



Truth

On Tough Texts

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The Most Terrifying Words in the Bible

Matthew 7:21–23

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

I would like to encourage you with something that has been on my heart for a *long* time. I think of these verses often and each time I shudder and examine my own heart. I would begin with the old adage, “It’s one thing to be a *professor* of Christ, but it’s quite another to be a *possessor* of Christ.” There has probably never been a preacher of the true Gospel in the history of the church who has not at some point said those words, or words to that effect.

In recent years, however, that truism has been relegated to an older, more unenlightened era and is considered narrow and judgmental. What matters in the minds of many in the church today, in fact, is simply what a person *does* profess, regardless of how nebulous it is. For example, if someone says, “Oh, I asked Jesus into my heart at Vacation Bible School when I was eight,” or, “I went forward at a Billy Graham Crusade and made a decision for Christ,” or, “I raised my hand at a revival meeting,” or any one of a plethora of other clichés, such a profession is considered to be “good enough.” After all, it’s insisted, no one has the right to doubt someone else’s salvation.

Taken to its final end, however, such an idea implies that a profession such as the following would qualify one as being a Christian: “Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the*

Lord.” Who said that? Adolph Hitler!¹ Or consider this even clearer profession by Hitler, who was raised Roman Catholic: “My feelings as a Christian points me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded only by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to fight against them and who, God’s truth! was greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter.”² Take note of “Christian, “Lord”, Savior,” and even “God’s truth.”

Consider also porn king Larry Flynt? After being “born-again,” reportedly from the witness of former president Jimmy Carter’s sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, Flynt continued to publish the worst filth that industry has to offer.

Now, would any evangelical today actually view Hitler as a true Christian? Would any discerning believer accept Flynt’s “profession” as genuine? We certainly hope not. Why? Obviously because their lifestyle does not demonstrate the life transforming reality of Christ. On the other hand, many view other people with similar “testimonies” as being believers, so why not “a devil incarnate” or a smut peddler? Writing in the early 1940s, Arthur W. Pink addresses our own times with this comment on our text in his *Exposition on the Sermon on the Mount*:

If it be true that Matthew 5–7 is more hated by our moderns than any other portion of God’s Word, it is equally true that none is more urgently needed by them. Never were there so many millions of nominal Christians on earth as there are today, and never was there such a small percentage of real ones. Not since before the days of Luther and Calvin, when the great Reformation effected such a grand change for the better, has Christendom been so crowded with those who have “a form of godliness” but who are strangers to its transforming

power. We seriously doubt whether there has ever been a time in the history of this Christian era when there were such multitudes of deceived souls within the churches, who verily believe that all is well with their souls when in fact the wrath of God abideth on them. And we know of no single thing better calculated to undeceive them than a full and faithful exposition of these closing verses of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount.

While we addressed the issue of so-called "Lordship Salvation" in an earlier TOTT,³ here in our text we encounter an especially significant group of those who profess Christ. This group, in fact, is on a whole new level of "profession." No text of Scripture is clearer than this one in demonstrating the truth that calling oneself a Christian doesn't make it so. Our Lord is very specific here of who *is* and who is *not* a true believer.

The Truth of the Text

In the introduction to his exposition of this passage, Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: "These, surely, are in many ways the most solemn and solemnizing words ever spoken in this world."⁴ In my own preaching I have often read these verses from my pulpit and then added: "Here are, I am convinced, the most terrifying words in the Bible." I can think of nothing more frightening than to be so deceived and deluded as to think I am a Christian only to one day discover that I am not. How horrifying is the thought that I could preach, pray, and perform ministry only to have it revealed in the end that it was all a sham.

The setting of our text, of course, is our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, which underscores the gravity of the passage. These are not the words of a man but of God Himself. The immediate context (vv. 15–20) is about false teachers, who while looking and acting like sheep are actually wolves whose sole purpose is to devour the sheep (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). The only way to discern them, our Lord adds, is to examine their fruit, as we would any individual (Jn. 15:1–17; cf. Prov. 12:12; Matt. 13:23; Rom. 7:4; etc.).

It is profoundly significant that our Lord has already finished the major teaching of His sermon but then ends with an explicit warning about false teachers. In a day when false teachers are everywhere while tolerance and open-mindedness of them is at an all-time high, this warning has never been more critical. All the Apostles recognized our Lord's emphasis of this (cf. Matt. 24:5, 11, 24) and repeatedly warned of it in Acts and their own epistles.⁵ This was no less true in the Old Testament, as God's true prophets warned of Satan's false ones.⁶

Through four emphases, then, our Lord delineates those who *profess* but to do not *possess*.

Their Profession

First, we note this is a *purist* profession; it's orthodox, in fact. The word **Lord** is *kurios*, and understanding it here is critical. It appears in the Septuagint over 9,000 times, some 6,156 of which translate the Hebrew *YHWH* (Yahweh, Jehovah), thus reemphasizing the meaning of divinity. It appears then in the New Testament 717 times, the majority of which

occur in Luke's gospel and Acts (210) and Paul's epistles (275). The reason for this, of course, was that they both wrote for readers who were dominated by Greek culture and language and who, therefore, understood the deep significance of this word in implying deity.

So, while **Lord** is sometimes used as simply a title of honor, such as Rabbi, Teacher, Master (Matt. 10:24; cf. Luke 16:3), or even a husband (1 Pet. 3:6), *when used of Jesus in a confessional way, it without question refers to His divinity.* The confession *Kurios Iēsous* (Lord Jesus) is rooted in the pre-Pauline Greek Christian community and is probably the oldest of all Christian creeds.

Early Christians unarguably recognized Jesus as God, as Paul wrote to the Philippians: "And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:11). Even more significant, when Thomas saw the risen Jesus, he called Him, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Even salvation is based on a confession of Jesus as **Lord** as Divine Authority (Rom. 10:9–10).

It's, therefore, extremely significant that some people actually call Jesus **Lord** but are still unbelievers. While the profession of a Jehovah's Witness or Mormon, for example, is easy to dismiss because they reject the deity of Christ and are therefore lost (cf. Jn. 8:24), others appear quite orthodox but are still unconverted. In other words, a person can be totally correct in his theology, have all his doctrine systematically outlined and memorized, and still be lost. Contrary to popular heresy, salvation is not just knowing and assenting to a few facts about Jesus.

Second, this is a *passionate* profession. The repetition of the term **Lord (Lord, Lord)** demonstrates enthusiasm, fervor, zeal, and perhaps even some level of "commitment." Oh, yes, such professors are earnest and sincere, but still they are not genuine. Yes, there are many who want to talk about Jesus, wave their hands in a worship service, and practice other outward displays of zeal, but still there is something missing.

Third, this is a *public* profession. Such people are not shy about their "faith." They let it be known where they go to church and what they do for God. But as we'll see, something is still amiss. This leads to a second observation.

Their Proclamation

While the Greek *propheteuō* (**prophesied**) can refer to proclaiming truth already revealed (implied in Acts 13:1), it also refers to speaking *immediately* of the Holy Spirit, that is, speaking under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Ponder a moment: How many teachers on radio and television nowadays claim new revelation? How many "testimonies" do we hear that claim, "God spoke to me last night and told me to share it with you." Is this not terrifying?

Our **Lord** warns us, however, that although such people do all this even **in [His] name**, they are false. Never in history, in fact, have more people claimed new revelation than in our own day, much of which flows from the mysticism that continues to grow in prominence. Later in Matthew our Lord declares that "many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many" (24:11), and such is indeed the case.

On the other hand, do such teachers have to be claiming

new revelation to be considered false? Certainly not. Some simply deny historic doctrine and preach prosperity, pragmatism, purpose, or any one of a plethora of other deceptions. Oh, yes, they give Jesus lip-service, but there has been no life-transformation, no obedience to the Truth.

Their Performance

Oh, how impressive their performance is! Our Lord declares, in fact, that such people have even performed **wonderful works**, such as **[casting] out devils** and other “miracles.” **Wonderful works** translates a single Greek word, *dunamis* (English “dynamic”), which speaks not just of power but here miraculous power. While some charlatans today fake their “miracles,” it is quite possible that some are real. But since Christ is here condemning such people, it is obvious that their power is not coming from God. That leaves only one alternative: some such people are empowered by Satan.

The most graphic biblical example of this reality is Pharaoh’s magicians in Exodus 7–9. When Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh, Aaron “cast down his rod before Pharaoh . . . and it became a serpent” (7:10). Pharaoh’s magicians (Jannes and Jambres according to 2 Tim. 3:8) appeared to duplicate this (v. 11), but it was, at the very least, a trick. Egyptian magicians had long ago mastered the art of inflicting a temporary paralysis on a cobra, making him appear stiff like a rod. The word “enchantments,” in fact, comes from the Hebrew *lahat*, meaning “to flame or to set on fire.” Magicians often use fire for dramatic effect, so their feat was nothing more than, as the expression goes, “just smoke and mirrors.”

As the miracles increased in complexity, however, it appears the magicians had some outside help. The word “enchantments” in 7:22, 8:7, and 18 is a different Hebrew word, *lāṭ*, a noun meaning secrecy, enchantment, mystery, or privacy and there conveys the idea of secret or magical arts known only to a select group. Scripture declares several times that Satan empowers men to perform “lying wonders” (2 Thes. 2:9–10; Matt. 24:24; Rev. 13:11–15).

Bringing this back to our text, commentator William MacDonald puts the matter well:

From these verses we learn that not all miracles are of divine origin and that not all miracle workers are divinely accredited. A miracle simply means that a supernatural power is at work. That power may be divine or satanic. Satan may empower his workers to cast out demons *temporarily*, in order to create the illusion that the miracle is divine. He is not dividing his kingdom against itself in such a case, but is plotting an even worse invasion of demons in the future.⁷

While the performance of false teachers is often *dazzling*, such ones are *deadly* because they are not true believers.

Their Problem

William Hendriksen eloquently states the problem of these professors of Christ:

The reason why the men described here in Matt. 7:22 are condemned is not that their preaching had been wrong and/or their miracles spurious but that they had

not practiced what they preached!⁸

How practical! This principle, in fact, is at the very core of the entire debate of Lordship that sadly continues to rage today. To say that we can believe in Christ but have absolutely no intention of following Him, obeying Him, or surrendering to Him is totally incongruous to the Gospel and is heresy. Our **Lord** clearly identifies who **shall enter into the kingdom**, namely, those who **[do] the will of my Father which is in heaven**. Frankly, why is there controversy? How much clearer could Jesus be? People can talk about Him, sing songs in a worship service, lead the worship team, preach sermons, teach a Sunday School class, do mission work, write books, and do all sorts of Christian service, but none of that is proof of conversion. Our Lord could not be clearer: If they do not do the **will** of God, as is revealed only in His Word, they are not true believers. While that is not a popular view, it is what Scripture everywhere declares. As noted in our discussion of this issue in an earlier TOTT, there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that biblical faith (*pistos*) implies obedience.⁹ To argue this is foolish. “I will put my spirit within you,” God declared through the prophet, “and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezek. 36:27). Writing before this modern trend got its strangle hold on Christianity, Martyn-Lloyd-Jones observed:

The difference between faith and intellectual assent is that intellectual assent simply says, “Lord, Lord,” but does not do His will. In other words, though I may say “Lord, Lord” to the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no meaning in it unless I regard Him as my Lord, and willingly become His bondsman. . . . True faith always shows itself in the life; it shows itself in the person in general, and it also shows itself in what he does. . . . Faith shows itself in the whole personality.¹⁰

Further, to underscore that such professors are not true believers, our Lord says **then [i.e., at the final judgment] will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity**. The word **knew** is *ginoskō*, which means “to know by experience” and is practically synonymous with love and intimacy. Joseph, for example, “did not know” Mary before Jesus was born, that is, they had not yet been physically intimate (Matt. 1:25).

It’s extremely significant that Peter uses *ginoskō* with the prefix *pro* in 1 Peter 1:1–2 to speak of God’s election being according to “foreknowledge.” Again, it is an absolute fact of the language that this does *not* mean just “precognition,” that God simply elected those He knew would believe the Gospel. This is beyond all doubt when we read another verse in this chapter, one often either overlooked or ignored: “[Christ] verily was foreordained [*proginoskō*] before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you” (v. 20). Obviously this doesn’t mean that God simply foresaw that Christ would be manifested. Rather, He was, as we are, foreordained and foreknown by an intimate relationship before the foundation of the world. In other words, foreknowledge is not to *foresee* but to “*fore-love*.” This is exactly what we see when we read what God said to Jeremiah: “Before I formed thee in the belly I *knew* thee; and before thou camest forth out

of the womb I sanctified thee, and I *ordained* thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jer. 1:5, emphasis added). What a thought that is! Christ knew us in the elective and saving sense before we even existed.

With that in mind, our **Lord**, therefore, uses *ginoskō* to say that He never knew these false professors intimately as their Savior and Lord. He never knew them in eternity past in the elective sense. They were never believers.

If any doubt remains as to the character of such false professors, our Lord adds that at the final judgment He will also say, **Depart from me, ye that work iniquity**. **Work** is *ergazomai*, to labor, and **iniquity** is *anomia*, literally without law, that is, the violation of law. Further, the verb tense (present participle) indicates continuous, habitual practice. Everything these professors have done, therefore, is totally worthless because they have habitually violated God’s revelation. We see many people today doing a lot of things, but how much of it plumbs with God’s revelation?

All this is, in fact, the point of the parable of the two house builders our **Lord** goes on to offer in verses 24–27. The wise man “built his house upon a rock,” while the “foolish man . . . built his house upon the sand.” Now, to what exactly does “rock” refer? While our first impulse is to answer that this refers to Christ—after all, He is called “that spiritual Rock” in 1 Corinthians 10:4—we would submit that this is not precise. Since He refers in verse 21 to doing God’s **will** (which is revealed in His Word), and then refers to hearing and doing His “sayings” (*logos*) in verses 24 and 26, it is clear that the foundation on which we must build is more specifically God’s Word. “Hear, then, the imperial claim of Christ,” writes G. Campbell Morgan. “He says: Take these sayings of Mine and build on them; and no storm can destroy your building.”¹¹

This works out when we consider the two builders. On the outside, both buildings look fine, so it takes close examination of the foundation to see the problem. The foolish builder is impatient and doesn’t want to be bothered with reading a building manual or consulting blueprints. He even arrogantly thinks he knows more than those who have come before him. He builds on the shifting sands of his own opinion. The wise builder, however, “reads the rules”; he obeys the sound principles of construction that have been proven repeatedly to be true. So, “The foundation in this parable,” writes Warren Wiersbe, “is obedience to God’s Word—obedience that is an evidence of true faith (James 2:14ff).”¹² It is tragic, indeed: while many people today appear to be believers, they are not. How terrifying!

The Pointedness of the Principles

The Risk of Self-delusion

The greatest delusion on our little blue planet is how many people believe they are Christians but are not, simply because they give absolutely no evidence of it by their obedience to the Word of God. Is there any doubt why James wrote, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (Jas. 1:22)? How many people today are fatally deceived?

Consider this: According to *The World Almanac and Book*

of Facts, there are about two billion “Christians” in the world. This number includes the categories: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and Independent. Now then, is there *evidence* that out of the over 6.8 billion people in the world over one-third are *true* Christians? Or, is there evidence that out of some 300 million Americans, 100 million of them love God, are committed to Him, and do His will? Bringing it closer to home, do you consider one-third of those at your workplace to be Christians? One-third of your neighborhood? One-third of our government? One-third of our schools, colleges, and universities?

There’s obviously no evidence for any of that. On the contrary, as our Lord says earlier in this passage (v. 14), few go through the narrow gate that leads to life. They might look, sound, and act like sheep (v. 15), but they are not. To make this even more practical (and blunt), one expositor courageously writes:

When a couple lives together without being married, when a person practices homosexuality, is deceptive and dishonest in business, is hateful and vengeful, or habitually practices any sin without remorse or repentance, such persons cannot be Christian—no matter what sort of experience they claim to have had or what sort of testimony they now make. God’s Word is explicit [in] 1 Cor. 6:9–10 [and] Eph. 5:5–6. In each of those extremely somber warnings Paul pleads with his readers not to be deceived.¹³

Indeed, self-delusion is a terrifying reality. Countless people today consider themselves heaven bound Christians simply because they go to church, prayed a prayer, walked an isle, “asked Jesus into their heart,” gave an offering, “spoke in tongues,” or even read their Bible, but their lives are utterly devoid of obedience of the Truth. An unknown penman long ago wrote:

You call me Master, and obey me not; You call me Light, and see me not; You call me the Way, and walk me not; You call me the Life, and live me not; You call me Wise, and follow me not; You call me Fair, and love me not; You call me Rich, and ask me not; You call me Eternal and seek me not. *If I condemn thee, blame me not!*

Countless people fail to remember the simplest principle of all: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7).

The Requirement of Self-examination

Is it not odd that many evangelists, pastors, and “crusade workers,” routinely tell people, “Oh, you should never doubt your salvation,” when Scripture says the exact opposite? Yes, it says we can have assurance (1 Jn. 5:20), but never does it say not to question. As Peter pleads in 2 Peter 1:10, “Make your calling and election sure.” And how do we do that? By comparing ourselves to the list of seven qualities in verses 1–9 to see if they exist in us. Likewise, both John in his first epistle and James in his go to great lengths to present tests of genuine Christian faith.

The Apostle Paul was no less direct when he wrote to the

carnal Corinthians: “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves” (2 Cor. 13:5). “Examine” is *peirazō*, “to make trial of, to test. It was used in Classical Greek to refer to a medical test, which would prove either health or disease. “Prove,” then, is *dokimazō*, which means “test, pronounce good, establish by trial.” A related word, *dokimos*, was originally used as a technical term for coins that were genuine. This principle was nothing new, appearing throughout Scripture (e.g. Job 13:23; Ps. 17:3 26:2; 139:23–24; Lam. 3:40; Hag. 1:5, 7; 1 Cor. 11:28, 31; etc.). “Examine, examine, examine,” is what Scripture declares.

Whether a preacher, a parson, or a pew-sitter, let us each closely examine our lives. Who are truly Christian believers? Those who do the will of God.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher

NOTES

¹ *Mein Kampf* (Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1927; 1971 renewed), 65 (emphasis in the original).

² From a speech in the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich in April 1922. Reported by Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37.

³ Issue 41 (12/08), “What Does ‘New Creature’ Mean? (2 Cor. 5:17).”

⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans, combined volume, 1971, 1982), Vol. 2, 261.

⁵ E.g., Acts 20:28-31; 2 Cor. 11:3, 13–14; Eph. 4:14; Phil. 3:2; Col. 2:8; 1 Timothy 1:8–20; 6:20-21; 2 Pet. 2:1-2; 1 John 4:1; Jude 4; etc.

⁶ E.g., Deut. 13:1–5; Jer. 23:16, 21–22, 25–32; 27:14–16; 29:8–9; etc.

⁷ *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson), electronic edition.

⁸ *Baker’s New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Baker Academic, 1973), electronic edition.

⁹ See note 3.

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, Vol. 2, 309–10.

¹¹ *Studies in the Four Gospels*, 4 volumes in 1 (Scripture Truth Book Company, previously by Fleming H. Revell, 1927, 1929), Vol. 1, 80.

¹² *Bible Exposition Commentary* (David C. Cook, 2007), electronic edition.

¹³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Moody Bible Institute, 1985), electronic edition.

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Book Review: *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Anniversary Edition)

By: John MacArthur

When John MacArthur’s *The Gospel According to Jesus* first appeared back in 1988, a firestorm didn’t just ignite—it exploded! In my own 37 years of ministry, I have never seen a true evangelical leader as vilified and maligned as MacArthur was (and still is).

I also observed that such criticism often came from people who hadn’t even read the book. This reminded me of a fellow I know who is fond of saying: “The less some people know about a subject the more passionately they can argue it,” which made me all the more curious to read the book. I did so then and I do so again with the release of the “Revised & Expanded Anniversary Edition” (2008).

The worst misrepresentation I read is from one who at least did read the book: “Had I read this years ago I never would have made the decision for Christ. MacArthur makes salvation like an invitation to study at Harvard with a condition that if you don’t maintain a B average then you will be kicked out, blackballed, and condemned to toil in the salt mines forever.” I’m speechless.

By far, the most often—and most ludicrous—criticism of this book is that MacArthur is teaching salvation by works. This hardly even deserves a response. MacArthur clearly and plainly teaches salvation by grace, just not *cheap* grace, that

is, grace that in reality doesn’t accomplish anything, such as delivering us from a sinful lifestyle and transforming our character. No, salvation is not a result of works, but works are most certainly the result of salvation.

Another criticism is that MacArthur is presenting a teaching that is new and novel. That, however, spectacularly demonstrates total, abject ignorance of theological history (note “Appendix 2: The Gospel According to Historic Christianity”). It is, in point of fact, the ideas of no repentance, no changed life, no obedience, and no fruit that are novel and unhistorical. (*Please read that again!*) It is today’s attitudes of tolerance, open-mindedness, relativism, and shallowness that gave birth to the so-called “Free Grace” and “no-lordship” movements. This is just one more of several ways modern Christianity is running away from the historic faith as fast as its little deformed legs can carry it. Healing is, indeed, desperately needed.

So, John MacArthur’s *The Gospel According to Jesus* is needed today even more that it was in 1988. It is one of the essential books of our day, as it presents the true Gospel of Christ that involves repentance, transformation, obedience, and faithfulness.

“Expositing Ephesians” Blog

We hope you will visit our blog: “Expositing Ephesians: The Christian's Wealth and Walk.” *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* is one of the chief passions of Pastor Watson’s life and ministry. He believes this epistle is at the very core of the Christian life. He spent years in the study of it and then three and one half years expositing it from the pulpit. While the complete exposition is on our website, we felt “bite sized” blog posts would be easier for readers to access. We hope this blog will be a blessing to you. We also hope you will tell others about this blog. Please check for new posts each *Monday* and *Friday*:

<http://expositingephesians.blogspot.com/>.