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Title: *The Great Illusion*

Scripture: Matthew 7:21-23

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Welcome. It's great to be together here in Wexford, the Chapel, Strip District, Butler, Southpointe, and online. Let's take a moment and pray. God, as we gather this weekend at Orchard Hill, I ask once again, as we ask so often, just that you would speak into all of our lives, wherever we're coming from, wherever our week, month, or year has brought us from. God, I pray that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Christmas often makes us feel something. Sometimes it's maybe a song that reminds us of something. Maybe there's a movie when it plays that reminds us of the first time we saw it. Or maybe there's food and aromas that bring back certain memories to our minds.

And sometimes it's a nostalgic moment where we say I remember a simpler time, different time, or family time. And sometimes we feel a sense of generosity around Christmas, just a sense of saying, I want others to experience good things, and so, I'm willing to give in ways that maybe would transcend what I normally do.

And often, we even feel something spiritual. In fact, I saw something about some of the traditions around the world. This is Christmas in Iceland, and Iceland children put their shoes on the windowsill so that the Yule Lads, which is Santa Claus, can fill their shoes with little goodies. In Christmas celebrations in Iceland, they start on December 24th and by Christmas Eve, families get together, enjoy their food, and many visit a midnight mass. And so, their tradition has many people not just having goodies, but a massive spiritual component.

In Portugal, they celebrate Christmas on the 24th of December, and houses are decorated for Christmas. And many families put up a little nativity scene where baby Jesus is added to the crib after the midnight mass and families attend. So, the baby doesn't actually appear. They set the whole thing up and then symbolically put the baby into the Nativity. So again, a little spiritual moment in the midst of their celebration.

In the Philippines, there's a special Christmas tradition where a lantern, which is really a star-shaped remembrance of the star of Bethlehem, is made out of bamboo and paper, is made, and it's on sale. And people put them all around their house.

And I just point to this to say that all around the world, people celebrate Christmas. And there's something of the spiritual in it that we're aware of. But here's what I also believe is true, and that is many people in our culture and cultures all around the world will experience Christmas, feel something at Christmas, know there's something of spiritual significance in Christmas, and yet miss Jesus Christ and heaven altogether.

The passage that you heard read is from Matthew Chapter seven. And this is a passage that may not seem like a Christmas passage, but in many ways, this is an important passage to consider this time of year. Here's what it says again.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

And so, Jesus says, there will come a day when many will stand before him and say, I thought I had it right. And what will happen for people, according to Jesus, on that day is people will come saying, I was pretty certain that I had it right.

And so, in our culture where we're some people will say, well, Christmas is a social issue, but it might be built on a myth. Or some people will say Christmas is just a mystery. Who really knows what it means? And even if you're all in on Christmas and you say, I know there's something spiritual, something significant, it's possible to go through everything related to Christmas and still miss what this is all about.

I remember several years ago. I took my family, and we used to do this thing we called city trips. And the way this started, like some of our traditions, is kind of backward. When my wife would go on the women's retreat weekends with the church, I at one point was teaching all the services and had all the little kids. And I said this is crazy. I'm going to use hotel points and have somebody else speak and take the kids somewhere.

And so, the first year we went to Philadelphia, we ate cheesesteaks, ran up Rocky's steps, swam in the pool, rang the Liberty Bell, you know, that kind of stuff. And then my wife said, you can't go on these trips without me. And so, then it became a whole family thing where we would go once a year to some city, try to do it as cheaply as possible, and do everything that we could in the city.

So, a few years back, we went to New York City, and it was the first time my kids had been to New York. And I thought, all right, I need to make sure that this is a fun experience for the family. And so, I spent a little more than we normally did on these trips. We went a little higher than cheesesteaks, Rocky's steps, and the free things.

And so, we decided that we were going to go to a play. We waited in line at one of those half-price dealers, and we got tickets. And it was a phenomenal experience. We got tickets right up front. We got them cheap, and we got to see a phenomenal play. And I was feeling really good about my half-priced tickets and how that it all worked.

So, the next night, we wanted to go to another event and it was sold out. And I thought I'm pretty shrewd. And so, I went, and I changed money and tickets with a vendor on the street, vendor is probably a generous word. My wife had decided she didn't want to go to this particular event. So, I walked my kids over and they were old enough that it wasn't very perilous, and I said, you guys go ahead and go on in, and I'm going to walk your mom back to the hotel. I'll come back, and I'll find you inside because we had assigned seats with our tickets.

And so, I'm walking with my wife back to the hotel, and all of a sudden, my phone starts to blow up and my kids say the tickets are a sham. I got scammed. I had bought tickets that weren't real, tickets that I thought would get us into the event but didn't get us into the event. And I learned an expensive lesson, and my kids still mock me.

Now, I tell you this because here's what happened to me. I had one experience that told me I can get things cheaper, better than the going rate. And so, I tried it another time. And the second time what happened was I thought I had gained entrance, and I did not. And what Jesus does in this passage is he says, some people will go through this life thinking I have punched a ticket to whatever eternity is, who have not. And he says, I want you to understand this.

So let me just point out three ways that you and I can miss Christmas. The first I'm just going to say is when we think that our affirmations are sufficient. This word, Lord, that's used here, he says, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord. And then he says it again. And He says many will come to me on that day and say, Lord, Lord, and the word is curious.

And it means basically to say, you are the sovereign. And it was used in the early church as a bit of a doctrinal affirmation to say that God is indeed in Jesus Christ. And so, what Jesus is doing in part, by just using this word, is saying there will be people

who will say everything right doctrinally and will still end up in the category of the person who's been deceived.

In a way, this is understandable. In Matthew Chapter three, Jesus is dealing with Sadducees and Pharisees. He's dealing with this baptism issue. And when he deals with this, what happens is, he basically turns to them at this point and says to them that they are looking at him and trying to get this baptism to be understood by them.

And what they did is they came, and Jesus says this, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

Now, here's why that's important. Pharisees and Sadducees, if you've ever heard those phrases, they just sound like old biblical words. Pharisees were the moral people who would have been those who said we observe the law of God, we keep it, and we do the right things. And the Sadducees were the educated, wealthy people who basically were somewhat skeptical of everything. They were the two religious classes of the day.

And what happened was when Jesus was baptizing, and when John the Baptist was baptizing, Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees were there, that they came in and he says, you're a brood of vipers. Now, what was happening? You see both of these groups, by and large, missed Jesus because they assumed the rightness of their group, their identity, and their politics if you will.

You see, it's possible, and I don't mean politics in the sense of our modern politics. It's possible that what we can do is we can say, as long as I have a tribe of people, and I agree with the tribe, and we all think that we're good, then we're the right ones. That's what the Pharisees did. That's what Sadducees did.

And so, what we can do sometimes is we come up with all of our here's who's right, and as long as I'm part of the right group, then everything's good. And by the way, it used to be that this was very directed at religious people.

But in our culture today, there's a very strong element of religion in our secular culture. And what I mean by that is, there's a very strong element that says, believe this or you're immoral. And only those of us who believe this are the moral ones. And therefore, it's the same basic idea as the old kind of religious idea that says, I'm right, and other people are wrong. And because I'm right, I'm pretty confident. And what

Jesus is doing, is he's saying, I want you to understand that being right is not the same as having a relationship with God.

Here's the second thing that we see, and this is that we may miss Christmas because we think our good deeds are selfish. And here's how Jesus states this, verse 22, says, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?'"

It doesn't get much better than this. Driving out demons. Miracles. This is impressive. Prophesying. And he's saying people will come who have done great things. And when they come, he's going to say, I didn't know you.

Now, this should shake anybody who is a church person because what Jesus is doing is he's saying there will be people for who everything will look right about them, and yet they still will not be people in the end who are right with God.

I remember years ago, I was playing basketball with some guys. One of the things that happen when you're a pastor is everyone knows you're a pastor in very short order. So, you can't swear when you play basketball. That's one of the things. I mean, you can, but it's ill-advised. And another thing that happens is that now and then, somebody will say, you're a pastor, tell me about something.

So, I played with this one guy and this group of guys for years at this point. I walk into the gym, and it's a normal day, and he says, I want to talk to you. Now, he says that in a way that all the other guys turn their heads. So, there's a little audience here.

He says, you're an evangelical Christian, right? I said, well, it depends on what you mean by that. And he said, my sister-in-law is an evangelical Christian, and my uncle is in the hospital about to die. And she went and told him that he was going to hell if he didn't believe in Jesus.

What do you believe? Now, I'm standing here, and I'm thinking I just came to play ball. But I realized very quickly that I had a chance to preach a very short sermon to a captive audience because all the other guys were like, yeah, that's a good question. What are you going to say to that? And I said, at that moment, well, why do you think somebody can stand before God?

And I knew this guy's story enough to know that his religious background would give him the sense to say, well, you do the right things. And he said, what I believe is that if you keep the Ten Commandments, you'll go to heaven. And I said, well, have you

kept all the commandments? He said, absolutely, every one of them. I've never broken one.

I said really? And I had a chance just to push into that for a moment and to say would evangelical Christians believe if they believe the Bible is not that they perfectly keep the Ten Commandments, but that they don't. And that there's a God who came to this Earth in Jesus Christ to pay the price so that those who believe in Him aren't justified before God, aren't made right by God because of their good works, but because of Jesus' good works. And he sat there, and you could just see in his mind he was saying, how could that be? And then we played basketball.

Now, I tell you that because so many people in our world today under or overestimate their goodness before God. And here's why that matters. Because when I or you say I'm good enough, it sounds like when you say don't tell anybody that they're sinful, that's harsh. But it's actually way harsher to say I'm good and you're bad, or I'm good and other people aren't good.

What's biblical and humble is to say none of us are except Jesus. We all fall short of what God's standard is, but what we like to do often in our culture, and even in Christian culture, is we like to develop a little better than list.

Here's how one author wrote about this. He said, "So here's a question you might want to ask yourself. Do I have my own, thank God I'm not like them list, and who's on it? Or who's a better than list for you? If you're passionate about justice, and the needs of the poor and orphans, you probably struggle with people who aren't. Your temptation will be to write them off as uninformed, selfish, or cold-hearted. Don't fall for it.

If you're green and care for the planet, recycle, or ride your bike to work, you'll be tempted to look down on those who don't. If you spend more time than most thinking deeply about theology, reading books written by dead guys, and do your Bible study in the original Hebrew and Greek, you'll be sorely tempted to look down on those who think the last book of the Bible is Revelations, and on those who think that the last book of the Old Testament was written by an Italian prophet named Malachi.

The same goes if you identify yourself as spirit-led, missional, incarnational, gospel-centered, or some other current Christian buzzword, you'll find it hard not to look down on those who don't even know that there's a buzzword to conform to. I have no idea what tempts you to feel superior. I have no idea what kind of people you're tempted to look down on.

But most of us have a list or at least the beginning of a list. And most of us have no idea how dangerous that list is. If left in place, it can nullify all the good that we do, and it can put us on top of gods. I hate it when you do that list.”

But not only that, what it can do is it can cause us to have a false sense of saying because I agree with, because I do, therefore I'm okay rather than being able to say it's precisely because I haven't that I have standing.

And then there's one more thing that we see in this text, and that is we may miss Christmas because we think that our passion is sufficient. It says here, Lord, Lord. And then again, many of you will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord. Now, when the New Testament was being written, there was no boldface, and so, the way that you emphasized something was you repeated it.

And so, what that means when he says, Lord, Lord, it was a way to emphasize. It was saying, I'm passionate, and I believe this deeply. And what many people in our world believe is that if we're simply passionate about whatever it is that we believe, then that passion will be sufficient.

But what we need to understand is that being passionate is not the same as having genuine faith. Now, I'm not saying that passion is unimportant. I'm not saying that what you do is unimportant or what you believe is unimportant. But what Jesus is saying is that there will be people who will have a belief that their belief was enough, their deeds were enough, or their passion was enough.

But if I took a rope and tied it up to the catwalk above my head here, and if you're watching online and don't know the exact distance, that's a good 30 feet above me up here. And that rope came down here and then I was to stand on this table or maybe a ladder, and I was going to support my weight with the rope.

Okay. After that, I was going to have somebody take the ladder out. Here's the question. Not how passionately do I believe that the rope is secure, but is the rope actually secure? So, what I believe about the rope won't matter once my weight is suspended by that rope. But what does matter is what the rope actually does. And so, believing something in and of itself passionately does not make it so. What makes it so is something more.

So, here's what we see, and that is that our beliefs, good deeds, and passion alone are not sufficient. And so, you may say, so then what is sufficient? I simply say, well, I need to go about life taking my chances.

I think there's an old song that has this line. It says, "I sat one night tuning in by remote, and I found a preacher who spoke of the light, but there was brimstone in his throat. He'd show me the way according to him in return for my personal check. I flipped the channel back to CNN and I lit another cigarette. I take my chances."

I take my chances every chance I get. You know what? I'm just going to live. Who knows? But this passage doesn't leave us here because here's what Jesus does say. And that is he says this. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not " And he goes through his list again, and then he says, "I never knew you. Away from me."

So, two indicators so that you don't miss Christmas. One is that you have a relationship with Jesus. I never knew you, so you know him. And then you have this relationship. And two, a responsiveness to Jesus. That is, you do what he says.

Now, don't misunderstand me here. I'm not saying that doing what Jesus says sounds like work and therefore you have to do it, but what I'm saying is the indicator that you actually have this relationship with Jesus is that you want to be in a relationship with God. You want to be around spiritual things because you're so drawn to the story and the idea of what God has done. And when God's will and your will are at odds, you're willing to say, I want to at least acknowledge that his way is different from mine. You may not obey it every time, but you won't simply say put it aside.

Think of it this way. If you're in a relationship with somebody, and every time that person said, hey, this really bothers me, and you said stinks for you, I'm going to do it this way. How do you think that would live? Now, there are some relationships where somebody may say that and you may say, you know, you're human, and I need to draw a boundary. That wasn't proper of you to try to put that restriction on me and all of that.

But God is perfect, and so God never misses on something. So, when we say God, you just stay on the side, what we're doing in part is we're saying, God, I don't really have a relationship with you. How we know that our relationship with God is real is that we're drawn to him, and we're drawn to be responsive to what he does.

We don't obey to get from God. We obey out of appreciation for what God has done. And where that comes from is a recognition that Jesus who came to Earth as a baby, lived a sinless life, went to the cross, is God, and has paid the way for my sin and yours.

And what Romans 10:9 says is if we confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that he is the Lord, hear that word Lord again, and we'll be saved. We don't have to be concerned that we don't have a real ticket.

So, it's possible, as we've gathered, that some of us have been disturbed here today because you're sitting here saying, I thought maybe because I had a great group, did some good things, my passion was enough, or I know that I'm not following God in an important area. And my point isn't to create doubt, but it's to simply say, Jesus said, I want you to not have this scenario of one day showing up and me saying, I didn't know you. And so, what you can do is you can say, God, I do want to know you. I do want to have Jesus as the Lord of my life, my Savior, my God, and turn to Him.

And for some who are here and listening, we may have heard this, and instead of being disturbed, we say, well, I've resolved this. I'm pretty confident about where my eternity is. But can I just say to you, if that's who you are, to live with a greater sense of anticipation and a greater sense of need to help other people come to know who Jesus Christ is because Jesus is indeed the savior of our world.

God, today I ask that you would help us who have gathered at Orchard Hill to not be people who go through Christmas spiritual tradition and yet don't really know you. But instead, we'd be people who know you, respond to you, celebrate you, and can live with certainty. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.