

DON'T BE SURPRISED MATTHEW 7:21-23

What is the ultimate issue of life? What is the *one* thing in life that matters most? I will give you a hint: it's the *same* for every person, no matter what their age, race, class, gender, nationality, or any other social distinction. It's the same for Millennials as it is for Baby Boomers. It's the same for a person who lives in a penthouse in Manhattan as it is for a person who lives in the squalor of a third world slum. It's the same for someone who lived 5,000 years ago as it is for someone who was born in the twenty-first century.

What is the ultimate issue of life?

Contrary to popular opinion, contrary to the attitudes of the vast majority of people in our culture, the ultimate issue of life is not what kind of a job you have, or how much money you make, or what kind of a house you live in, or how many toys are in your garage. It is not how happy, how pretty, how healthy or strong or athletic you are. The ultimate issue of life is not how many people follow you on Facebook, or how many good deeds you've done, or how many wonderful experiences you've had. It has nothing to do with your personality, your net worth, or your IQ.

The ultimate issue of life is what is going to happen to you on the Day of Judgment. What matters most is what God will say to you on that day about *where* you will spend eternity. Will He assign you to spend eternity in heaven, or will He assign you to spend eternity in hell?

And if this is the ultimate issue of life, then it stands to reason that the most important *question* in life, the question about which every person ought to have absolute clarity is: *How can I be sure that I am going to heaven?* And how can I be sure I can point the way for my loved ones? For the alternative to heaven, the *only* alternative to heaven, is conscious, eternal suffering and torment in hell.

But the question, "How can I be sure I am going to heaven" raises another, equally important question. Where do I find the answer? The *true, definitive* answer?

In his book, *Follow Me*, David Platt tells the story of his friend John...*who's first exposure to the concept of hell was during an episode of the cartoon, Tom and Jerry, when he was young. Tom was sent to hell for something bad he had done to Jerry. What was intended to be a humorous cartoon scared John to death, and he later found himself at church talking with an older man about what he had seen.*

The church man looked at John and said, "Well, you don't want to go to hell, do you?" "No," he responded.

"Okay, then," the man said, "pray this prayer after me. Dear Jesus..."

John paused. After an awkward silence, he realized he was supposed to repeat after the man, and so he hesitantly responded, "Dear Jesus..."

The man continued. "I know I'm a sinner, and I know Jesus died on a cross for my sin." Again, John echoed what he had heard.

"Amen," the man concluded.

Then the man looked at John and said, "Son, you are saved from your sins, and you don't ever have to worry about hell again." (pp. 5-6).

Is that true? Is that how you can be sure that you are going to heaven? Can John look back upon that experience and conclude that because he recited that prayer he has the assurance of eternal life?

That older man could just as easily have been in the church I grew up in. I was told at

an early age that if I wanted to go to heaven I needed to “ask Jesus into my heart.” And people like me were assured that as long as we prayed a particular prayer, raised our hand, signed a card, or walked down an aisle, we were saved from hell and were going to heaven.

I didn’t realize until years later when I started to study the Bible for myself that “asking Jesus into your heart,” or praying what people called “the sinners’ prayer” was nowhere in the Bible.

And it naturally made me wonder: If it’s not in the Bible, is that what it *really* means to be a Christian? Or was I misinformed? And if it’s not in the Bible, are there people who have asked Jesus into their heart at some point in their lives who *think* they are Christians—who think they are going to heaven—but really are *not*?

And, finally, if the Bible does not say that the way to become a Christian and go to heaven is to ask Jesus into your heart, then what *does* the Bible say about how one becomes a Christian and how one can know with certainty that he/she is going to heaven?

Fortunately, Jesus, the Author and Giver of life and the Lord of heaven, wants us to be sure. He died and rose again in order to secure eternal life for us. He has made it available, He *wants* to give it to us, and He wants us to be absolutely certain that we have it.

But we need to know that even though He wants to give us eternal life and He has clearly told us in His Word how we can be sure we have it, the terms of us receiving that gift are very narrow. And unless we receive His gift on those terms we will *not* have it.

Please listen carefully to what Jesus says. **Matthew 7:21-23.** ²¹ *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.* ²² *On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’* ²³ *And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’”* (ESV).

This may be the most sobering passage in all of Scripture, so it is imperative that every one of us understands its meaning—from the oldest to the youngest. And we *can* all understand it because the meaning is simple and clear. Jesus is saying that *on the Day of Judgment many will be surprised to discover that they never truly belonged to him.* And I want to underscore the word *many*. Look at **verse 22.** *“On that day many will say to me...”* There will be many who *think* they belong to Jesus when, in fact, they do not; many who *think* they are going to heaven when, in fact, they are not.

And the text says they will remain deceived up until the Day that they stand before God. Look at **verse 22** again. *“On that day many will say to me...”* “That day” is the Day of Judgment. There is no one who disputes that this is what Jesus means by “that day.” It is the day when every person who has ever lived will stand before the Righteous Judge of heaven and give an account for their life lived on this earth.

Jesus makes it clear that many who stand before Him on that day will be in for the shock of their lives. They will be astonished by what Jesus says to them. They will be horrified.

Why? First, these people professed to be followers of Christ while they lived on earth. They weren’t atheists, or pagans, or heretics, or God-haters. They were people who were associated with Jesus and called Him “Lord.” And when Jesus says these people will say to Him, “Lord, Lord,” I’m pretty sure He means they not only call Him that because they consider Him worthy of that title, but because they believe He is God.

But Jesus makes it clear that it’s not enough to merely know that He is God. It’s not

enough to have correct theology, or to honor His name, or to call out His name, or even to worship Him. That is not what saves people and allows them to go to heaven.

Neither does sincerity or earnestness. In verse 21 “Lord, Lord” is called a double emphatic in Greek syntax, and it conveys an intensity and an urgency on the part of the person making the address. Jesus is talking about sincere, earnest people here. People who mean business.

But being earnest and sincere about Jesus is not what saves you. There are occasions in most everyone’s life when he/she means business with God. A time of crisis, a time of despair, a time when their own resources are depleted and they have nowhere else to turn. And they cry out, “Lord, help me! Save me! Rescue me!” And they are as sincere and earnest as can be.

But when circumstances change and things get better, it’s back to business as usual. No. There must be more than just an acknowledgment of who He is and an appeal for Him to rescue you from your troubles. Jesus says in **verse 21**. ²¹ *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*

And here is the crux of the issue. You want to be assured of eternal life? *Do the will of God.* Do you see that in the text?

That raises the most important question. What does it mean to *do* the will of God? Obviously, it means more than *knowing* the will of God. It means more than just *agreeing with* the will of God. Jesus said *doing* the will of God is the prerequisite for entering the kingdom.

Those who were listening to Jesus preach this sermon were convinced they knew what it meant to do the will of God. Jews in the first century had been taught that doing God’s will meant obeying the Law of Moses and being religious, which for them meant performing religious duties and engaging in religious activities. It involved such things as praying at prescribed times of the day for a prescribed length of time, fasting on prescribed occasions, tithing, keeping the Sabbath, giving to the poor, reading the Scriptures, going to synagogue, etc. If one does these things, they thought, one is doing God’s will.

But Jesus made it perfectly clear earlier in the Sermon on the Mount that religiosity and rule-keeping are not what impresses God, and it’s not what saves a person. He shocked them when He said, *“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom...”* (5:20).

And you’d better believe that statement had these people scratching their heads and wondering, “If doing God’s will is more than the religious activity and rule-keeping that our leaders are doing, what *is* it?”

And perhaps a few of them might have concluded, “Oh, I know. Doing God’s will is *not* doing what the Scribes and Pharisees do, it’s doing what *Jesus* does. It’s doing good works in *His* name.”

But Jesus goes on to say, **verses 22-23**. ²² *“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’* ²³ *And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”*

Consider what He’s saying here. These are people who have done some spiritually impressive things. They spoke for God; they proclaimed the very words of God, and there is no evidence to suggest that those words were *not* God’s words. They cast out demons

from those who were oppressed; they triumphed over the powers of darkness in Jesus' name, and there is no evidence to suggest that this didn't really happen.

What's more, they did many mighty works in Jesus' name. We're talking miracles—*many* miracles! They were used by God as vessels through whom He demonstrated His power and blessing. People were healed, people were saved, people were blessed, and there is no reason to believe that these miracles were not genuine and that it wasn't God who actually performed them through these people.

But notice, even though these people did extraordinary things, even though they had a part in doing the work of Christ in significant ways, they themselves did not belong to Christ.

Do you see what Jesus is saying here? Just because someone calls him/herself a Christian doesn't mean he/she is. Just because someone is earnest and sincere doesn't mean he/she is part of the kingdom. And just because a person does wonderful things in Jesus' name doesn't mean he/she belongs to Jesus. Jesus says that *on the Day of Judgment many will be surprised to discover that they never truly belonged to him.*

And so I take verses 22-23 to mean that among those who will be surprised on the Day of Judgment will be pastors and elders and deacons and missionaries and Sunday School teachers and people who run ministries and some of those you see on Christian television or hear on Christian radio. Jesus is describing influential people, people who are considered leaders, people who are active and busy in the Lord's work, people who are being used by the Lord in significant ways.

But being active and busy and recognizable in the Lord's work and being used by the Lord to do great things does not make someone a follower of Jesus who is safe on the Day of Judgment.

You might be thinking, "Well, something must have happened to these people along the way. Maybe they *were* Christians at one time, and then did something to lose their salvation."

Look at what Jesus says in **verse 23**. *"And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"*

It's not that these people were Christians at one time and then lost their salvation. It's not that they were "in" at one time and then did something to forfeit their eternal inheritance. Jesus says, *"I never knew you"*.

And He says, *"Depart from me."* What does He mean? Is He merely saying, "Leave me alone? I don't want to be bothered with you right now?" No. He's talking about what He will say to them on the Day of Judgment; the day when our true identity will be revealed; the day when our real status with God is brought to light; the day when we shall be assigned to either heaven or hell.

And when Jesus says, *"Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness,"* He is assigning them to that place of conscious, eternal torment—the place of outer darkness, where the fire is never quenched, where the worm never dies, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying here? The Day of Judgment will be a rude awakening for many. Do you see that in the text? And Jesus is telling us this because He wants us to be sure that we are not among those who are deceived. He wants us to be clear about what it means to be saved. He wants us to know the entrance requirements for heaven.

And so we need to go back to verse 21 and find out just what He means by, *"but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*

Everything rides on the meaning of this phrase “the will of my Father.” If we can determine precisely what this means, then we can have certainty that we know what it means to be saved.

I’d like you to look at **John 6:38-40**. ³⁸ *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.* ³⁹ *And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.* ⁴⁰ *For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

There are two aspects of God’s will in this passage. God sent His Son into this world to secure for Himself a people that are His very own. Jesus came to redeem them from their sin, to give them life, and to raise them up on the last day. And “last day” is another reference to the Day of Judgment. On that day, all that the Father has given to Jesus will be raised—that is, they will be assigned to live with Jesus forever in heaven. That’s the will of God.

Here’s the second part of the will of God: That everyone who “looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life.” What does this mean?

Obviously, it means more than just believing He exists, believing He is powerful, believing He is God. The demons believe that, and shudder! Looking on the Son and believing in Him means that we look on Him to save us from our helpless sinful condition which makes all of us guilty before God and worthy of hell. It means that we look to Him to rescue us from our abject spiritual poverty, and it means to look on Him to clothe our shameful spiritual nakedness with His righteousness and make us presentable to God.

We are not looking to our own good deeds or our own righteousness to get to heaven. We are not looking to our religious upbringing or our spiritual accomplishments to save us. We are not looking to anything we have, anything we have done, or anyone we know. Because it’s not what we do for God—it’s what He has done for us through Jesus.

It’s about looking on Jesus. Putting our complete trust in Him—His righteousness, His grace, His mercy, His power, His provision. It’s placing our absolute confidence in what He did for us on the cross when He bore our sins in His body and experienced the punishment for sin that we deserved. It’s putting our full weight upon Him.

Do you want to have eternal life? Do the will of the Father. Do you want to know what God’s will is? “Look on the Son and believe in Him, and you *shall* have eternal life”.

That’s the entrance requirement into heaven. These are the terms. There is no other way that leads to life. Salvation is found in Jesus and Jesus alone.

Have you looked on Jesus and believed?

It’s possible that some of you have been anticipating the Day of Judgment with confidence that you are going to be okay and you are going to heaven because you were baptized as a baby, or you grew up in a Christian family, or you went to church all your life, or you prayed the sinners’ prayer, or you’ve done a lot of good things. I want to declare to you none of these things can save you. You cannot bring anything with you on that Day of Judgment—not your baptism certificate, your church membership papers, your church attendance records, your tax forms that show how much you gave to God’s work, your Bible degree from such and such a college, your good works. As the hymn writer so poignantly wrote, “Nothing of my own I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.”

Knowing for certain that you are going to be safe on the Day of Judgment is not a matter of saying certain words, or praying a certain prayer, or knowing correct theology, or even doing indisputably supernatural things. It’s about coming to God on the merits of His

Son, Jesus, putting your confidence in what Jesus has done for you, being clothed in His righteousness, and being born again by His Spirit.

I began this message by asking you, 'What is the ultimate issue of life'? 'What is the *one* thing in life that matters most'? And I told you that it's the same for every person, no matter what their age, race, class, gender, nationality, or any other social distinction.

I hope you are convinced that the ultimate issue of life is what is going to happen to you on the Day of Judgment. The one thing that matters most, the *only* thing that really matters is what God will say to you on that day about *where* you will spend eternity. Will He assign you to spend eternity in heaven, or will He assign you to spend eternity in hell?

Several years ago a popular Christian singer sang a very pretty song with very poor theology. It went like this: "Anybody here want to live forever? Say 'I do'. Anybody here want to walk the golden streets? Say 'I do.'" Sorry, but that's not correct. *Everybody* wants those things. But you don't have them by merely wanting them or by saying, "I do."

You gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven by *doing the will of God*. And the will of God is this: "Look on the Son and believe in him" (John 6:40).

Don't Be Surprised **Matthew 7:21-23**

Main Idea: On the Day of Judgment many will be surprised to discover that they never truly belonged to Christ

Introduction: the ultimate issue of life

Jesus' Prophecy
Big surprises on the Day of Judgment

A Damning Deception
For *many*

Professing Christians

Sincere and earnest people

Spiritually active people
Prophecy in Jesus' name

Casting out demons

Performing miracles

Jesus *never* knew them

"Depart from Me"

The Key Question: “What is the Will of God?”

All that the Father has given Jesus will be raised on the last day (John 6:39)

All those who look to the Son will have eternal life (John 6:40)

We Look on Jesus to:

- Save us from our _____ condition
- Rescue us from our _____ spiritual _____
- Clothe our _____ spiritual _____ with His righteousness