

Jim's Notes
November 15, 2006
The Gospel According to St. Matthew 7:13-23

Matthew 7:13-14

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

He says this not because the Lord's yoke is rough or his burden heavy but because there are a few who wish their labors to end. They do not put their full trust in the Lord when he cries, "Come to me, all you who labor and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart. . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Hence the humble and the meek of heart are named at the very beginning of this sermon. But because there are many who spurn this smooth yoke and this light burden, it comes to pass that the way that leads to life is demanding and the entry gate is narrow. (Sermon on the Mount 2.23.77)

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Remember that later Jesus would say, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). And here he implies the same thing. Does it not seem inconsistent then to say here that the good road is narrow and constricted? Pay attention. He has made it clear the burdens is very light, easy and agreeable. "But how," one may say, "is the narrow and constricted road easy?" Because it is both a gate and a road. The other road is, of course, both a gate and a road, but on that way there is nothing that is enduring. All things on that way are temporary, both things pleasant and painful. . . . It is not only on the way that, the things of excellence become easy. In the end they become even more agreeable. For it is not just the passing away of toil and sweating but also the anticipated arrival at a pleasant destination that is sufficient to encourage the traveler. For this road ends in life! The result is that both the temporary nature of the toils and the eternal nature of the victor's crowns, combined with the fact that these toils come first and the victor's crowns come afterward, become a hearty encouragement. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 23.5)

Matthew 7:15

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Jesus reminded them of what happened to their ancestors who were attracted to false prophets. The same dangers are now faced as those that occurred in earlier days. He reminded them of the experience of their ancestors so that they would not despair at the multitude of troubles that would mount up on this way that is narrow and constricted. He reminded them that it is necessary to walk in a way that goes contrary to the common opinion. One must guard oneself not only against pigs and dogs but those other, more elusive creatures: the wolves. They were going to face inward anxieties as well as outward difficulties, but they are not to despair. "Therefore do not be thrown into confusion," Jesus says in effect, "for nothing will happen that is new or strange.

Remember that the ancient adversary is forever introducing deception as if true." . . . Notice that along with the dogs and pigs there is another form of ambush and plotting that causes far more trouble than that of dogs or pigs. For the dogs and pigs do not hide their nature. They are obvious. But the movements of wolves are hidden in shadows. Hence he commanded that one should not only avoid the dogs and pigs but also that one should continuously and carefully look out for wolves, because one cannot see them the moment they attack. For this reason he says, "Watch out!" --- to make his hearers more careful to distinguish deception from truth. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 23.6)

Matthew 7:16

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

It does not seem to me that "false prophets" here refers to the heretics but rather to persons who live morally corrupt lives while wearing a mask of virtue. They are usually called frauds by most people. For this reason Jesus continued by saying, "By their fruits you will know them." For it is possible to find some virtuous persons living among heretics. But among the corrupted of whom I speak it is in no way possible. "So what difference does it make," Jesus says in effect, "if even among these false prophets some do put on a hypocritical show of virtue? Certainly they will soon be detected easily." The nature of this road upon which he commanded us to walk is toilsome and hard. The hypocrite would seldom choose to toil but would prefer only to make a show. For this very reason the hypocrite is easily detected. When Jesus notes that "there are few who find it," he distinguishes these from those who do not find the way yet pretend to find it. So do not look to the mask but to the behavioral fruits of those who pursue the narrow way. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 23.6)

Matthew 7:17

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Even though Jesus seems to make virtually the same point a second time, it is hardly redundant. For in the second time around he prevents anyone from concluding, "The evil tree bears evil fruit, but it also bears good fruit, so as to make it difficult to recognize an evil tree, because the crop is of two kinds." No. Jesus says, "This is not so. For the evil tree bears only evil fruits and would never bear good fruits. So also it is the same way with the opposite kind of tree." What then? Is there no such thing as a good person who becomes corrupt? Or a corrupt person who becomes good? Isn't life full of many examples of such reversals? But the Messiah is not saying that the evil person is incapable of changing or that the good person will never fail in anything. But he is saying that so long as a person is living in a degenerate way, he will not be able to generate good fruit. For he may indeed change to virtue, being evil, but while continuing in wickedness, he will not bear good fruit. What then? Did not David, even though good, bear evil fruit? No, because he did not bear evil fruit while remaining good but while being changed. For if indeed he had remained continually good as he had been, he

would not have produced the bad fruit. For it surely was not while abiding in the habits of excellence that he had the audacity to do the very things that he had the audacity to do. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 23.7)

Matthew 7:18

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

Jesus also said these things to shut the mouths of those who say nothing but slander and to reign in the lips of those who speak maliciously. For many are suspicious of good people because so many others are evil, but Jesus by this saying has deprived them of all excuse. For on this premise one would not even be able to say, "I am deceived and was misled." For he has provided you a rule by which accurately to identify the frauds by their deeds. He has also commanded you to proceed on the basis of practices and not to mix up all cases at random. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 23.7)

Matthew 7:19

Theodore of Mopsuestia (died: A.D. 428)

Others maintain that these things are said with reference to teachers of foreign doctrines (see I Timothy 1:3) and to people who mingle lies with the truth. Just as one cannot gather evil fruit from a tree that produces good fruit, neither can one gather grapes or figs from one that bears thorns; similarly, from an evil mindset, one does not hear good words, nor would you expect evil teaching to come from a pious teacher. But in protecting the others so that they may not be easily deluded, Jesus at the same time deters those who would attempt to teach evil things. For, he says, "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire." Just as fruitless trees are thrown into the fire, so human beings who do not bear the fruits of religion with their mouths will consequently receive punishment. (Fragment 38)

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

On this point, one must carefully avoid the error of those who think that they find in these two trees a reason for believing that there are two natures and that one of them belongs to the nature of God but that the other neither belongs to God nor depends on him. This error has been rather fully discussed in other books, and if that is not sufficient it will receive still further treatment later. But we must now show that these two trees furnish no argument in support of it. First of all, in this similitude the Lord is speaking about two kinds of persons. This is so obvious that if anyone will but read the passages in the context of those that precede and follow it, he will be amazed at the blindness of those who would misinterpret it impersonally. Again, they fix their attention on the saying, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit," and then they think that an evil soul cannot be changed into a better or a good soul into a worse.

As though, in truth, the saying were “A good tree cannot become a bad tree, nor a bad tree become a good tree!” But what has been said is that “a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.” The tree, of course, is the soul itself --- that is, the person --- and the fruits are the person’s works. So a bad person cannot perform good works, nor can a good person perform bad works. (Sermon on the Mount 2.24.79)

Matthew 7:21

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

He said “whoever does the will of my Father” shall enter, not whoever does my will. Why? Nothing is insufficient if they do the will of the Father. What he did say was itself a very difficult thing to accept in view of their weakness. He implied that to do his Father’s will is to do his will. There is no other willing of the Son than the will of the Father. This may apply in particular to those who commit themselves in detail to legal rules 1 yet take little thought for the actual embodiment of their better intentions. Elsewhere Paul confronts them directly when he says, “Consider this. You bear the name Jew, rely on the law, boast in God and know the will of God” (Romans 2:17-18) but in all this you ‘derive no benefit as long as the actual fruits of good living are not present. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 24.1)

Matthew 7:22-23

St. Cyril of Alexandria (died A.D. 444)

There may be some who, in the beginning, believed rightly and assiduously labored at virtue. They may have even worked miracles and prophesied and cast out demons. And yet later they are found turning aside to evil, to self assertive deception and desire. Of these Jesus remarks that he “never knew them.” He ranks them as equivalent to those who were never known by him at all. Even if they at the outset had lived virtuously, they ended up condemned. God knows those whom he loves, and he loves those who single-mindedly believe in him and do the things that please him. (Fragment 88.4)