

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 36: The Danger of Self-Deception

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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 (Mt. 7:21-23).

After warning His disciples of false prophets, Jesus turns His attention toward self-deception. There are people who are fairly orthodox in their profession of Christ who are not true Christians at all. We are called in this sobering, heart-piercing application not only to beware of false teachers, but also to beware of deceiving ourselves. Of all the applications designed to show the indispensable necessity of obedience to Christ's commands this one has the most force. This one strikes the most fear in the spiritually sensitive soul. Here we are called to examine ourselves to see whether we are really in the faith. Here we are transported to the final judgment to witness this tragic, terrifying scene where nominal Christians and false professors are confronted by Christ Himself for their lack of faithfulness. A time is coming when we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Then everyone will know if their faith in Christ was real or counterfeit. Self-deceived and false professors are even more dangerous than false prophets because their state is the fruit of their own depraved hearts. It comes from inner corruption. A profession of faith in Christ is not real if it is not accompanied by the *fruit* of faith, which is obedience to God's revealed will. By way of introduction, there are some things to note about this passage.

First, this pericope continues our Lord's pattern of instruction found throughout the sermon. Jesus begins each section with either an imperative (e.g., "Do not lay up..."; "Judge not..."; "Ask..."; "Beware...") or a statement of fact, truth or reality (e.g., "No one can serve two masters...") and then follows the imperative or statement with supporting arguments, illustrations or amplifications to drive home the main point. In this passage the Savior says that not all professors of Christ will go to heaven, but only those who confess *and obey*. He proves this point by showing us a brief dialogue between hypocritical professors and the Redeemer on the day of judgment. This glimpse of the final judgment is designed to obliterate any idea that His message of salvation through belief in His name tolerates or excuses antinomianism. There is no statement of our Lord that is better designed to refute the idea that salvation by grace through faith alone leads to licentiousness than this one.

Second, the teaching of this section reiterates from a different perspective Jesus' teaching on the law near the beginning of the sermon and strongly reinforces it. The statement, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20), is now examined from the perspective of the final judgment. The disciples who ignored the Savior's teaching on the law and did not

practice the righteousness of the kingdom will be in for a shocking surprise on the day of judgment. They will take their place with the scribes and Pharisees in the outer darkness.

Third, it is almost certain that verse 21 and following are meant to be viewed in light of the warning on false prophets which immediately precedes it. The false prophets talked the talk, but did not walk the walk. They produced followers who reflected their erroneous preaching. The pattern of false teachers in the Old Testament was to preach sermons that tolerated and reinforced wicked behavior. The requirements of the law, as well as the sanctions of the law, were ignored. Moreover, the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day had externalized the moral law to make it easier to obey. They also nullified many laws by their human traditions. They produced people who were very religious, but who were not godly in their behavior. Given the context and Christ's charge of lawlessness to these phony Christians, we must especially be on guard against defective preaching on the law, repentance and sanctification. Modern "easy believism" leads to antinomianism and multitudes that will be cast into hell on the final day.

Fourth, it is important that we interpret this passage within the narrow and broad context of Scripture for this teaching is used as a proof-text for salvation by works or human merit. The point is made that the emphasis here is not on believing, but on doing. It is argued that we do not have a "faith alone" message for justification, but a faith plus works message. This understanding must be rejected for the following reasons.

The immediate context is on the importance of entering the narrow gate and walking on the narrow way. As we have seen, it is obvious that Jesus is not speaking about salvation in the narrow sense, but is discussing the whole life of discipleship. This involves the fruit of justification which is sanctification and a life of service to Christ. Our Lord's audience no doubt contained many people who were attracted to Jesus because of the miracles and excitement surrounding Him, but who were not really committed to Him. Consequently, the Savior wants these professors to understand that faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:20). It is not genuine; it is not the kind of faith that truly lays hold of Christ and is saving in nature.

The Redeemer, therefore, is not denigrating or contradicting the gospel message of "faith alone" in relation of justification; but rather, like the previous section is pointing out that a tree which produces bad fruit is a bad tree. John Gill writes, "This, as it may regard private Christians, intends not merely outward obedience to the will of God, declared in his law, nor barely subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel; but more especially faith in Christ for life and salvation; which is the source of all true evangelical obedience, and without which nothing is acceptable to God. He that seeth the son, looks unto him, ventures on him, commits himself to him, trusts in him, relies on him, and believes on him for righteousness, salvation, and eternal life, he it is that does the will of the father, and he only."¹

That Christ is speaking of an obedience resulting from saving faith is proven by His statement in verse 23: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" The word "know" here refers to a saving, loving relationship, not a mere intellectual recognition. Those who never repented and continued in a lifestyle characterized by sin or lawlessness were never truly Christians and were never really part of God's family. In other words, real faith always results in a lifestyle characterized by obedience or faithfulness to God's revealed will.

This interpretation is supported by what immediately follows in verses 24 through 27. In verses 21 to 23 Jesus speaks against a verbal profession that does not lead to a changed life. John, in his first epistle, says that such people do not give any evidence of regeneration or conversion (1 Jn. 1:6-7; 2:3-5, 9, 15, 19; 3:3-4, 6-7, 14, 24; 4:7-8, 20-21; 5:1-5). In verses 24 to

¹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:72.

27 our Lord speaks about people who hear His message, but do not obey it. They have an intellectual knowledge of the truth, but no real trust or commitment to it. Both of these final paragraphs teach the same truth from different perspectives. The right response is to hear, confess *and obey*, while the wrong response is to disobey or lead a life characterized by lawlessness. Therefore, instead of the Romanist or Auburn Avenue idea that good works are somehow involved in our justification, the Savior is teaching us to look at the fruit of our lives to see if we were ever really redeemed to begin with. The full salvation message is believe, repent and *follow Christ*. If we are not walking in the Spirit and endeavoring to follow Jesus the rest of our lives, then we will be cast into hell on the day of judgment.

This relationship between true faith and obedience is clearly set forth by the author of Hebrews: “And to whom did He swear that they would no enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (3:18-19). In Scripture there is an intimate connection between unbelief and disobedience; this is always the case. It happened when Adam fell from God; the Israelites rebelled in the wilderness and when the vast multitudes that first followed Jesus progressively fell away leaving only 120 disciples at the time of Pentecost. The message of the Bible is to trust and obey. Consequently, Jesus is not emphasizing works at the expense of faith or teaching that works must be added to faith to be justified, but that true faith always leads to obedience.

Fifth, the expression “kingdom of heaven” can refer to the kingdom of grace that Jesus set up during His first advent. Anyone who truly believes in Christ enters into the new order of things that succeeded the Old Covenant era. Because our Lord is discussing the final judgment, however, and uses the future tense (will enter, *eiscleusetai*) the meaning here is the eschatological salvation at the final judgment. On that day all genuine believers will be openly acknowledged and acquitted by Christ, received into heaven and in their glorified state will be fully freed from all sin and misery. This is our final or ultimate salvation at the end of history. Given the fact that we are discussing a dialogue on the day of judgment, there is horror and urgency on the part of those who appeal to their confession and their mighty works before the Judge.

The Self-Deceived Profession

In our Lord’s assertion about a mere verbal profession and the dialogue at the final judgment that follows, we are given a description of things that men rely on for salvation that are not enough by themselves. These are things that can be the actual experience of people who are not really Christians at all; who are actually on the broad path that leads to destruction. This is a passage that every professing Christian must study carefully and meditate upon often. We need to understand what Jesus says to make sure that we ourselves are not living in self-deception regarding the most important issue we face. We should be alarmed that people who say and do many religious and “good” things that seem inconsistent with being unregenerate are in reality wicked, damned reprobates. There are many people who seem so righteous, but are really in complete darkness. May God enable us to examine ourselves in light of this astounding passage. There are some things that these reprobates say that merit our attention.

An Orthodox Confession without a Holy Life

Note, these people acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. They address Jesus as “Lord, Lord.” The repetition of this title indicates urgency in the petition. “The word is repeated to show their importunity, sense of danger, the confusion they are in, the wretched disappointment they will have; and therefore speak as persons amazed and confounded, having expected they would have been the first persons that should be admitted to heaven.”² “Trembling with fear they pronounce this title with awe and reverence, pouring into it far more meaning than they had ever done before the arrival of this crisis of deepest despair.”³ These words in this context carry the sense of a desperate man who is begging for his life. While alive these people spoke these words “as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal”; but now is the final day when all secrets are revealed, they are repeated with fear and trembling.

There is much that we can learn from the use of these terms in this particular context. As an address to Jesus, the word “Lord” (*Kyrie*) is quite common. It is used by close disciples as well as complete strangers. Sometimes it carries no theological significance and is simply a title of respect like our word “sir.” Among the English of old, people of an inferior status would address superiors or men who had great social standing as “lord.” At the very least, then, these professors are being polite and courteous as they speak to Christ.

There are a number of reasons, however, why the word “Lord” in this context means much more than a title of respect. For one, the Redeemer is sitting upon His throne as the judge of all men who ever lived. This can only mean that Jesus is the Son of God and equal to the Father. Moreover, the false professor reveals a certain amount of theological sophistication when he says that he prophesied, cast out demons and did many wonders *in Christ’s name*. This can only mean that he ascribed ultimate power and authority to Jesus. Our Lord is not only supreme eschatological judge, but also the source of miracle-working power. He is the Son of God and Savior of mankind. In addition, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostolic church knew exactly what it meant by the title “Lord” when speaking of the Messiah. It meant that, as the divine-human mediator, He had all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18). It also meant that Christ was LORD or Jehovah (“the LORD” [*ho Kyrios*] is the common Greek Septuagint translation of the divine name “Yahweh” [or “Jehovah”]).

Consequently, as shocking as it may seem, these false professors have an accurate, orthodox confession of Jesus Christ. During their life, they confessed Jesus as Lord and they defined the term “Lord” in a biblical manner. These people would probably easily have mixed with true Christians and may have been notable members of various conservative Bible-believing churches. When they prayed in public or private, they sounded just as sincere, orthodox and fervent as a genuine believer. Thus, Christ here teaches that a verbal profession about His true person is not enough to enter the kingdom of heaven if it is not accompanied by genuine repentance and a life focused on the mortification of sin. Orthodoxy in doctrine is useless if it is only an intellectual exercise with no real trust or commitment. A person can be the most orthodox, theologically astute person in the world; but, he will perish if he does not have true faith that results in sincere obedience.

This point is rather obvious when we see that demons in the gospel accounts know the truth about Jesus and confess it openly. They address Christ as “the Holy One of God” (Mk. 1:24); “the Son of God” (Mt. 8:29; Mk. 3:11) and “the Son of the Most High God” (Mk. 5:7).

² Ibid, 1:73.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 376.

These expressions identify the Savior as the divine Son of God. In Acts the demons possessing a servant girl cried out after Paul and Silas, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation” (15:18). When a Jewish exorcist attempted to cast out an evil spirit using Jesus’ name as a magic formula the demon responded, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” (Ac. 19:15). The demons know and believe that Christ is Lord; that God is the Almighty and that Paul is God’s messenger who preaches the way of salvation. They know all about the truth and are willing to admit what is true; but they are evil. They are God’s enemies. When James wants to refute the dead, phony, inadequate faith of church members who refuse to do good works he says, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble” (2:19). The demons believe the truth because they have firsthand knowledge of it. They also have no problem confessing the truth about God, Jesus and the gospel; but they certainly are not trusting in Christ as Savior and Lord. An intellectual assent to the truth is the lowest act of faith. It is something that even demons and pagans can do. Bare assent to the articles of Christianity does not prove true faith. There must be assent and trust. Manton writes, “A man may be right in opinion and judgment, but of vile affections; and a carnal Christian is in as great danger as a pagan, or idolater, or heretic; for though his judgment be sound, yet his manners are heterodox and heretical. True believing is not an act of the understanding only, but a work of ‘all the heart,’ Acts viii.37.... Therefore do not please yourselves in naked assents; these cost nothing, and are worth nothing. There is ‘a form of knowledge,’ Rom. ii.20, as well as ‘a form of godliness,’ 2 Tim. iii.5. ‘A form of knowledge’ is nothing but an idea or module of truth in the brains, when there is no power or virtue to change and transform the heart.”⁴ Do you have faith that goes beyond devils, pagans and hypocrites? Have you truly believed in Christ and repented of your sins? Are you living a holy and humble life of submission to Jesus? Many people who call themselves Christians and have a good profession will hear those terrifying words, “I never knew you; depart from Me.” If we are to be saved we must believe, confess and *practice* the truth. Daily, we should contemplate the day of judgment. We must often examine ourselves and judge our lives to make sure that our faith and profession are real, true and sincere.

Although a knowledge, assent and confession of the truths of the gospel are insufficient by themselves, we do not want to give the impression that they are not important. No one can be saved who does not first know and give assent to the biblical truths regarding Christ’s person and work. Anyone who does not accept what Scripture says about Jesus’ deity, sinlessness, sacrificial death, true humanity and glorious resurrection whether Unitarian, modernist, Jewish, Muslim or atheist are obviously going to go to hell. There is no question about that. In a sense, such people are worse than demons that “believe and tremble.” Make no mistake; knowledge of orthodox doctrine is absolutely essential if one is to become a Christian. We must not use this passage as a proof text for “life” over doctrine. We must embrace the historical facts of the gospel as well as a biblical interpretation of these facts if we are going to be a Christian. Christianity can never be separated from the truths set forth in God’s holy Word. There is no such thing as a Christian who does not believe all of it. Jesus said to the Jews, “If you do not believe that I am He you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24). “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (2 Jn. 9). Anyone that departs from the biblical teaching about Christ or the truths that come from the Savior does *not* have fellowship with God. True knowledge precedes assent, trust and repentance.

⁴ Thomas Manton, *James* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1693] 1962), 240-241.

We also do not want to denigrate confessing Christ. Jesus spoke of the necessity of confessing Him before men (Mt. 10:32; Lk. 12:8). If we are unwilling to confess Him before others, He will not acknowledge us before His Father. Paul says that confession with the mouth accompanies believing in the heart (Rom. 10:9) and that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:11). John tells us, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 Jn. 4:15). Paul concurs, “No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). In light of our passage this means that no one can *truly* believe and *sincerely* confess that Christ is God manifest in the flesh unless he is regenerated and enlightened by the Holy Spirit (see Mt. 16:17; 1 Jn. 4:2-3). It is absolutely essential that we publicly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Everyone who wants to go to heaven must confess that Jesus is Lord and God. No one, not one person who refuses to confess Christ as Lord will go to heaven. But there are people who say it who do not really mean it. Consequently, not all who confess Christ will enter the kingdom of heaven.

It is frightening and sobering to think that there are multitudes of people who look at Christianity as just another interesting philosophy. They examine it. They like it from an intellectual point of view; they think that it is logical, coherent and that it meets their needs. But all of this is merely an intellectual exercise. There is not a heartfelt agonizing over sin that flows from a regenerate heart; there is no real desire to integrate all of Christ into all of life. Jesus and His teachings are placed in a little side compartment of life while self remains on the throne. While lip service is given to the Savior, an examination of life reveals one’s true priorities. There is a habitual pattern of refusing to bow the knee to Christ by obeying His law Word. When the person is confronted with the choice between his little idols and following God’s moral law, the idols usually win. This scenario is very common in our day. It explains why all the polls in recent years taken among evangelicals reveal that in important areas, such as sexual ethics, honest business practices, divorce without a just cause, unlawful debt and so on, evangelicals are either just as lawless and wicked as unbelievers or only slightly better. Their profession of Jesus as “Lord, Lord” means virtually nothing. Churches are often just as full of bitterness, hatred, gossip, slander, backbiting and sinful pride as the pagan clubhouse down the street. Church courts are often as corrupt and unjust as their pagan counterparts. In many cases they are worse. This tragic scene should show us the great danger of trusting in our profession instead of truly grasping Christ by faith. It demonstrates the great need to examine every area of our lives. Is Jesus really Lord? Or are we fooling ourselves? “I’m a church member. I have been baptized. I regularly partake of the eucharist.” But God desires obedience far more than an insincere and thus empty ritual. “The day of judgment will reveal strange things. The hopes of many, who were thought great Christians while they lived, will be utterly confounded. The rottenness of their religion will be exposed and put to shame before the whole world.”⁵

By way of application, there are three things that we must be on guard against if our profession is to be genuine.

(1) There must be a watching against a *nominal* Christianity. A nominal “Christian” is someone who professes faith only because they were born in a Christian household or a predominantly Christian nation. There are multitudes of people who fit in this category. They were baptized as infants and attended church in their youth, but the teachings of Scripture are really unimportant to them. They profess to be Christian, but they really do not care much for church, public worship, Bible reading, prayer or leading a separated life. They attend church occasionally, especially at Christmas and Easter, but they are not at all committed to leading a

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 70.

Christian life. These people usually know little doctrine and are indistinguishable ethically from rank pagans. They read their horoscope in the paper and get their concepts of morality from the surrounding culture. These people are obviously not truly saved or part of Christ's kingdom of grace. This sad state describes the vast majority of Americans.

(2) There are *formal* professors of Christianity. These people seem to take Christ and the Bible much more seriously than nominal professors. They know orthodox doctrine quite well and attend church regularly. They may even like to talk about theology with others, but everything is purely intellectual. There is a commitment in words, but it does not extend to deeds. There is no love of the brethren or love of Christian fellowship. There is no enthusiasm for godliness; there is a dusty orthodoxy that does not strongly affect the life. They are happy to acknowledge Christ as Lord and seem enthusiastic for the truth, but are not willing to apply these precepts to their own experience. There is simply no fruit of the Spirit in their behavior. There is no consistent evidence of an internal work of the Holy Spirit upon their heart. When they are confronted with a serious sin in their lives, they respond by making excuses and attacking the church leadership. They often will move to a church that tolerates sin. These deceived souls will be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(3) There are *hypocritical* professors of Jesus. Although this category encompasses the previous two groups, here we are discussing people who attend church and profess Christ, yet deliberately lead a double life. At church they are the upstanding persons who talk and act very piously; but, in secret, they are immoral and unconcerned with submitting to God's holy Word. We have all read stories of prominent pastors visiting prostitutes or committing adultery. There are professing Christians engaged in gross lies, deceit and fraud. For some reason, these people have the need to appear as a serious Christian before others, when they know their profession is a sham. Perhaps they have deceived themselves into thinking that God will overlook these gross inconsistencies. Or, perhaps they have imbibed some form of antinomian doctrine. In any case, these deluded fools will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone with the devil and his demons.

If any of these categories describe your experience, then your only hope is to confess your guilt before Christ and repent of your sin at once. If you want to become a true Christian and persevere as a genuine believer, then you need to not only profess, but also do the will of Christ's Father who is in heaven (Mt. 7:21). What does doing God's will involve? It involves believing in Christ and submitting to His revealed will. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him" (Mt. 17:5). You must endeavor to shun every known sin and keep every revealed commandment. You must strive to be of one mind with God by loving what He loves and hating what He hates. There must be a heartfelt desire to obey His Word and a great fear of displeasing Him. The way of the world must be seen as complete foolishness, vanity and darkness. Like Paul, we must "delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22). Our thoughts must be in accord with David when he said, "I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right and I hate every false way" (Ps. 119:128). Moreover, we must strive to follow Christ as the perfect example of what it means to obey God's will. Jesus always submitted to God's will sincerely, quickly and completely. We need to walk, even as He walked (cf. 1 Jn. 2:6; 1 Pet. 2:21). Doing God's will involves being unselfish, meek and submissive to God's authority out of love. It involves a willingness to daily mortify our sinful desires and bring them into submission to the moral law. We must habitually say no to sin and yes to Christ's law-Word. There must be a complete surrender of our hearts and lives to everything Christ says. We must bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). "The will of the Father is

that we should forsake our sins, trust in His Son, take His yoke upon us, and follow Him; to do less and yet call Him Lord is most horrible mockery.”⁶ In order to do God’s will, we must become joyful slaves of Jesus Christ. The love in our hearts for our precious Savior would not want it any other way.

Is the man who does the will of God free from all sin and the presence of indwelling sin? No, not at all! It is one of our greatest afflictions that we must carry about with us the sinful flesh—this body of death (Rom. 7:24). We are constantly fighting against our sinful lusts and we sin every single day in thought, word and deed. The difference between someone who does the will of God and someone who does not is that the godly man is never at peace with indwelling sin as the unregenerate man is. He hates it, fights against it, becomes depressed over it, mourns over it, and begs God to be free of its company. He can’t wait to part with it forever. Moreover, *scandalous*, high-handed sins are *rare* in the true believer’s life. David committed adultery, but he didn’t make a habit of it. He repented with tears. When the apostle John wrote to tell people in the visible church how to know if they were truly saved, he made a clear-cut distinction between a man who sins yet who does not make it a habitual practice and the one who continually sins. The person who lives in continuous sin is not a true Christian (cf. 1 Jn. 1:6; 2:24).

In discussing doing the will of God as it relates to entering the kingdom of heaven, it is important to note that our sanctification is a *progressive* work and an *imperfect* work. Even the greatest of saints has many defects and fails to live up to the perfection of God’s holy Word. If we do not realize this and understand that we will never be what we would like to be or attain to the holiness that we strongly desire, then we will live our lives without any assurance and will be miserable, joyless creatures. Our spiritual self-examination must be honest, thorough and biblical. Yet, it must also be balanced with a strong focus on Christ, His love toward us and His perfect salvation or we will enter into despair. While many professing Christians today are antinomian and do not practice self-examination, we must avoid the extreme of some of the New England Puritans, who emphasized holiness in an unbalanced manner that left many with no hope of salvation at all. Our lives consist of continual warfare against the flesh, the world and the devil. There are times when we are overcome; yet, we continually press forward with our eye of faith on Jesus. Even though in many things we offend, we must never give up the fight or forsake Christ.

The Appeal to Mighty Works

Jesus also points out that even “many” that did mighty works in His name will not enter the kingdom of heaven. “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’” (Mt. 7:22). Here our Lord describes, not professing Christians in general, but leaders in the church. These were men that exhibited supernatural gifts in their ministry. These were sign gifts that functioned in the first generation of Christians. Christ is amplifying and driving home His point that a bare confession is not enough to enter heaven. He is destroying self-deception and all false concepts of assurance. He wants His followers to understand that even those who work miracles can be self-deceived. There are a number of things that merit our attention in this verse.

First, Jesus points out that this appeal will be made by “many” on that day. This means that many leaders, pastors or teachers in the church will also be surprised on the day of

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 383.

judgment. We live in a time when, outwardly, Christianity looks as though it is prospering. But most churches today preach a false gospel of Armianism. Many church leaders boast of their impressive achievements, but all their building programs, revival meetings and large numbers of attenders will avail them nothing on that day because they preached a false gospel and did not do God's will. This verse is obviously related to the one on false prophets. Mighty ministries without the true gospel that do not lead to genuine holiness are worthless and dangerous.

Second, these men had the ability either to fake or perhaps even do real miracles. They suppose that miraculous gifts prove that they must be genuine believers. They emphasize their loyalty and connection to the Redeemer by using the expression "in Your name" three times. This phrase is placed emphatically before each verb to emphasize that these miracles were supposedly done through the Savior's own power for His own cause. Let us examine the three mighty deeds in turn.

(1) These reprobates point out that they prophesied in Jesus' name. Although at times prophecy can refer simply to the proclamation of the truth, in this context (where it is placed next to two supernatural activities), it probably refers to speaking or to *allegedly speaking* direct revelation. These men may have predicted future events or may have set forth authoritative doctrine. There are examples in Scripture of men who prophesied, yet were not true believers. In Numbers 23 we read that "the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth" (v. 5) and that he prophesied good things of Israel (vs. 7-10), even though he was employed by wicked Balak. Although Balaam "has the knowledge of the Most High" and "sees the vision of the Almighty" (Num. 24:16), he was destroyed with God's enemies (Num. 31:8). Peter describes him as a wicked man, a false prophet "who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15). In John 11 we have the remarkable example of Caiaphas, the wicked leader of the Jews who delivered Christ over to Pilate. John tells us that "he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad" (vs. 51-52). Note also that wicked Saul "prophesied among the prophets" (1 Sam. 11:11). We are told that "the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them" (1 Sam. 11:10). Saul died as a God-hating reprobate.

Although there are some exceptional cases of false professors who truly prophesied, it is likely that the vast majority of people in this category are actually false claimants to the gift of prophecy. There are many men and women in history who have prophesied in the name of Christ who were never sent by God or authorized to speak in His name. Think of all the Charismatic charlatans in our own day who have built large ministries that are very gifted and successful, yet who teach heresy and live immoral lives. There are even men, who preach orthodox doctrine and who have helped many people get to heaven, who themselves come short of true belief. It is a shocking, sobering thought that there are men who are orthodox, and even fervent in their preaching, who nevertheless do not know God.

The apostle Paul seemed to be aware of this danger when he said, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27). He is aware of the constant and deadly struggle against sin that is a part of every Christian's life. He brings all the evil propensities and passions of his heart into subjection to avoid being a cast-away from the faith.

When speaking of the importance of exercising love during the exercising of gifts Paul says, "though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2). If a man has the ability to prophesy, knows all the secret purposes of God relating to

redemption and has an intellectual apprehension of all the truths of the Bible, yet does not have Christian love which is a fruit of saving faith, then all these gifts are worthless. Intellectual attainments and amazing gifts are of no value if we have not truly believed and repented of our sins.

(2) These deluded souls also claim to have cast out demons. The apostles and their close associates had the ability to cast out demons. This was another sign gift practiced among the first generation of the Christian church. Interestingly, Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ, completely apostatized and hanged himself, had this gift. Matthew writes, “And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease” (10:1). If Judas had not had the same gifts as the other apostles, then the others would have regarded Judas with some suspicion. But there was none. The Holy Spirit can even do works through the unregenerate. If God can cause a donkey to speak (Num. 22:28, 30), then He can also cause an unbeliever to prophesy, cast out demons or work miracles. God is sovereign, and for His own reasons, sometimes permits imposters to do amazing things. Jesus said that “many false prophets will arise and deceive many” (Mt. 24:11) and that “false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive if possible, even the elect” (Mt. 24:24). The doing of great wonders does not prove that a man is part of God’s kingdom. Sometimes God works through an unbeliever; at other times, men may do counterfeit miracles by the power of Satan. Consequently, it is important that we evaluate mighty workers by their doctrine and *by their lives*. In our day people often highly esteem so-called miracle workers, even though their teaching and lifestyle are clearly unbiblical.

(3) These people claim to have done many wonders in Jesus’ name. The word translated “wonderful works” (KJV), “wonders” (NKJV), “miracles” (NEB, NIV, NASB), or “mighty works” (ASV, RSV) is *dunameis* (from *dunamis*) which refers to a work of power. In this context it probably refers to miracles of healing. The same word is translated miracles in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and Galatians 3:5. These men not only prophesied and cast out demons, but also had healing ministries. On the day of judgment, they will point to these healings and speak of all the good things that they have done to help others. “Certainly one such as I, who have helped so many people in time of need, must be a true Christian.” Miraculous gifts, whether genuine, as with the case of Judas Iscariot, or counterfeit, like what occurs in the modern Charismatic movement, do not prove that a person is a genuine believer.

If we take this passage and apply it to our own day, when the supernatural gifts are no longer operative, we could say that the man who preaches very effectively cannot base his assurance of salvation solely on his ability to preach. Many a preacher has ended up in hell. We could also say that a man who has a wonderful ministry to the sick, the mentally anguished and the poor has no guarantee on that basis of eternal life. Modernists and grossly immoral men have had such ministries. Matthew Henry writes, “There may be a faith of miracles, where there is no justifying faith; none of that *faith which works by love* and obedience. Gifts of tongues and healing would recommend men to the world, but it is real holiness or sanctification that is accepted of God. Grace and love are *a more excellent way than removing mountains, or speaking with the tongues of men and of angels*, 1 Cor. xiii.1, 2. Grace will bring a man to heaven without working miracles, but working miracles will never bring a man to heaven without grace.”⁷ We must not take refuge in gifts and mighty works without a genuine faith that leads to obedience to God’s law. The Jews rested in their external privileges and their many fasts, alms and rituals. But they were worldly, prideful and wicked. Beware of self-deception!

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:96.

The Savior's Declaration

In verse 23 we see the Redeemer's terrifying statement to these false professors. "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" There are a number of profound things in this statement.

First, we cannot fail to notice that the one pronouncing judgment on the final day is Jesus Christ. Our Lord, from almost the very beginning of His earthly ministry, "laid claim to being the One to whom the entire world, believing and unbelieving, would be answerable"⁸ (cf. Mt. 25:31 ff.). This teaching on the final judgment is consistent with the doctrine of the rest of the New Testament (Mt. 25:31 ff.; 2 Thess. 1:7 ff.; Rev. 20:11-15). As the door to heaven (Jn. 10:7, 9) and the One who holds the keys to death and hell (Rev. 1:18), the Savior admits His own and excludes the rest. This is an aspect of His glorification. It is also proof of His divinity. Every human being who ever lived will bow the knee and acknowledge Christ as supreme Lord (Phil. 2:10). The expression "on that day" in verse 22 in the Old Testament frequently refers to "the day of the Lord" (e.g., Isa. 10:20; Hos. 2:21; Amos 9:11). Although the phrase "day of Jehovah" often refers to cataclysmic temporal judgments in history (Isa. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Am. 5:18; Oba. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14, 18), all of these judgments point to the final judgment at the end of history (cf. Isa. 2:20; Zech. 14:4; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:8). As the Lord over heaven and earth, Jesus will act as judge on His Father's authority. Although we do not want to profess the Lordship of Christ falsely, nevertheless we must acknowledge that "He is *Lord* of the universe and all it contains, the sovereign ruler of all men and of all things (cf. 11:27; 28:18; Phil. 2:11; Rev. 17:14)."⁹ He is our Lord for we have forsaken all things that offend Him and we worship Him as the divine-human Mediator.

Second, the Redeemer declares that He never knew these people. The word translated "profess" (KJV, ASV), "tell them" (NEB), "tell them plainly" (NIV) or "declare" (NKJV, RSV) can refer to a solemn declaration. It can be translated "profess" or "confess." This word (*homologeîn*) is used elsewhere of an open confession of Jesus before men (Mt. 10:32), confessing Christ unto salvation (Rom. 10:9); the baptizer's public declaration that he was not the Messiah (Jn. 1:20) and Herod's promise to Salome in the presence of his guests (Mt. 14:7). This is Christ's open, public declaration as Judge of all men.¹⁰ With public profession or confession as an element of this declaration, we have here a strong antithesis between the false profession of these reprobates and Christ's public profession or declaration that He never knew them. "I will profess with My mouth, openly before the whole assembly of angels and all men who ever lived what I have always known in My heart. I never had a saving relationship with you." "I knew that you professed acquaintance with Me. You used My name; but it was a mere profession. You did not know Me. You knew a number of things about Me; but you did not know Me (as your Lord, and Lawgiver, and Savior)."¹¹

The statement, "I never knew you," is pregnant with meaning and refers to far more than an intellectual recognition (cf. Gen. 18:19; Ex. 2:25; Ps. 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hos. 13:5; Mt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Jn. 3:1). In Scripture it often has the sense of an intimate relationship or love (e.g., "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived..." [Gen. 4:1]). Jesus is saying, "I never loved you or regarded you as My own. I never set My electing

⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 378.

⁹ *Ibid*, 377.

¹⁰ See Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:51.

¹¹ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 114.

love upon you because you are not of My flock. I never took a saving interest in you or delighted in you because you were not chosen of My Father and you never truly believed in My Person or work.” The word “know” can also have the sense of approve or acknowledge. “The LORD knows the way of the righteous” (Ps. 1:6). That is, He approves or acknowledges their faithfulness. Of Israel God said, “You only have I known [i.e. loved and acknowledged as My peculiar people] of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). Christ said, “I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (Jn. 10:14-15).

The word “never” indicates that these false professors were not at any time truly part of God’s family or the invisible church. There was never a time when they had real saving faith. This is an excellent proof text against those who believe that real Christians can apostatize and go to hell. This passage implies “that if he had ever known them, *as the Lord knows them that are his* [2 Tim. 2:19], had ever owned them and loved them as his, he would have known them, and owned them, and *loved them, to the end*; but he *never* did *know* them, for he always knew them to be hypocrites, and rotten at heart.”¹² We are saved and preserved in salvation only because Jesus first loved us and chose us. “Behind the free and responsible deeds of human beings lies always the sovereign will of God (cf. 11:27; 13:11).”¹³

Third, our Lord orders these persons to go from His presence with the words: “depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Mt. 7:23). These words are the most terrifying words a professing Christian could ever hear. The verb “depart” in the original language means more than a physical departure, “namely, separation and desertion, in which sense it is the root of the noun *anchorite*, meaning one who retires, or retreats, or is secluded from the world.”¹⁴ These poor souls are separated from Jesus and forever cut off from any possibility of being saved and sanctified by His precious blood. “To *depart from* Christ is the very hell of hell; it is the foundation of all the misery of the damned.”¹⁵ Those who rejected the Savior to lead their own lives of sin and autonomy are rejected by the Redeemer, cast out, and abandoned to eternal perdition. These hypocrites are abandoned to everlasting fire (Mt. 18:8), the pit of the abyss (Rev. 9:2), the lake of fire that burns with fire and brimstone (Rev. 14:10; 20:10), the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13), the outer darkness (Mt. 22:13); the place of torment (Lk. 16:23-24) and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 24:50-51). Separation from Christ leads to eternal damnation and suffering. It involves an incredible punishment of loss (i.e. from fellowship with God, all the beautiful things of this world and the glory and bliss of heaven) as well as the punishment of sense (e.g., thirst, pain, mental anguish and regret). Without the atoning death of Jesus to pay the complete penalty for their sins, these wicked persons will receive strict, perfect justice from our Lord. Their damnation will be an eternal display of Christ’s justice, holiness and almighty power. This dreadful scene is simply the logical and historical outworking of the truth that the soul who sins must die (Ezek. 18:4); the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23); and, God is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness (Hab. 1:13).

The reason that our Lord gives for the wicked being sent into the abyss is their practice of “lawlessness” (the word used [*anomia*] means literally “lawlessness”). Their profession of Christ as Lord and their practicing of amazing sign gifts was merely a whitewash on a lifestyle that was habitually opposed to God’s moral law. This statement is probably an allusion to Psalm 6:8 (LXX 6:9). “Matthew reproduces the LXX phrase which translates ‘workers of evil’ as

¹² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:97.

¹³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 188.

¹⁴ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 213.

¹⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:97.

workers of ‘lawlessness.’”¹⁶ The participle “practice” is in the present tense indicating a *lifestyle* of lawlessness. These are people who never truly repented of their sins. These are people who called Jesus Lord, but who *continuously indulged* themselves in sin. A true Christian is not without sin, but he does not walk in *habitual sin*. As Paul says, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries and the like; of which I told you beforehand, just as I told you in times past that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:19-21. “Since God’s kingdom is a kingdom of godliness, righteousness and self-control, those who indulge in the works of the flesh will be excluded from it. For such works [of righteousness] give evidence that they are in Christ.”¹⁷ Those who live a life dictated by self obviously have never embraced Jesus as Lord.

The end of verse 23 states in negative form what our Lord had stated positively at the end of verse 21, specifically doing God’s will. We do God’s will by keeping His commandments. Once again, we see that the gospel does not denigrate or set aside God’s law, but rather exalts it. Christ came so that men would be justified by His blood and then sanctified by His Spirit applying the moral law to the heart. Therefore, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim. 2:19).

Summary and More Applications

We have seen that many professing Christians will be in for a terrifying shock on the day of judgment. These people have deceived themselves into believing that they were true Christians even though their lives were characterized by lawlessness. They practiced a form of self-examination, but focused on the wrong areas of life. Instead of looking at everyday godliness or faithfulness to the moral law, they focused on the spectacular. Instead of considering a daily, humble imitation of Christ, they were obsessed with big, dramatic acts of ministry. Instead of relying on the Savior and looking to His Word for sanctification, they placed their trust in mighty deeds while walking according to the flesh. There are some things that we can learn from this teaching that will help us avoid the often subtle way in which people deceive themselves.

First, we must beware of looking to amazing experiences as a foundation for assurance. Because of the widespread influence of the Charismatic movement in our day, people more and more have placed their faith in a dramatic experience instead of the teaching of God’s holy Word. People have been trained not to examine themselves or others on the basis of obedience to God’s moral law or faithfulness to apostolic doctrine, but rather look to speaking in tongues, being “slain” in the Spirit, receiving a healing or having some mystical feeling. We hear, “Reverend so and so must be a man of God; look at the wonderful healings he has done”; or, “I know that I am a true Christian because I spoke in tongues”; or, “I am positive that the sign gifts continue because I saw Mrs. Jones receive a healing.” We must keep in mind that all of the things that these false professors considered to be signs of genuine faith are exalted by the Charismatic movement. When people place experiences, no matter how wonderful or exciting, above the teaching of God’s Word, they leave themselves open to all sorts of heresies and self-delusions. Is our main concern Jesus Christ or are we interested in exciting phenomena? Do we

¹⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

¹⁷ John R. W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (London: Intervarsity, 1968), 148.

live our lives to glorify and please God or are we living for the next fascinating experience? For many people religious experience has more in common with a drug trip or mysticism than practical godliness.

Second, we must beware of dead orthodoxy divorced from personal holiness. The Bible tells us what we must believe and how we must live. If we focus on doctrine without also seeking a personal application to our own behavior, then our profession is meaningless. We need to have what the Puritans called an experimental Christianity. We need to study and learn all the right doctrines and then apply them to ourselves, our families and (as best as we are able) our societies. Tragically, there are people in the church who engage in theology as an intellectual game, as a way to feel superior to others. If theology only leads to pride and an attitude of snobbery, then it is all in vain. A rich biblical theology should increase our godliness and our love of the brethren. A deep knowledge of God's law should bring humility and greater holiness. There are men in the church today who like to speak much about God's law and culture, but who are not interested in personal sanctification. This is an unscriptural and dangerous false emphasis. Before we speak to others we must first carefully examine ourselves. Are we using theology to increase our love and dedication toward Christ and the brethren? Are we applying biblical law to ourselves as expounded in the Sermon on the Mount? Are we living a life of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees?

Third, we must be on guard against theologies that embrace "easy-believism," implicitly denying the Lordship of Christ and completely divorcing sanctification from the doctrine of salvation broadly defined. Most evangelicals in our country, who are living in self-deception regarding their spiritual state, have been lulled into a false sense of security by this heretical teaching. Moreover, we must watch out for the idea that the moral laws found in the Old Testament are no longer binding. The deluded souls cast out on the final day were rejected because of *lawlessness*. This means that they were not being faithful to God's moral precepts revealed in *both* testaments. If we do not study the moral requirements in the *whole* Bible, then how will we be able to examine ourselves properly or thoroughly? True self-examination presupposes a good understanding of biblical ethics. The man who lives for self in order to serve his own lusts will evaluate himself with an autonomous, flexible ethic. A false standard will always lead to a false evaluation.

Fourth, we must make sure that Christ is the central focus of our life and religion. Many people are attracted to church as a kind of social club. Others like volunteering for good works because it makes them feel good about themselves. Still others enter the ministry and attempt to do great things to make a name for themselves. We must watch against a form of Christianity which does not have Jesus as the axis around which everything else revolves. Our faith must be directed to Him for sanctification as well as justification. Let us beware of thinking we are secure because of our parents, or our baptism, or our supreme knowledge of theology, or our membership in an orthodox church, or our impressive works. We must always be looking to Christ with true faith and we must strive to do God's will as a fruit of our faith and out of gratitude for what Jesus has done. Let all who have embraced Christ walk as He walked, according to His Spirit. Let us demonstrate our love and dedication to Him by obeying His commandments. Let us always strive to do the will of our Father who is in heaven.