

# Revolutionary choices—Matthew 7:13-29

**Theme:** If we're going to be transformed by Jesus' revolution, we need to sort out what we're committed to, choosing the way of Jesus over all the other options

Jesus has laid out his stall, explained what his revolution consists of and calls us to. Now he seeks our response. It's possible to read these words as a set of hard, almost off-putting challenges, as if Jesus didn't want anyone to join his revolution. In fact they are words of grace that warn us like well-positioned road signs to avoid the route that leads to disaster for us and our world and choose instead the way that leads to life and peace, justice and freedom.

## Questions:

1. How, when and why did you decide to become a disciple of Jesus Christ?
2. Do we find it liberating or scary that God gives us the freedom to choose whether we follow Jesus or not?
3. Why do you think Jesus emphasizes what we 'do' in our response to his sermon?
4. What do these verses tell us about who Jesus is? Why does that matter?
5. How do we answer those people who tell us that the Christian life is 'narrow and constricted'?
6. How do we distinguish between Christians who are bringing us a word from God and those leading us astray?
7. How do we read verses 15-20 in the light of verses 1-5? Is Jesus talking about the same thing?
8. Do we measure our Christian life in terms of its effect on other people? Why might that be dangerous?
9. How do we feel when we read Jesus' words in verse 21? What is 'the will of my Father in Heaven' for us?
10. What do you think the house is that Jesus says we need to build on the rock—your life? The church? Both? How do we do the building?
11. How has your understanding of the sermon on the Mount changed through this series? Have you learned anything new about it?
12. What's your response to Jesus' call to discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount?

## Your stories:

## Potted summary

Jesus issues four invitations that are also warning signs—like the signs that direct and keep us safe on the roads. He invites us to choose between routes and guides, between pictures of the Kingdom and building sites. And every choice offers us life in his Kingdom, a broad, expansive life of justice and joy, peace and equity lived with him forever. And as with all invitations, it's up to us whether we accept. More over the page....

# What the passage is about....

Having finished the teaching section of the sermon (that runs from 5:1-7:12), Jesus asks us to respond.

It's possible to read these words as harsh, upping the ante in what seems like a difficult call to follow him. In fact these four sections are words of grace, invitations for us to choose the way that Jesus offers and the reward that comes from us choosing them.

There are two things we should note about this life to which Jesus calls us:

**1) it's consciously chosen:** we can't drift into discipleship, soak it up by osmosis, acquire it because we're part of a crowd all going in vaguely the same direction. Discipleship is not like chicken pox; we don't just catch because we're near people who've got it. We have to choose it. This means that our choices, our actions and our motives matter: isn't it amazing—if a little scary!—that it matters to God what I choose.

**2) it's continuously chosen:** there is a stress through this section on doing—10 times the Greek verb *poieo* meaning 'to do' (also translated 'produce') is used. Our response is not just a matter of believing but a matter of trust that leads to action—following, doing, producing. What we *do* is evidence that we've understood and are genuinely committing ourselves to Jesus and his revolution.

One other thing that we should note before looking at the text in more detail is the high Christology of the passage—especially v21-23, but also v24-27: it is Jesus who judges and that judgment is on the basis of people's response to Jesus, to him as a person and to his mission, his Kingdom, his ethic and lifestyle. This indicates that for Matthew and his community, discipleship involved recognizing who Jesus is: he is God incarnate and hence comes with God's authority.

So he lays before us four revolutionary choices:

## **i) between paths (13-14)**

Life is a journey and it's crucial that we pick the right road. The image Jesus uses is not of a hard choice, so much as a definite one. The life he offers has a single, identifiable point of entry. This is not to say that his way of life is easy—he's already suggested the strong possibility of persecution—rather that if we want to live his way, he has clearly spelled out what's involved: we know what we're choosing and by implication what we're rejecting.

The two paths are like either end of a funnel. It's easy to drift into the wide

end, we don't have to consider and choose. But what happens is that as we go into the funnel life closes down on us and ends in the narrowness of destruction. It's harder to enter the narrow end because we have to identify it and aim for it. But as we go through it, we find ourselves entering a life that becomes wider and ever more expansive. This is the life of joy and peace, justice and equity that we find in God's Kingdom forever.

## **ii) between guides (15-20)**

There's lots of advice out there—who do we trust? The Sunday papers are full of fantastic health products; our friends are always telling what gizmo we need to buy to make our lives complete; and every year there's a new theory on how to save the church. So we need to be discerning and test things out: what's their effect not just on us and our happiness but on the world?

The false prophets in view here are a bit like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood—disguised. Often they are not malicious just misinformed, talking about life as they see it, about 'balance'—having a bit of faith in Jesus alongside trusting the government and the Visa corporation; reminding us that no one likes a fanatic.

The test that Jesus gives us is simple: what's their life like? Do they live by the beatitudes, the Kingdom ethics outlined in 5:20-7:12? If not, might they be leading up the garden path? Jesus repeats himself here (v16, 20) to emphasize how important this is.

## **iii) between pictures of the Kingdom (21-23)**

This is a word that brings us up short, stops us in our tracks—and that's Jesus' intention. But even this word is a word of grace, an invitation to choose his way over the alternatives.

How will I know I'm a true disciple? Is it because I'm able to do spectacular things—things I've seen Jesus do, things I've read about Christian books? Is it because others will be influenced or impressed by my life? No, none of those things are measures of my response to the sermon. Jesus says doing what he calls us to do is all that matters: following him, seeking his Kingdom, trusting his grace. Where's our focus?

It is a sharp warning, however. People can do all kinds of spectacular and not so spectacular things and draw attention to themselves and their ministries at the expense of pointing to Jesus. In that they are doing harm because maybe people are put off the life of discipleship by

their deeds and attitudes who might otherwise have been drawn to Jesus if they'd seen the fruit of good living.

These people are drawing attention to themselves, their righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), is not in line with that outlined in chapter 6 where the followers of Jesus do not draw attention to themselves with their acts of piety.

For some the Kingdom of God is all about personal power, gain, fulfilment; their faith in the end is a private matter, about their salvation and personal well-being only. This is not what Jesus is about at all. Such people appear powerful and godly but aren't. Jesus is particularly critical of the Pharisees who cultivated a form of holiness for all to see. But they were seriously wrong and their way of life and teaching would lead to Israel being destroyed by the Romans—it did not lead to the Kingdom coming but to the loss of everything for a great many people.

How do we keep ourselves from being contaminated and sharing their fate? By holding on to the truth that we hear from Jesus and living by it. And there's a hint as to how we discern that truth: the true way is likely to have suffering in it (Philippians 2:5-11, 2 Corinthians 6:4-10).

## **iv) between building sites (24-27)**

What Jesus says here is as much about where we build as what we build with. The rock in this little parable is Jesus himself and the group that models its life on his. The materials the sensible builders use are his teaching. The image is drawn from the Old Testament's twin emphasis of the rock being God and his presence in the temple on Mount Zion.

Note that Jesus expects his followers to endure storms. His promise is that lives built on him and lived by his teaching will stand, not that we will be spared the pains of life just because we're Christians. But our standing through these will be a witness and a place of safety for others caught in the storm—we can welcome them into our house that stands in and after the deluge.

So, can our choices make a difference? Can our choices result in a revolution? It all depends on what we choose. Jesus says 'choose me and my way and you'll be caught up in a life- and world-changing adventure; a revolution that will affect every aspect of every life on the planet'. The crowd listening to Jesus is astonished at his authority (28-29). But did they believe him? Did they choose to follow him, join his revolution? Do we?