.

The father doesn't stand at the door waiting for the boy to crawl home. He runs toward him. Then come the robe, the ring and the fatted calf. The father who has already given gives yet more. That's prodigal generosity. Prodigal does not mean ‘wayward’ but rather effusive and overflowing.

When I consider the characters in the story, I've sometimes been that younger son. I've made a mess of things and then thought, “Maybe I'll come back to God. I'll work harder. I'll do more religion. Perhaps I can straighten this out.” And I turn toward Him only to discover that the Father is not waiting to whack me upside the head. His arms are open. That's the Father Yeshua wants us to know. If earthly fathers, imperfect as we are, know how to give good gifts, kal va-chomer—how much more our Father in heaven.

Life Application

Sometimes our prayers reveal what we really think God is like. We approach Him as though He must be talked into generosity, or as though we need exactly the right words before He will listen. Yeshua says: ask. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. Not because the Father is stingy, but because He is good.

The Golden Rule

Yeshua then brings this section back to the way we treat other people: “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you” (7:12).

We call this the Golden Rule, but the basic idea wasn't new with Yeshua. Similar sayings were already known in Jewish tradition. Tobit says, “What you hate, do to no one” (Tobit 4:15). And Hillel famously taught: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”

The Hillel line comes from a well-known story about him. A Gentile challenged Hillel to explain the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel gave him that summary and then told him that the rest was commentary.

But notice what Yeshua does. The earlier formulations are negative: don't do to someone else what you wouldn't want done to you.

Yeshua makes it positive. Don't merely refrain from hurting someone. Do for them what you would want them to do for you. That requires initiative. Kingdom rightness isn't satisfied with saying, “Well, I didn't hurt anybody today.” It asks how I can actively seek another person's good. Then Yeshua says something enormous: “For this is the Torah and the Prophets” (7:12). You want to know what Torah looks like when it gets lived out? Treat people the way you would want to be treated. Take the initiative. Be generous.

And there is a connection here with what Yeshua has just told us about the Father. People who know the Father's generosity, His prodigal nature, ought to become generous people.

Life Application

I can see another person's actions. I cannot see their motives. Sometimes I don't even fully understand my own motives. So I should be very careful about claiming to know why somebody else did what they did. I can discern. I can evaluate what is actually in front of me. But when I don't know, generosity is a good place to begin.

Treat them the way I would want them to treat me.

Two Gates, Two Ways

Matthew 7:13–14

Now Yeshua puts two gates and two ways in front of us. “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” (7:13).

They say the neon lights are bright on Broadway. There is something attractive about the broad way. It's popular. There are plenty of people traveling in the same direction, and there is comfort in being part of the crowd. If everybody else seems to be going that way, surely it can't be too bad.

Yeshua says otherwise.

The gate is narrow and the way that leads to life is narrow, and relatively few find it. Following the King may mean walking against the traffic. If you've ever tried walking the wrong direction through a crowded city street, you know the feeling. Everyone else is coming toward you, and you have to keep making the deliberate choice to continue against the flow. Sometimes following Yeshua feels like that.

There is a social price to discipleship. Once I recognize that some people or practices are pulling me away from God, I may have to stop traveling with them. And when I find people who love God's Word, serve others and want to follow Yeshua faithfully, those are people with whom I want to walk.

The narrow way is not narrow because God takes pleasure in keeping people out. Matthew has already shown us Gentiles and other unlikely people being welcomed into the story. The invitation is wonderfully broad. But the way itself is defined by the King. We don't get to invent another road and then demand that it arrive at the same destination.

The Gate and the Way

I think the distinction between the gate and the way matters. The gate is the entry point. The way is what comes afterward. You enter a stadium through a gate. You show your ticket and you're admitted. But you haven't watched the game yet. You still have somewhere to go. In the same way, beginning with Messiah matters enormously. There is a point at which we turn toward Him, trust Him and begin to follow.

But entering is not the same thing as walking.

The Messianic life isn't simply about being able to point backward and say, “I started.” Yeshua calls us to continue with Him. Starting well is good. Finishing well is better. That's going to become increasingly important as we move toward the end of this chapter. Two roads will become two kinds of fruit and finally two houses. Yeshua is not merely asking whether we once entered a gate. He's asking what kind of life we are building.

Life Application

Popularity is a poor compass. If I determine my direction by asking where everybody else is going, I'll probably find the broad road fairly easily. Following Yeshua requires another question: Where is the King going? Sometimes His way will put me alongside a crowd. Sometimes it will put me against the traffic. My task isn't to choose the popular or unpopular road simply because it is popular or unpopular.

My task is to follow Him.

Two Kinds of Prophets—and Their Fruit

Matthew 7:15–20

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (7:15). This is another reason we cannot interpret “Do not judge” as “Never make a judgment.” Yeshua now commands His talmidim to evaluate people who claim to speak for God. And appearances won't be enough.

A false prophet doesn't normally arrive wearing a badge that says FALSE PROPHET. Sheep's clothing looks reassuring. Religious language can sound convincing. Gifts can be impressive. A ministry can attract crowds. So how do we know? “You will know them by their fruits” (7:16).

Grapes don't grow on thorn bushes, and figs don't grow on thistles. Yeshua's point is almost childishly simple: eventually a tree produces according to what it is. That means discernment takes time. Charisma can impress us immediately. Fruit takes longer. I want to know not only what someone teaches, but what kind of life grows around that teaching. Does this person's ministry increasingly point people toward Yeshua or toward himself? What happens to the people entrusted to that leader? Is there accountability? Is there integrity when nobody is applauding?

This matters especially with religious leaders. A person may appear successful and still be deeply unhealthy underneath.

A Test for Prophecy

Derek Prince, one of the Bible teachers who influenced me for many decades, suggested several useful tests when evaluating someone who claims to speak prophetically. Among them:

• Does it build up, encourage or admonish God's people (1 Corinthians 14:3)?

• Does it agree with Scripture rather than contradict it (Isaiah 8:20)?

• Does it center on and exalt Yeshua (Revelation 19:10)?

• What fruit does it produce in character and conduct?

• If it predicts something, does it actually happen (Deuteronomy 18:20–22)?

• Even if a prediction happens, does the prophet lead people toward God rather than away from Him (Deuteronomy 13:1–5)?

• Does it produce the freedom and life of God's Spirit rather than bondage and death (Romans 8:15; 2 Corinthians 3:6)?

• Is there confirmation from other mature members of the Body of Messiah (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 John 2:27)?

No single impressive moment proves a prophet genuine. Look at the fruit.

"I Never Knew You"

Matthew 7:21–23

Yeshua's warning becomes more searching: "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 will enter" (7:21).

These are sobering words. And notice who is speaking them. Yeshua doesn't say that people will stand before the Father and appeal to Him. They stand before Yeshua. He is the one they call "Lord, Lord," and He is the one who renders the verdict. Then their résumé comes out. "Did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" (7:22). Those are impressive claims. If we met these people today, we might be impressed by their ministries. Prophecy. Deliverance. Miracles. Surely those things prove that someone belongs to God.

Yeshua says they don't.

Religious activity is not the same thing as relationship with God. Spiritual gifts are not the same thing as godly character. Public success is not necessarily evidence of the Father's approval. And that takes us straight back to the fruit.

What About My Failures?

But there is a danger in reading these verses. A sincere believer can hear them and immediately start wondering, "What about me? I had a bad day. I sinned. I judged somebody harshly. I said something I shouldn't have said. Does this mean I'm not going to make it?" No. Yeshua is not teaching perfectionism.

The person who belongs to God is not the person who can stand before Him and boast, "Look how well I performed." In fact, that's precisely what these people are doing.

"Didn't I prophesy? Didn't I cast out demons? Didn't I perform miracles?" Their confidence is in their own religious résumé. The disciple's confidence is somewhere else entirely.

I don't boast in my purity. I boast in my forgiver, my redeemer, my Savior. When I fail, the answer is not to pretend I haven't failed or to produce a list of religious achievements to compensate for it. The answer is honesty before the Father who already knows me. And that connects directly with what Yeshua has just taught us about our prodigal Father. The younger son in Luke 15 came home with no résumé worth presenting. His story was failure. He could only admit what he had done and entrust himself to his father's mercy.

That's where grace met him.

Known by the King

Yeshua says something particularly striking in verse 23: “I never knew you.” He doesn't say, “You never knew Me.” The language is relational. It is possible to know things about God, talk about God and even do impressive things in God's name without truly belonging to Him. That's frightening if our confidence is in our religious performance. But it is wonderfully freeing if our confidence is in the King who knows us. Sometimes we compartmentalise our lives. We have rooms we are happy for God to enter and other rooms we keep locked, as though He cannot see behind the door. He already knows what's there so stop hiding. Let Him have His way in you. Let Him have His way with you. That's where life begins.

Don't hide.

Lawlessness

Yeshua calls these people “you who practice lawlessness” (7:23). The Greek word is anomia: a- meaning without, and nomos, law. For Jewish hearers, nomos naturally brings Torah into view. But Yeshua isn't saying that entry into the Kingdom depends upon achieving flawless Torah observance. The whole Sermon on the Mount has exposed something much deeper than external compliance.

These people have impressive religious claims while resisting the Father's rule. That is the tragedy. They have substituted religious performance for surrender. The person who truly knows the Father discovers two things: who God is and who I am not. Knowing who I am keeps me from boasting.

Knowing who He is keeps me from despairing.

Life Application

There is a world of difference between saying: “Look what I've done for God.” and saying: “Look what God has done for me.” When I succeed, I need His grace. When I fail, I need His grace. My confidence is not that I have accumulated enough spiritual achievements to impress Him. My confidence is in the King who knows me.

Two Builders, Two Foundations

Matthew 7:24–27

Yeshua finishes the sermon with two builders. And the most important thing to notice is what they have in common. Both of them hear the words of Yeshua. One hears and acts. The other hears and doesn't. That's the difference. The two houses also face exactly the same storm. Rain falls. Floods come. Winds blow and slam against both houses. Following Yeshua doesn't exempt us from storms.

We've seen what storms can do around Sydney. I remember the terrible damage along the Northern Beaches when houses at Collaroy were threatened as the sea tore away the ground beneath them. A building can look perfectly secure until the foundation is tested. I remember something else from across the street from where we worked for many years. After our little one-story building was demolished to make way for a much larger development, the builders seemed to spend forever digging down. Before they could build upward, they had to reach bedrock.

That's the part nobody admires when the building is finished. Nobody stands outside a twenty-story building and says, “What a magnificent foundation!” You can't even see it. But when the storm comes, what you cannot see may determine whether everything you can see remains standing. Yeshua says the wise person “hears these words of Mine and acts on them” (7:24).

The foolish builder hears exactly the same words. His problem isn't ignorance. His problem is that hearing never becomes doing. Both hear. Only one builds on what he hears.

Life Application

Bible study can become another religious activity. I can underline the verse. I can explain the Greek. I can tell somebody else what the passage means. I can even teach a Bible class about it. And still build on sand. The question at the end of the Sermon on the Mount isn't simply: What did I learn? It is: What choices will I make with what the King has said?

The Authority of the King

Matthew 7:28–29

“When Yeshua had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28–29). The crowds were amazed. Why? It wasn't simply because Yeshua was a gifted communicator. Teachers commonly established their arguments by citing authorities who had gone before them: according to this teacher, according to that rabbi, according to this interpretation.

Yeshua doesn't do that. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount we have heard Him say, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you.” He speaks with His own authority. That should stop us for a moment. Who is this guy?

That's really one of the questions Matthew has been asking since the beginning of his Gospel. Who can speak this way? Who can take us into the Torah and declare with authority what Kingdom rightness actually looks like? Who can say that our response to His words determines whether we are building on rock or sand? Others might offer their interpretations, but Yeshua speaks as though His interpretation carries final authority.

The crowds recognize that they are hearing something different. And somewhere along the way, those of us who follow Yeshua have had to answer that same question. Who is this guy? He spoke with something that compelled me. He answered questions I didn't even know I had. He is the Messiah. He is the Savior. He is the King. No wonder they were amazed.

Concluding the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount began with ashrei—the flourishing of people who might not look particularly blessed to the watching world. It ends with a house still standing after the storm.

Between those two pictures, Yeshua has shown us the rightness of His Kingdom. He has taken us beyond outward compliance into the heart. He has taught us to give, pray and fast before the Father rather than for human applause. He has told us where to put our treasure, whom to serve and why we need not carry tomorrow's worries today.

And now He has brought us to a decision. There are two ways. Two kinds of fruit. Two claims to know Him. Two builders. We cannot remain spectators forever. One of my favorite sayings is:

Starting well is good. Finishing well is better.

Following Yeshua isn't measured merely by a moment when I once made a decision. It is a life of trusting the King, receiving His grace and learning to obey Him. Storms will come. Build on the rock.

Takeaways

Yeshua calls us to discernment without judgmentalism. I need to deal honestly with my own plank.

Our Father is generous. We can ask, seek and knock because we are approaching a Father who delights to give good gifts to His children.

Popularity is a poor compass. There are two ways before us, and the call of Yeshua is to choose His way and keep walking it with those who honestly represent Him.

Religious activity is not a substitute for knowing the King. Fruit matters. Relationship matters. Grace matters.

Hearing Yeshua's words is not enough. The wise builder hears and acts. Starting well is good. Finishing well is better.

Memory Verse

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.” — Matthew 7:24

What’s Next?

The sermon is finished, and Yeshua comes down from the mountain. Now Matthew moves from the King's words to His deeds. In Matthew 8, we will see Yeshua encounter sickness, outsiders, a storm and the demonic—and His authority will be on display in each encounter. The crowds have just been amazed because He teaches with authority. Next we will see what that authority can do.