

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
John Ortberg
Series: The World's Greatest Talk: The Sermon on the Mount
September 7, 2008

Choices
Matthew 7:28, 29

I mentioned last week, the name Michael Phelps. Did any of you see him swim in the Olympics? Isn't he unbelievable? He has won 8 gold medals, all kinds of world records. It is remarkable how popular one man can become. I talked to somebody a couple of weeks ago who works with Facebook, and he was telling me Facebook added (they are estimating) about 5 million people to their ranks over the Olympics because Michael Phelps talked about being on Facebook, because so many people admire him. How many of you here would be willing to raise your hand and say, "I admire Michael Phelps."? Just about all of us.

Now somewhere out there, a kid was watching the Olympics and what happened inside him goes way beyond admiration. Somewhere out there is a kid who is watching Michael Phelps swim, and when he was watching, his heart started pounding, and his mind started racing, and he thought to himself, *What Michael Phelps is doing, I could do. The way he is swimming, I could swim.*

That kid is reading articles and watching videos, going to the pool, finding a coach, swimming laps... He actually wants to become like Michael Phelps, and one day he will. There is a kid out there somewhere who watched that whose heart started racing, and one day, he is going to be in the Olympics. He isn't just an admirer of Michael Phelps, he is a follower.

I'm not in that category. I'll applaud what Michael Phelps did, but I'm not going to change my life. I haven't been in a pool since the Olympics. I am an admirer but not a follower, and there is a big difference.

An admirer is impressed. A follower is devoted. An admirer applauds. A follower surrenders his life. A lot of people admired Martin Luther King. Some marched with him. Not many went to jail with him. Not many got their houses bombed like he did. A lot of people admired Mother Theresa. Not many people followed her to live among the destitute and dying.

I say this because today we come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus gave this talk that changed the world, there were two groups of people listening to him. At the beginning of it, we are told, when He saw the crowds, He went up to the mountainside. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach. One group is the crowd...and there were lots of them...and they were very impressed by Jesus. In fact, when He reaches the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we are told this about their response, ***"When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching because He taught them as one who had authority, not as their teachers of the law."***

The whole crowd admired Jesus, but while He was teaching, something happened in the hearts of a few of them that went way beyond admiration, and their hearts started pounding, and their minds started racing. Something deep inside them said, "This is it. This is what I have been longing for my whole life long without even knowing it, without being able to name it, to be cleansed and forgiven of all my sin and all that junk that is part of my life, to know God, to have a life beyond worry, beyond fear, to not be a slave to sexual desire or unhealthy habits or the need for more and more money, to be part of God's cause to redeem the world, to have confidence beyond the grave, to not be afraid of death anymore. I have to have this.

I would rather have what this man has and give up everything else in the world, than to have everything the world could offer me and give up this man. Therefore, I will pay any price. I don't care. I will do whatever He wants me to do. I will go wherever He wants me to go. I will give whatever He says I ought to give. I will be whatever He says I should be. Today, I am leaving the crowd. As of today, I'm not just an admirer anymore. I will live as a fully devoted follower of this man Jesus."

Now Jesus knew that His presence, His life, His words would have this impact on a few, and He is constantly forcing people to decide if they will move from admirer to follower. He describes what is going on...life in His kingdom. Then, He is constantly forcing people to choose.

In John 3, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a religious leader, comes. We are told in the text that he *"came to Jesus by night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miracles if God were not with them.'"* He is an admirer of Jesus. "You must have come from God. Nobody could do what you are doing if God wasn't with you." But he came to Jesus by night.

Why do you think the text tells us the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus by night? He didn't want to be seen. He didn't want to risk losing his status among the religious leaders of Israel. He was an admirer. Jesus says, "Nicodemus, you must be born again. You must become My follower. You must allow My spirit to remake you. You must publicly identify with Me. You are going to have to give up what you want the most." And Nicodemus does. When Jesus dies, Nicodemus publicly claims His body and places it in a tomb. He goes from the night into the light to become not just an admirer but a follower of Jesus.

One day, somebody who became known as a rich young ruler came up to Jesus. We are told, *"He ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees. 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"* He is an admirer of Jesus. He falls on his knees before Him. He calls Him "good teacher." Jesus says one thing. "Go and sell all your possessions. Radically change your lifestyle. Give away everything you have to bless the poor. Come and follow Me." This rich young ruler turned and walked away very sad. He was ready to admire Jesus, but following Jesus...that would interfere with his financial life. That is where he drew the line. Jesus always does this with people. "Are you going to follow Me or just admire?"

All through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is describing His kind of life, the life of blessing. Blessed are *you*. Blessed are *you*. Blessed are *you*. If you want it. Even *you*, who thought you were a million miles away from God. That blessing is yours if you want it. Then He talks about

what it looks like. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, He says, "Now if you want this life, here is how you obtain it: ***Enter in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it, but small is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life and only a few find it.***"

What is the narrow way? It is Jesus. "***I am the way, the truth, and the life.***" Love Jesus. Surrender to Jesus. Trust Jesus. Abide in Jesus. Devote yourself to Jesus without reservation and holding nothing back.

What is the broad way? That is the way of the crowd. That's what people do in our world. The path of least resistance, kind of drift along, admire Jesus if you want, but reserve for yourself the right to do whatever you want to do when the chips are down, when push comes to shove.

The whole end of the Sermon on the Mount is just a series of pictures that Jesus gives, and every one of them involves this stark contrast designed to force people to choose. There is a narrow gate or there is a wide gate. No third gate. There is a narrow road and a broad road. No third road. There is a good tree and a bad tree. No third tree. There are true disciples and false disciples. No third category. House built on the rock, house built on the sand. No third house. People who do what Jesus says and people who hear and know but not seek to do.

It all comes down to this: Will you be wholly devoted to Jesus from your heart or will you not? Follow or just admire?

I've been thinking a lot about what the admirer category looks like because I think it's widespread in our day, and I want to sharpen this as much as I can. If you ask folks in the admiring-Jesus category, "Do you believe in Jesus?" They would most likely say, "Sure, I believe...in my own way." And they may go to church, maybe for years. They may volunteer sometimes. They may give some stuff, but they want to retain control of their lives.

If getting too close to Jesus would mean risking something they don't want to risk, their success at work, or would mean changing their lifestyle or mean humbling themselves to get help with a crumbling marriage or mean getting serious about immersing their mind in Scripture rather than just drifting along, or it would mean not sleeping anymore with somebody they aren't married to or would mean getting help with their anger or some habit they have. Then, deep down in the secret place of their soul, they want to be able to say, "No." They want to be able to say to God, "Hands off. This life is my life." So they admire Jesus, but they will try to maintain a certain distance between them and Jesus.

Now, if that distance gets too big, if they slip up somehow and sin in what looks like to them a big way, they might come to church a little more often. They may give a little extra money. They don't want to let the gap get too great because that would feel uncomfortable, but they won't let Him get too close. They are often, kind of, spiritual chameleons.

With church people, they can talk the Jesus talk, but in another setting, maybe on a business trip or maybe at school, they do not clearly stand with this man Jesus. They do whatever they need to do to fit in with that crowd as well. They can even feel a little superior sometimes to all these

different groups because they kind of float above them, but inside, they are a little hollow because they are fundamentally uncommitted people because there is not commitment that goes to their core that they have given everything for, except maybe commitment to themselves.

They will generally rationalize their devotion, and it will sometimes look kind of like this: They will find a real fired up Christian somewhere who is quite imperfect, and they will say to themselves, *You know, if I was all fired up spiritually, I would be self-righteous like this person, or I would be hypocritical like this person, or I would be flawed like this person, and I don't want to do that.* So they will justify never fully devoting themselves to God, by focusing on the flaws of some apparently more devoted person.

Let me be really, really frank with you. I was talking with one of our long-time elders, and he was telling me about a pastor...a really nice pastor or a really nice church, Presbyterian church. This pastor was quite haunted at the end of his ministry by how there were a lot of people who attended the church where he served for a long time, but somehow, out of vagueness or niceness or fear or drift or something, they never got real clear on this one issue: Have you devoted yourself wholly to Jesus Christ as the Savior and Lord and Master of your life, or have you not? Broad road or narrow road? What's it gonna be? Will you choose?

I thought about my own life, and I thought, *How often do I shrink back to myself in personal conversations or with the church I serve and love out of vagueness or out of my own sin and inadequacy (which are great) or out of a desire to be liked or out of fear, because I suffer from all of these.* I'll tell you my own conviction. I would rather be part of a community where the call of wholehearted devotion to Jesus is proclaimed clearly, even if it shrinks down to only a few than to be part of a big crowd of thousands who just kind of drift along the broad road as admirers of Jesus without ever being challenged to their core to full devotion. So, I ask you, are you a follower of Jesus or just an admirer?

I want to give a picture of the difference between admiration and full devotion. I want to start with a word that I had never heard until this week. Funambulist. Do you know what this word really means? An acrobat who walks on a cable from a great height. In the 8 o'clock service, I asked this question, and one guy pointed to his wife, who wasn't really eager to share it, and so I asked her and she said, "It is somebody who is really good at having fun." *Not* the correct definition. A tightrope walker.

There have been many, many of them, but there is one who towers over everyone who has ever lived. About 150 years ago, he was at the peak of his game. His name was Charles Blondin. He came over to the United States from overseas. He came over here, and he was fascinated, kind of obsessed actually, with Niagara Falls, wanted to cross over Niagara Falls on a rope. He actually did string a hemp cord 1100 feet across, 160 feet above Niagara Falls, and he said he was going to cross from one side to the other.

He was quite a showman. This was 150 years ago. A crowd of 100,000 people gathered to watch Charles Blondin walk a tightrope across Niagara Falls inch by inch, step by step. Can you imagine the drama of that moment? Life or death. He had no safety net there. He crossed all the way over. Tons of people, of course, were taking pictures of him, so he did it again. He crossed

over and brought a camera with him and took a picture of the crowd while they were taking pictures of him.

He went another time and took a chair with him, balanced a chair on the rope and stood on the chair. He went back another time and fixed an omelet. He actually did this and lowered it to passengers on the Maid of the Mist so that one of them could have it for breakfast. He went another time and took a wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls with him. The crowd went crazy. This man walks the rope, **"...with authority, not like our teachers of the law."**

He turned to the crowd and asked them, "Do you believe I can do this?" Of course, they all believed. Then he asked them, "Now, who will get into the wheelbarrow?" Then, it got real quiet. Do you believe, or do you just admire? All 100,000 people were silent. One man, a man named Harry Colcord knew Blondin. He had worked with him. He had seen him do it 100 times. He got into the wheelbarrow...inch by inch...step by step. Can you imagine that ride? In a wheelbarrow over Niagara Falls? They make it to the other side. Of course, the crowd goes crazy again, but the crowd didn't get in the wheelbarrow. Everybody applauded Charles Blondin, but only one man trusted him, and the walk they went on together, neither one of them would ever forget.

Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount, and everyone is amazed, but Jesus is not interested in amazing the crowd. Jesus never went up to people and said, "Admire Me." He only said, **"Follow Me."** He said, **"Whoever wants to be My disciple, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Me."** Get in the wheelbarrow.

Here is the question: Have you wholly devoted yourself to following Jesus? Not...do you admire Him? Not...do you believe? Are you a *follower*? Because this is the most momentous decision you can make, I want to be real, real clear on what goes in the wheelbarrow: My sin goes in there. My guilt goes in there.

I've been at this long enough to know a lot of people when confronted with this challenge will feel deep down inside, *I've got some sin. I've got some guilt. I am not a spiritual giant. I am not spiritual enough to be a follower of Jesus, to be a disciple.* Jesus comes in the Sermon on the Mount and says, "Your sin problem is much, much worse than you thought it was. You thought, 'thou shalt not murder' meant as long as you avoided homicide, you're okay with God on that one. The truth is, your heart is all messed up. It's a cauldron of anger and vengeance that leaks out of you and messes up your life.

You thought that "no adultery" meant as long you avoid intercourse with somebody else's spouse that you're okay. The truth is that your heart is a cauldron of lust, of mismanaged, misguided desire that is out of your control. You have a sin problem like the Niagara Falls of sin, and you cannot clean that up, but I can. I can take care of that. I will die on a cross. I will put your sins on My back. I will pay your debt so that that gap between you and God, that other side where life with God is such that you could never get over to by your own good deeds. I will take you there, if you will confess your sins, if you will repent...which means you both ask God to forgive you and to help you change. I will wipe the slate clean if you will put your past, your sin, your guilt in My wheelbarrow."

Then also, you put in your present and your future. This means your time. It isn't yours anymore. Your energy. Your resources. Your money. Your savings. Your security. Those all go to Jesus...not yours anymore. Your life isn't about piling them up. Your relationships and how you behave in them. Your mind. Your sexuality. Your emotions. Your allegiance. Your language. Your money. Your work. Now, of course, I can't even do that. I can't live Jesus' life, and Jesus knows that, but He says, "You can ask Me to come and live My life *in* you."

I'll give you a picture of this. Nancy and I were in a part of the country we had never been to before. We were going to be driving along obscure back roads, so we get a rental car there, and the guy at the counter said to me, "Along with this car, if you want, you can also get a little box...it's a guidance system." Have you ever seen those? You plug it in and punch in your destination. It is quite amazing. A voice will tell you how to get to wherever it is that you are going. "Do you want to add this also to the car?"

My immediate response was, "No. That is going to cost something. I don't need that. I can find where I'm going without that. No, I'm not going to pay for that."

Anybody want to guess what my wife weighed in with?

"Get the box."

We got the box.

There was this voice coming out of the box. You don't even have to read it. Someone talks to you. It is a British voice, because people who talk with a British accent always sound smarter, don't they? You're just inclined to do what they say. It was a woman's voice, because...same thing.

Now, here's the deal: You can get the box. You can have the lady in the car, but that doesn't mean you trust her. If you trust her, what do you do? You do what she says. You go where she tells you to go. She says, "Turn left," you turn left. If she says, "Turn left," and in your heart you think, *Oh but I want to turn right*. Then you remember, "***There is a way that seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof is death.***" Okay?

Now, to follow Jesus means I will do what He says. I will mess up a lot. I'm going to need His power. I know that, but I form the intention. I say to Him, "God, with Your help, as best I can, I will do what You say. I will give You my life, my time, my obedience."

Here is the thing: If that is not your settled intent, then it is best to be honest about it. If that is not your settled intent, then whatever else you might be, you are not a follower of Jesus. An admirer, maybe. But He is looking for followers. He is looking for somebody who will say, "Alright God."

There is something else you need to know about Him. At one point, when we were driving in this car...I was quite sure the lady was wrong. She said to go left, and I didn't go left, I went right because I knew she was wrong. Then as a real interesting response, she said, "Re-calculating

route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn." I knew she was wrong...so...I unplugged her. That's the beauty of that little box. You can unplug her.

And...I got lost as a goose. And my wife enjoyed that immensely.

So we plugged that lady back in, and you know what she said, "I told you so, you little idiot." She said, "You think I'm going to help you now? You rejected me. There is no way. You just find your way home by yourself."

No, she didn't. She said, "Re-calculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn." Now see, that's grace. As soon as you're ready to listen, as soon as you're ready to surrender, God will say, "Here is the way home. Execute a U-turn." That's repentance. I'll bring you home." That is grace. That's Jesus. Jesus is it. He is the only one with authoritative wisdom about how to live. He is the only one to bring about the possibility of forgiveness for your sin and mine. He is the only one to give any kind of realistic hope of conquering death, of life beyond the grave.

Why would you not give your full devotion to this man? He does not present Himself as a good, spiritual teacher to be admired from a distance. He presents Himself as Master, as Lord, as the One to be followed and served and obeyed and worshiped. There is no other way. He is it.

You need to know this. He says that one day all of humanity will be in one of 2 camps: Those who follow Him, and those who reject Him. There will be no third option. No third gate. No third house. There will be no nice, polite, respectable, successful distance-keepers who admire Him from afar but withhold their devotion.

Where will you be? This is your moment to decide.

Would you bow your head and close your eyes right now. I want to give you a few moments just to respond, just to talk with God, and then give you a chance to respond. Debbie is going to sing this song that expresses this choice. What does it mean? What does it look like to say, "Alright God, I am stepping out of the admirer category. I will be a follower."

Listen to the words of this song. You talk to God in your heart, and then we will together.

*In the morning, when I rise
In the morning, when I rise
In the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus*

*Give me Jesus,
Give me Jesus,
You can have all this world,
But give me Jesus*

*When I am alone
When I am alone
When I am alone, give me Jesus*

*Give me Jesus,
Give me Jesus,
You can have all this world,
But give me Jesus*

*When I come to die
When I come to die
When I come to die, give me Jesus*

*Give me Jesus,
Give me Jesus,
You can have all this world,
You can have all this world,
You can have all this world,
But give me Jesus*

I'm going to ask you right now to just keep your eyes closed. I want to say a word to those of you who have never real clearly made this decision. I know a lot of you have already committed your lives to Jesus. There may be issues that God is kind of raising that you need to pray about right now, so you go ahead and do that. Right now, I want to speak very clearly to those of you who have never clearly committed your life to Jesus. You have never clearly confessed your sin and repented and wholly devoted your life to Christ.

I want to give you a chance to make that commitment now and to express it by just briefly standing up as a way of saying with your body, "God, I'm coming out of the crowd. I'm crossing the line from admirer to follower. No more playing games. No more half measures. I have never really fully devoted my life to following Jesus and expressed that to You, and I'm doing that today."

If that is your decision...if that is your intent, I want to invite you right now just briefly to stand up wherever you are. This is just between you and God. God bless you!

You know, when you make that decision, (God bless you!) it is the most important thing a human can do. God bless you! It brings joy and delight to the heart of God. When somebody says, "Alright God, my life, my time, everything I have, is Yours." God bless you!

I want to say a word to those of you who have stood up, and you can all sit down now. You know, Jesus will meet you, and He will help you. He is delighted beyond words at your devotion. I want to encourage you, find a follower of Jesus, find a Christian brother or sister today and tell them about the decision that you've made, or come on down...when we are done in just a moment, I and others will be standing in this kind of "prayer corner." We would love to pray for you.

Now, for those of you who may have done that before but there's just...maybe there's a corner of your life, a part that God is calling you to surrender that you've been holding off on. Or maybe God is kind of tugging at your heart, and you didn't take that step yet, but you know that you need to keep moving toward Him.

Debbie is going to sing just one more verse of this song. Let God speak whatever He wants into your heart in this moment, and then we're done.