

**“Going Deeper: Not Everyone Who Says to Me, 'Lord, Lord...'"**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 7:21-28

This is the last of our Growing Deeper sermons. We've seen how Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount push us deeper, beneath the surface of our actions and down to our hearts. It's fitting that we end the series by looking at the end of the sermon. Warning: it's a pointed ending. Jesus confronts us with something that can go really wrong in the deepest part of our heart.

So what's Jesus warning against? What's the heart ailment that leads to these pointed words? Self-deception. Jesus is warning us against the danger, the subtle danger, of self-deception.

When I think of self-deception, the first thing that pops into my mind is the glory days of the TV show American Idol. The entertainment value of American Idol, the popularity of that show, is partially based on the power of self-deception. How so? American Idol is a song competition. Thousands of young people from all over the country sing before cameras and judges hoping to become the next American Idol. Every season, the show starts out with the auditions. Do you remember how those go? One after another, people come and sing before the judges. They belt out their audition piece and the judges either tell them that they are going to Hollywood, or they tell them that they are going home. It's like judgment day. You're either a sheep or a goat. Every season, some of the singers are good, and some of the singers are bad. Really, really bad. But-and here's the self-deception; many of these bad singers, think that they are really good. They are sure they're going to ace judgment day! In their interview before the audition and they say things like, "Yo! This is my moment y'all! I've got what it takes. I'm going to be a star!" But then they get in front of the judges and they bomb. Their singing causes physical pain. Do you remember the name William Hung? His audition was a classic of the genre.

I haven't watched any part of this show in years, but I remember that when I did these auditions were strangely fascinating, and part of the what made them fascinating was the level of self-deception in these bad singers. How could these people possibly think they were good?! How could they have so little self-awareness?! It's not just fascinating of course, it's also tragic. Many of these poor, misguided 20 year olds have put all their hopes and dreams into this. They really believe they're destined for Hollywood and stardom. But then in 5 very painful, very public, minutes, it all comes crashing down. It's hard not to think of the sudden crash of the house built on the sand in Jesus' story.

That's a good illustration of self-deception. But if we are going to listen to Jesus, if his words are going to change our hearts, we can't think of self-deception as something that happens to 20-year-old American idol contestants, we have to think of it as something that happens to us. Jesus is warning us that we can be just like those misguided contestants. That's the difference between our passage and the passage before it. In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus warns us about others. He warned about false prophets, outsiders who mislead us. They pretend to be sheep, but they are really wolves. Jesus says, "You need to watch out for those people!" But in verses 21-23, Jesus is saying, "You need to watch out for yourself." In our passage, Jesus warns us that we can

be our own false prophet. We can be our own wolf in sheep's clothing! We are the both the con artist and the victim of the con!

Moreover, Jesus warns us against something much worse than being self-deceived about our musical or athletic ability; he warns against *religious* self-deception. Jesus raises the terrifying possibility that you or I or we might be completely self-deceived about our relationship with God. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of heaven," says Jesus. Jesus isn't talking about people who are consciously pretending, he's talking about people who think they're on the team! People who think they are faithful believers. Jesus is talking about people who think they are a faithful part of the fold, but on judgement day Jesus says, "No. You're wrong. You never knew me."

That's chilling right? It gets worse. Look at the level of commitment among these people. They're not Christmas and Easter believers who spend most of their Sundays on the golf course. They do amazing things. They prophesy in Jesus' name. These are people who preach great sermons, and have big churches with lots of online followers. They cast out demons in Jesus' name. They seem to be great prayer warriors against the power of the devil. They do miracles in Jesus' name. They perform signs and wonders, the kind that would draw crowds and fill churches. They are constantly talking about God. "Lord, Lord" they say, "The Lord just put it on my heart." If these people were in your community, you would think of them as pillars of piety, and yet Jesus says, 'you people don't even know me.' Wow. If someone like that can be totally self-deceived about their faith...*what about me?* If this doesn't put a little self-doubt into your heart, nothing will. How do I know that I'm not self-deceived? How do I know that my relationship with Jesus is real?

So how *do* we know? How can we tell that our faith isn't infected by self-deception? How can we tell whether or not we are conning ourselves? Jesus gives us some help here. In verses 21-23 he warns us about self-deception in this really bracing way. Then in verses 22-28 he tells us the parable of the two houses. That parable shows the results of self-deception-the great crash when reality hits. But it also suggests how we might avoid becoming religious fakes.

Jesus uses the image of house-building to illustrate self-deception, and that's a good image. How do you tell whether a house is strong or not? How can you tell whether it is well constructed? It's pretty hard to see from the outside. A house might be brimming with curb appeal, you might walk into that house and be blown away by the high-end finishes, you might spend an afternoon in that house and think it was completely solid. But the *real* strength of a house is not in its finishes; the real strength of a house is in the deeper parts. The stability of the building site, the depth of the foundation, the thickness of the floor joists, the quality of the framing. These aren't the parts you see. These aren't the public parts, but these are the parts that make a house strong. These are the parts you need when the storm comes.

So, how do we make sure that the deep parts of our house, the unseen parts of our house, are strong and solid? Jesus suggests 2 things in this passage.

First, healthy self-suspicion. Jesus jabs a finger in our chest in this passage, and he pokes us pretty hard. He says to us, "Get your house in order folks! *You think you are cozy with God, but are you sure?!*" When's the last time you got your house inspected? Are you sure there's no rot in the floorboards? Are you sure the roof doesn't need some attention? Are you sure the foundation isn't cracked? A strong and stable house needs regular maintenance and regular inspection. You can't just assume everything is okay, you have to be willing to lift the floorboards, climb up into the attic and take a look.

And when it comes to making these inspections, you can't be the lead inspector. In the real estate world, if you are selling your house, you can't do the inspection for the buyer. Why? Because you are self-interested. You will tend to overlook things. When you are inspecting your own life, self-inspection is part of how you keep yourself spiritually healthy, but it's only part of it. You need others. You need community. You have to have good Christian friends who will look you over and tell you the hard truths. That's why there's such a thing as interventions. Really serious self-deception can only be flushed out by others. It's yet another reason why we need Christian community. We all need loving people who are willing to challenge us, who can see our blind spots.

But he also has a positive suggestion for strengthening the foundation, and keeping it from the rot of self-deception. "Everyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like a man who builds his house on the rock. The people who hear my words and don't put them into practice who are like a man who builds his house on the sand." Jesus emphasizes practice in this parable. Actions give you a strong foundation. It's the people who don't just *hear* the words, but *act* on them who build a foundation that can endure storms.

But not every action is foundation-building, Jesus has particular kinds of acts in mind. After all, he just finished pointing out four kinds of actions that were not foundation building. Religious talk (saying 'Lord, Lord' a lot), miracles, fancy preaching and casting out demons-you can practice all these things and it's still no guarantee against self-deception. Why aren't they a guarantee? Well, think about it. What do these pious actions all have in common? They are all very public. Casting out demons, God talk, miracles, prophecy-those are attention-getting activities. These actions will get you crowds and congratulations. That doesn't make them inherently bad, but it does make them corruptible. It does make them subject to self-deception. "Lord I'm working hard on this sermon for you and your kingdom!" ...or am I doing it because people will say nice things to me afterwards? Spectacular public actions are the ones most susceptible to self-deception.

So when Jesus says 'whoever hears my words and puts them into practice,' he's not talking about these spectacular actions, he has other actions in mind. Which actions are those? We know the answer. It's the actions he's mentioned in this sermon. The practices that Jesus has been lifting up in this sermon are NOT the kind that draw crowds and congratulations. Praying in a private place instead of on a street corner. Fasting so that no one will notice. Giving so humbly that your left hand doesn't know what your right hand is doing (do you hear how Jesus is particularly guarding against self-deception there?) Praying for your enemies. Absorbing the wounds of others and going the extra mile for them. Guarding your heart and your eyes from lust. These aren't actions that draw a crowd, these are actions that build a soul. Whoever hears the words of this sermon and puts them into practice, that's the one whose heart goes deep into the rock.

There's one more thing I need to say. Self-deception is so scary, and so easy for us to miss. Is there any hope for the self-deceived? Is there any hope for the person whose sandy house falls with a crash?

I don't have all the answers, but this week reading this story again, I thought of Peter. The disciple Peter. Peter was a big fan of large public actions. He was always taking the lead. When Jesus sent the disciples out on their mission, Peter did miracles and cast out demons. He was also a "Lord, Lord" kind of guy. He was a big talker. "Lord, Lord! Everyone else may fall away! But I will never leave your side!" He thought he was Mr. Committed. But then the storm came. The weekend of the crucifixion. How did Peter's house do in the storm? Turns out Peter

was not Mr. Commitment. Turns out he was self-deceived. Peter denied Jesus and do you remember what he said? “I never knew the man.” Jesus didn’t have to pronounce the terrible judgment “I never knew you,” because Peter pronounced that judgment on himself. Then the rooster crowed, the rains came down and the floods came up, and Peter’s house fell with a great crash.

But what does Jesus do? Jesus dies for Peter. Jesus in great mercy and at great cost, reaches down into the flood for the second time and grabs Peter and pulls him out. Jesus saves his foolish self-deceived child. God shows mercy. It was a severe mercy. It breaks Peter down before it makes him new, but the mercy of God saves him. I don’t know if God will rescue all the self-deceived, but I know he rescued Peter, and I know his mercy is strong enough to knock our house down, if that’s what’s needed, and save us too.

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