

## Lordship and False Followers – Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>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?’ <sup>23</sup>And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’

This passage is often cited to show that many professing Christians are not actually saved. It is clear that these false followers are rejected by Jesus Christ even though they know who He is and have abundant good works. But does this passage teach, as some claim, that a person must be totally surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in order to be saved? What is doing “the will of My Father in heaven” that gains entry into heaven?

### What we know about these followers

Here’s what we know about the subjects of the passage:

- They are evidently related to the false prophets of 7:15-20 (see GraceNotes no. 51, Fruits and False Prophets – Matthew 7:15-20) who would lead people away from Jesus as the narrow gate (7:13-14). The “Not everyone who says” in verse 21 links to the “them” in 7:20, as does the “you” of verse 23. Jesus could also be speaking of those deceived by the false prophets. Outwardly this group displays good works (they look like sheep; 7:15), but their true beliefs are revealed ultimately in what they say.
- They have a correct theology in that they confess that Jesus is Lord. The title “Lord” is a title of respect, but also of deity when used of Jesus Christ. Its repetition here indicates an emphasis on who Christ is.
- They are submitted to Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives. By their emphatic address (“Lord, Lord”) and boast of miracles done in His name (v. 22), we could even say that these professors are ultra-lordship. There is no indication they err in their concept of who Christ is, nor is there any indication that they are not totally submitted to him in their ethical conduct. Indeed, they are very enthusiastic about following and serving Jesus Christ.
- They have many good works—actually, great works. They have preached and spoken as prophets, performed exorcisms, and done many supernatural signs.
- They are trusting in their works to merit eternal life. Their plea to Christ reveals an attempt to justify their entrance into the kingdom of heaven based on their magnificent performances. Their pride in their deeds reveals an attitude of self-righteousness. In their plea, they do not say, “Have we not believed in You alone?”
- They are “many” in number (v. 22), not rare exceptions. Sadly, the nature of this self-deception is widespread. This is not surprising, since Jesus previously indicated that most people would miss the way to eternal life (7:13-14).
- They have never been eternally saved. They did not have salvation and lose it, or believe in Christ and fail to persevere. Jesus said He never knew them and rejects them (v. 23).
- They are practicing lawlessness (v. 23). But what does this mean? There is no hint of conduct contrary to the Mosaic Law or of blatant immorality. The meaning of “lawlessness” must be connected to doing “the will of the Father” that Jesus mentions in verse 21. They are not doing God’s will in relation to Jesus Christ, because they are misinterpreting the law as the Scribes and Pharisees did (5:21-7:6), using it to establish their own righteousness instead of looking to the exceeding righteousness of Christ (5:20).

### What we know about the Father’s will

God’s will for unsaved people is not merely proper theology and impressive works. In the context, Jesus wants people to accept God’s Way (7:13-14) and God’s Word (7:24-27), and obey accordingly. Previously in

this Sermon, Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven was entered only by those whose righteousness exceeds that of the self-righteous Jewish leaders (5:20-48). The righteousness required for eternal life is not based on outward conduct (5:21-28), which is why they should seek God's righteousness (6:33). Jesus is the narrow gate that leads to God's righteousness and life (7:13-14; John 10:9). Similar words and concepts in 7:21-23 and 21:23-46 show that the issue is belief in Christ and His righteousness (21:25, 32). Other Bible passages help us know how to receive God's righteousness (Rom. 3:21-24). Works are not acceptable for obtaining God's righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5). The only thing God wants an unbeliever to do is believe in His Son, Jesus Christ (John 6:27-29). The will of the Father is to believe in Jesus Christ for righteousness (Matthew 12:50; John 6:40).

## What we learn from this example

- Good theology is not enough to save a person. In Mark 1:24 demons also knew and proclaimed a proper view of Christ's position as Lord.
- Submission to Christ's lordship is not enough to save a person. Someone can surrender all of his or her life and be a devoted follower and servant of Christ's ethical commands, but not know Jesus Christ as Savior. After all, the people in this passage do not cry "Savior, Savior."
- Good works, no matter how great they are, are not enough to save a person. Neither can one's deeds prove a relationship to Jesus Christ as Savior. Miraculous performances can come from sources other than God (Acts 19:13; 2 Thes. 2:9; Rev. 13:1-12).
- Self-righteousness cannot save a person. Those in the passage are not claiming to have believed in Christ for His righteousness. Unsaved people need a righteousness outside of themselves and their own good works, which can never meet God's perfect standard. Only Christ's righteousness obtained through faith in Jesus Christ satisfies God's righteous requirements.
- Many people who think they are Christians may not be saved. They are trusting in proper Christian theology, dedicated service to Jesus Christ, or performance of great deeds. They have missed God's will, which is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior from sin and receive His righteousness rather than try to establish self-righteousness.
- Those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior reveal an utter disrespect and contempt for God's command and desire for them to believe. Jesus rejects such people because this unbelief is the greatest form of disobedience (John 3:36), or lawlessness.

## Conclusion

This passage shows that there can be unsaved professing Christians who follow Jesus Christ outwardly, but do not know Him personally. This passage cannot be used to say that those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior are not saved unless they also submit to His lordship. That is exactly what the passage is not saying. There is no indication that this group has believed in Jesus as their Savior from sin, yet there is every indication that they have believed and submitted to Him as Lord of their lives. The reason they are not saved is that they have not done the Father's will—believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin who imputes His righteousness. Many professors of Christianity have a false security because they are looking at and trusting in their submission and their works instead of resting fully in the merit of Christ and His work on their behalf. Sadly, on the final Day of reckoning, they will find they do not have eternal life and have misled others to the same fate. We should surrender to Jesus Christ as our Lord, but we must believe in Him as our Savior if we are to have eternal life.