

**What Is The Meaning of
“τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” in Matthew 7:21?**

by René A. Lopez

Introduction

Upon studying Matthew’s Gospel one can see that his message primarily conveys to the Jews by employing selected events of Jesus Christ’s life that He was their promised Messiah of OT prophecies. This further explain God’s present kingdom program in light of Israel’s rejection of her Messiah.¹ The means Matthew uses to convey this theme stands out by employing the following eight characteristics:

- A. Nine times the formula “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the Prophet” or a close variant of it² appears in order to develop apologetically from the OT that Jesus is indeed Israel’s Messiah. In addition, the concept of fulfillment from the OT also appears another six times.³
- B. Eschatology plays a large role, which Jesus conveys through discourses and parables (cf. 5:1–7:29; 13; 24–25, 28:20).
- C. The “kingdom of heaven” is a uniquely dominant theme found only in Matthew.⁴
- D. Jewish themes dominate:
 - a. Jesus Christ’s royalty (7:13-29; 25:31-46; 28:18-20)
 - b. Jesus’ preeminence over the Law (5:21-22, 27-28)
 - c. Jesus’ preeminence over the Sabbath (12:8)
 - d. Jesus’ preeminence over the Prophets (12:41)
 - e. Jesus’ preeminence over the temple (12:6)
 - f. Jesus’ preeminence over the king and kingdoms (12:42)
 - g. Jewish lineage traced back to Abram (1:1-17)
 - h. Fourteen generations equally fit from Abraham to David to Jesus (1:17).
- E. Matthew works as a bridge from the OT to the NT by linking through Scripture fulfillment the veracity of Jesus as Messiah. Precision and details sets Matthew apart from the other synoptic.
- F. Only Matthew mentions the church (16:18; 18:11).
- G. Concern and contrasts are made to Gentiles (8:11–12; 15:24; 21:43; 24–25 (?); 28:19).

¹Mark L. Bailey and Thomas L. Constable, *The New Testament Explorer: Discovering the Essence, Background and Meaning of Every Book in the New Testament*, Swindoll Leadership Library, ed. Charles R. Swindoll (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 3.

²See Matt 1:22; 2:15, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56.

³See Matt 2:17; 3:15; 5:17; 13:14; 26:54; 27:9.

⁴The Greek phrase “τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν” appears only in Matthew 32 times: 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1, 14.

H. Parables and discourses are the methods used by Christ to teach. Out of the five discourses appearing, uniquely all of them end with the phrase “when Jesus had finished ...” (5:3–7:28; 10:5-42; 13:13-52; 18:3-35; 24:4–25:46).⁵

Matthew 7:21 appear in one of the five discourses (as shown above in section H) that Jesus employs. This passage sits within the broader context 5–7:29, known as “the Sermon on the Mount.” Numerous interpretations exist concerning the overall thrust and applicability of this Sermon, which makes it problematic.⁶ However, equally problematic is the meaning of the phrase “the will of My Father”⁷ (“τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου”) in Matt 7:21.⁸

Three possible interpretations are set forth in trying to grapple with this phrase: 1) One option interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” as applying to believers’ faithful response to the father’s commands. 2) A second option understands “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” as a distinguishing marker setting apart false-professors from faithful-possessors demonstrated by one’s obedience to the Father’s Commands (i.e., “will”). 3) A third option interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” as the Father’s sole command to believe in Jesus the Messiah as the only way to become righteous.

This paper will develop the arguments for and against each view. At the end, this writer will propose a solution.

⁵The five places where the phrase appears after the discourses are the following: Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1.

⁶J. Carl Laney, *Answers to Tough Questions from Every Book of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 188-89, lays out six possible views set forth by theologians: 1) *Pattern for Christian Life*. Augustine (354–430) understood the sermon as applicable to Christian behavior. 2) *Impossible Ideal*. Gerhard Kittel believed the impossibility of fulfilling the sermon, therefore Jesus’ intent was to bring them to that point so that Jews look to Him as the only means of righteousness. 3) *Interim Ethic*. Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer interpret it as “an emergency ethic for His disciples’ use during the brief interval between His preaching and the cataclysm coming of the Kingdom of God.” Thus, it does not apply to a twenty-first century audience. 4) *Way of Salvation*. A. Tholuck believes it presents a way of salvation. 5) *Kingdom Ethic*. Barthian scholars believe, as many Dispensationalist, these sermon principles apply strictly to the future millennial kingdom 6) *Historical Approach*. J. Carl Laney believes it is “set in the historical context of Jesus’ offer of the kingdom (Matt. 4:17). Entrance into the kingdom was the key issue confronting the Jews following Jesus. Rather than describing the characteristics of the future millennial kingdom, the sermon sets forth the high requirements that must be met in order to enter that kingdom.” However, it also reveals God’s holiness and “serves as a guide for Christian conduct in this present age.” See also Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 85-94, for a slight variations in some of these views.

⁷Jesus mentioned God as “My Father” 29 times in Synoptics (Matt 7:21; 11:21; Mark 8:38; Luke 10:22, et al.), but in Matthew it is more prominent, see Robert Paul Lightner, “The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Father” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1959), 36.

⁸David K. Lowery, “God as Father With Special Reference to Matthew's Gospel” (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1984), 328, understands “those who do the will of the Father will enter not those who claim their allegiance to Jesus” in Matt 7:21 to be of “particular interest.” He says, “The verse has a Q parallel at Luke 6:46. Matthew’s fuller text appears to be an interpretive expansion but it is not clear whether the expansion is due to Matthew or occurred in his tradition. ‘Entering the kingdom’ is a traditional idea (cf. Mk 10:24; Lk 11:52) but ‘doing the will of the Father’ is a phrase peculiar to this Gospel which Matthew may have found here and used elsewhere or formulated himself.”

**Option no. 1 Interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου”
as Applicable to Believers’ Faithful Response
to the Father’s Commands**

The first interpretive option suggests that one should take Matt 7:21 as applying to believers’ faithful response to the Father’s will. That is, “To properly understand this section in Matthew’s gospel, it should be clearly understood that eternal verities are not in view at all.”⁹

Arguments Commending this View

Context

Overall context. One can argue that contextually the Sermon on the Mount was given to justified disciples. Zane C. Hodges, while *not* agreeing with this view, understands the sermon as applying to millennial “Kingdom living,”¹⁰ and believes Jesus’ disciples were redeemed at this point: “[Jesus] had already indoctrinated His disciples in this basic truth of salvation.”¹¹ One can see this chronologically in John’s Gospel. Before Jesus began His public ministry, His disciples were already eternally saved (John 1:35-51; 2:11), and clearly understood eternal life, or in a Matthean term “enter the kingdom of heaven,” based on a simple one-time gift (John 4:10) conditioned upon believing/trusting in Jesus (3:16-18, 36; 4:42, 48).

Immediate context. The end of the Sermon on the Mount presents three antithetical approaches to kingdom life: two ways (vv 13-14), two kinds of fruits (vv 15-20), and two foundations (vv 24-27)¹² along with Jesus judgment (vv 21-23). In fact, the immediate context in Matt 7:13-29 suggest that judgment comes based on the charismatic works these “Christians” were involved (vv 21-23), which they thought—in their self-deception—were of the Lord. The Greek οὐ (negative particle) begins a three-part question “have we not prophesied” that shows they expected a positive response from Jesus. Furthermore, not only does Jesus not deny the reality of these miracles they performed, which probably means they were authentic, but also they did them in His “name.” Verse 22 emphasizes three times “in Your name,” as the source of their miracles.

⁹Arlen L. Chitwood, *Prophecy on Mount Olivet* (Norman, OK: Lamp Broadcast, Inc., 1989), 76.

¹⁰Zane C. Hodges, *Grace In Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards* (Dallas, TX: Redeción Viva, 1985), 21-22, says, “The body of the sermon (5:17–7:12) might very well be described as ‘Kingdom living.’” The Standard of conduct which are here laid out are viewed from the perspective of the standards that will be enforced when the Kingdom actually comes.”

¹¹*Ibid.*, 19.

¹²Rick W. Byargeon, “Echoes of Wisdom Background to the Lord (Matt 6:9–13),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/3 (September 1998): 359. These types of “genre,” as Byargeon calls it, were found in the OT, Apocrypha, and Judaism. See Deut 11:26; 30:15; Jer 21:8; Ps 1:6; Prov 28:6, 18; Sir 2:12; 15:11-17; 21:10. Also see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According Saint Matthew*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, ed. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988), 695-96.

Thus, the disciples need not understand upon hearing the overall (Matt 5:1–7:12) and immediate (7:13-29) context of the Sermon on the Mount as instructions for salvation to enter or as furnishing evidence of those “truly-saved” who will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Exegetical Meaning

Key components to this view. The relationship between “ὁ ποιῶν,” (v 21) “οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν” (v 23), and “εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν” the concept of judgment are exceptionally important to understanding “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” in Matthew 7:21. Matthew 7:21-23 says:

<p>v 21 Οὐ πᾶς ὁ λέγων μοι κύριε κύριε, εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν, ἀλλ' ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς</p>	<p>Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but <u>he who does the will of My Father</u> in heaven.</p>
<p>v 22 πολλοὶ ἐροῦσίν μοι ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ: κύριε κύριε, οὐ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι ἐπροφητεύσαμεν, καὶ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι δαιμόνια ἐξεβάλομεν, καὶ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι δυνάμεις πολλὰς ἐποιήσαμεν;</p>	<p>“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?’</p>
<p>v 23 καὶ τότε ὁμολογήσω αὐτοῖς ὅτι οὐδέποτε <u>ἔγνων</u> ὑμᾶς· ἀποχωρεῖτε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν.</p>	<p>“And then I will declare to them, ‘I never <u>knew</u> you; depart from Me you who <u>practice lawlessness!</u>’</p>

First, since “doing” is key to understanding “the will of the Father,” the term ποιέω needs consideration. The term ποιέω occurs eighty-six times in Matthew¹³ of which twenty-two of them occur in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁴ BDAG defines ποιέω with seven different nuances.¹⁵ However, at its basic level ποιέω means to “*produce..., to undertake or do someth. that brings about an event, state, or condition, do, cause, bring about, accomplish, prepare..., [or] carry out an obligation of a moral or social nature.*”¹⁶ Once ποιέω comes under careful scrutiny in all the twenty-two occurrences of the term within Matt 5–7:29, BDAG’s rendering of ποιέω in 7:21 as having a meaning to “*do, keep the will or law obediently*” agrees quite well with the context.¹⁷ Therefore, Arlen L. Chitwood reasons that if man’s eternal destiny could ever

¹³Ver. Accordance 4.5 (Altamonte Springs, FL: OakTree Software, Inc., 2000).

¹⁴See Matt 5:19, 32, 36, 46, 47 [2x]; 6:1, 2 [2x], 3 [2x], 7:12 [2x], 17 [2x], 18 [2x], 19, 21, 22, 24, 26.

¹⁵Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed., Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 839-42.

¹⁶Ibid., 839-40. Italics added.

¹⁷Ibid., 840. Italics original

be brought into judgment based on his works two things would come into question: 1) Salvation by grace through faith, and 2) the sufficiency of Christ's finished work to pay for man's sin.¹⁸

Thus, the issue of those "who practice lawlessness" (οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν, v 23) is a matter in Matt. 7:21-23 simply having "to do with occupying or being denied a position as co-heir with Christ in the heavenly sphere of the kingdom during the coming age."¹⁹

Second, since Chitwood interprets "enter [into] the kingdom of heaven" (εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν) as "an expression referring to the *rule of the heavens over the earth*," the subject in Matt 7:21-23 (as mentioned above) refers to ruling in the heavenly sphere in the Messianic age. Satan and his angels rule the present kingdom, but during Messiah's rule, it will be controlled by Christ and His co-heirs (Dan 4:17, 25, 26; 7:18-27; 10:12, 13, 20, 21; Rev 2:26-27). Therefore, Jesus refers by commanding to enter through the "narrow gate"²⁰ in vv 13-14 to living obediently to the Father's will (v 21), which they failed to do (by taking wide gate) and to which they will come into judgment "in that day" (v 22) by being denied entrance into the kingdom (v 23). Because these Christians involved themselves in an erroneous charismatic movement, Christ will answer them "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (v 23) Thus, the judgment depicted in Matt 7:21-23 refers to the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:11-15; 2 Cor 5:10-11).²¹

Parallel passages. Other passages like Matthew 22:1-14; 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27 seem to suggest entering the kingdom based on obedience. For example, the garments found in Matt 22:11 may not refer to Christ's righteousness (as in Isa 61:10),²² but to the righteous acts of believers²³ that qualify them to come back and rule with Christ (as in Rev 19:8-19; 20:1-4).

¹⁸Chitwood, *Mount Olivet*, 76.

¹⁹Ibid., 77.

²⁰This is further supported specially when compared with the phrase "Strive [ἀγωνίζομαι] to enter through the narrow gate" in Luke 13:24. Louw and Nida computer version defines ἀγωνίζομαι as "to engage in intense struggle, involving physical or nonphysical force against strong opposition." This concept would seem to involve effort or works on the part of the individual.

²¹Chitwood, *Mount Olivet*, 76-77, 179. Chitwood states two reasons why believers are the referent here: "1) Unsaved individuals cannot be in view, for a person is in no position to be judged relative to entrance into the kingdom until after he has been saved; and 2) the 'kingdom of heaven' is that part of the kingdom which was taken from Israel and is presently being extended to Christians."

²²Karl E. Pagenkemper, "Rejection Imagery in the Synoptic Parables: Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July–September 1996): 315, fn 25, understands wedding garments in Matt 22:11 as positional salvation, and says, "The figurative use of clothing is common in Scripture (Job 29:14; Ps. 132:9; Isa. 11:5; 61:10 [the 'garments of salvation' are parallel to the 'robe of righteousness']; Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:22, 24; Col. 3:8-14; Rev. 19:8. In Ezekiel 16:6-14 Israel had been found in blood and received new garments from God. The motif is similar to Pauline thinking (Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 2:12)."

²³Gregory P. Sapaugh, "A Call to the Wedding Celebration: An Exposition of Matthew 22:1-14," *Journal of the GRACE Evangelical Society* 12 (Spring 1992): 25, understands that "the wedding garments [in Matt 22:11] is a figure for righteous living. Therefore, this man did not faithfully perform the good works that are necessary to be present at the wedding banquet. This leads to the conclusion that eternal salvation is not an issue in this passage.... One valid motivation for being faithful to Christ is the glorious prospect of receiving rewards and, as Matt 22:1-14 teaches, reigning and fellowshiping with our King in His kingdom. In the words of Paul and John,

Matthew 25:14-30 seems to refer to faithful servants and one unfaithful servant who does not make the millennium. Similar lines of argument are used in Luke 19:11-27.

Some hold that obedience is needed to “enter the kingdom of heaven”. Some older commentators point to other parabolic teachings of Jesus (e.g., those above Luke 19:11-27; Matt 25:1-30) where missing the millennial rule with Christ—having eternal ramifications—based on unfaithfulness is the issue. G. H. Lang, D. M. Panton, G. H. Pember, and Robert Govett are among those. For example, Lang says:

Few believers ever ponder His words [of Matt 18:3], ... Yet these were believers ... they had been born of God and were already in the kingdom (John 1:12, 13). It cannot then be of this initial entrance that the Lord here spoke, but rather of that future entrance when the kingdom shall be set up in glory....

The first occurrence of the expression [enter the kingdom of heaven] is in Matt. 7:21, where the next verse places entrance forward ‘in that day,’ the day of the coming of the Lord for judgment....

The warning as to entering the kingdom reminds of that earlier warning addressed to those same disciples on the same topic of greatness in the kingdom (Matt. 5:17-20)....

Let not the believer in this age presume that he can be proud of heart and work any wickedness and yet escape such warnings, for he is solemnly reminded, on the very ground that he is expecting to receive a kingdom that ‘our God is consuming fire (Heb 12:28, 29).²⁴

Similar to Lang’s line of reasoning used elsewhere, Govett understands Paul’s use of 1 Cor 10:1-11 of the first Exodus generation’s failure to enter the promise land to be an analogous picture and a warning to Christians to be careful of not missing to enter the millennial kingdom due to disobedience.²⁵

these kingdom privileges are reserved for those who “endure” (2 Tim 2:12) and “overcome” (Rev 3:21). In the words of Matthew, they are for the ones who are clothed in the “wedding garment” of good works [see Rom 3:5; 19:8].” He also notes: “In the Pauline system, the wedding garments of good works is expressed in a passage like Eph. 4:22-24. There Paul exhorts the Ephesian believers to put off the corrupt old man, be renewed, and ‘put on the new man, which was created according to God in righteousness and true holiness’ (v 24). The Greek verb ‘put on’ is *endyō*, which is the same word used here in v 11 (‘clothed’),” see p 25, fn 50.

²⁴G. H. Lang, *Firstborn Sons, Their Rights & Risks: An Inquiry as to the Privileges and Perils of the Members of the Church of God* (London: Samuel Roberts Publishers, 1936; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing, 1984), 146-47, 148, see also 149-53. See also Chitwood, *Mount Olivet*, 179-180, who views the banquet guest of Matt 22:1-14 and the disobedient “virgins” of 25:1-12 as missing the millennium due their disobedience, but still being in possession of eternal life.

²⁵Robert Govett, *Entrance into the Kingdom: or Rewards According to Works* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing, 1978), 110, says, “In all the instances mentioned here [i.e., passages referring to the first Exodus generations] God cut off the offenders *by death*; entirely removing thus their hopes of entering the land of promise. Hence we are to understand the cases cited as applying to us in the strongest sense: that is, that those believers who are guilty of like trespass, will forfeit altogether their entrance into the kingdom.” See also Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulational Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing, 1991), 165-75, who explains these commentators’ partial-rapture position of the faithful believers within the church as being a condition of entering, and thus participating in the rapture.

The meaning of γινώσκω in 7:23. The meaning of “not knowing” must be interpreted contextually and need *not* refer to Christ’s denial of one’s eternal status. For example, in John 14:4, 7, Christ tells His disciples they “know” (οἶδα) the way in v 4, but in v 7 he tells them they had *not* “known” (γινώσκω) Him in a deeper sense, but from then on they will. Further evidence suggests interpreting γινώσκω in 7:23 as referring to a “type knowledge gained through experience. That is, one has an intimate relationship with Christ through the experience of following Him, keeping His commandments (as in 1 John 2:3, 4).” This same term is used by Paul in desiring to *know* Christ intimately through His sufferings in Phil 3:10. On the other hand, οἶδα is the type of knowledge gained “apart from experience, an absolute knowledge. This is the type of knowledge we possess concerning eternal salvation”²⁶ as seen in other passages (cf. 1 John 3:2; 5:13). Distinguishing between the meaning of οἶδα (used in John 14:4) and γινώσκω (used in John 14:7) is also acknowledged by *Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*.²⁷

Thus, the phrase “I never knew you,” Chitwood suggests, “This is a ‘relative’ statement pertaining to the matter at hand. (Note that even if eternal verities were in view, the statement would still be ‘relative,’ for God is *omniscient*, knowing every person and all things.) Christ will not *know* these individuals relative to 1) *their works* (He will have nothing to do with them) and 2) *entrance into the kingdom* (they will be denied positions as co-heirs with Him in the kingdom).”²⁸ Knowing here does not have a positional but a practical nuance that means not approving of their actions relative to rewards *not* redemption.

Thus, this view concludes the following: The meaning of “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός μου” applies to the believer’s faithful response to the Father’s commands delineated in the Sermon on the Mount. This would be further supported by vv 24-27 by Christ’s introductory words that conclude the following section: “whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and *does* them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Arguments Opposing this View

Context

Saved disciples are only part of the audience in this sermon. According to Matt 5:1 and 7:28 a broader audience called “ὄχλος” (multitude/people) were present that were not saved. Many that were even called disciples that were not necessarily saved as John 6:66 suggest followed Christ. Thus, this accounts for the warning given in 5:20 and the immediate context 7:13-29.²⁹

²⁶Chitwood, *Mount Olivet*, 180.

²⁷J. H. Thayer, ed., *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1986; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 118, 174.

²⁸Chitwood, *Mount Olivet*, 77-78. Thus, Chitwood concludes: “To the *unsaved*, it would be relative to eternal life; to the *saved*, it would be relative to matters having to do with the kingdom...” p 179. Italics original in both quotes, the body and footnote.

²⁹Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 92-93, acknowledges the presence of both of these groups.

Exegetical Meaning

Key components to this view. The relationship between “ὁ ποιῶν,” (v 21) “οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν” (v 23), and the concept of judgment does not seem to refer to saved individuals for several reasons. First, the term ποιῶν need not only refer to “works,” for “ποιῶν” in itself can refer to believing, which may entail works but may certainly include faith as a primary tenet of the meaning as in Matt 21:31-32, where both terms “the will of his father” and “enter the kingdom of heaven” also appear as in 7:21. In addition, in John 6:28-29 ποιέω refers solely to “believe.”

Second, the “οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν” (v 23) seems to refer to unsaved people who have not entered through the narrow gate (7:13-14) and does not surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ...[to] enter the kingdom of heaven” (cf. 5:20 and 7:21). These people seem to be the same false prophets in 7:15-20 that may be teaching entrance into the kingdom by works, which accounts for the erroneous view of the law held by the Scribes and Pharisees. This accounts for why Christ had to explain the essence and meaning of the Law from 5:17–7:12, an absolute standard unable to be attained by meritorious works. Thus, as such, these are the same unbelievers claiming entrance into the kingdom of heaven by their works of righteousness that Jesus calls οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν in v 23 (cf. Matt 23:13).

Parallel passages. Equally striking and more congruent to Matt 7:21-23 is the other eschatological passage of the sheep and the goats’ judgment in 25:31-46 where failure to inherit³⁰ the kingdom (v 34) results in being cursed and thrown “into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v 41b). In addition, the other passage in Luke 13:23-27 that comes closer to Matt 7:21-23 suggest that both come with eternal verities when looking at someone’s question in 13:23: “‘Lord, are there few who are saved?’”

Obedience *not* needed to “enter the kingdom of heaven.” Scripture points in other places like Matt 18:3 (that refers to “become as little children you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”) and John 3:3 (as born again/from above to see the kingdom of God) to faith alone in Christ alone as the means of entrance into the kingdom. Even in passages like Matt 22:1-14; 25:1-30 and Luke 19:11-27, the concept does *not* need to refer to *missing* the kingdom, but as others have interpreted it refers to having no rewards *within* the kingdom.³¹

The meaning of γινώσκω in 7:23. Although a distinction between οἶδα and γινώσκω may occur, the parallel passage to 7:23 found in Luke 13:27 uses οἶδα instead of γινώσκω: “‘I tell you I do not know [οἶδα] you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.’” Therefore, both terms seem to be interchangeable. BDAG also defines οἶδα as

³⁰The term “inherit” here would include the concept of entering, but comes with a broader meaning of co-heirship to rule with Christ (see Rom 8:17; Rev 2:25-28).

³¹The following theologians interpret these passages as such: Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing, 1992); Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999); Charles C. Bing, “Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991).

“experience” in category four.³² Thus, one must be careful in making too sharp of a distinction when speaking of both of these terms. Context must determine, and in Matt 7:23 the context favors seeing a positional (with eternal verities) *not* an experiential nuance of γινώσκω, perhaps as in John 17:3.

Thus, the meaning of “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου,” cannot refer to a believer’s faithful response to God’s command. Based on these objections, this meaning must be rejected. Instead, the following suggested meaning finds closer affinities to what Matthew intended to say.

**Option no. 2 Interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου”
as Distinguishing False-Professors from Faithful-Possessors
by Obeying the Father**

By far, the view that interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” in Matt 7:21 as distinguishing false professors from true possessors is held by the majority of commentators.³³ Stanley D. Toussaint’s words are typical of this view:

In this sermon Jesus is looking at the entire life of a disciple, from its inception to its culmination. It is a life begun by repentance and thereafter marked by good fruits. This is why the Lord emphasizes the works which are to characterize His followers. Even the warning of Matthew 5:20 follows an admonition concerning the doing and teaching of the commandments, clearly the work of a disciple. The invitation to enter the narrow gate is associated with the narrow life that is to follow (Matthew 7:13-14). Likewise the warnings of Matthew 7:21-29 are concerned with righteous works performed from a pure heart. True disciples are those who have repented and produce good fruit.³⁴

Arguments Commending this View

Context

Overall context. Although, there were others than the disciples present (cf. 5:1; 7:28) that heard Jesus deliver the Sermon of the Mount, David K. Lowery says, “The sayings are directed primarily to disciples (Matt. 5:1) who have repented (4:17) and followed Jesus (4:18-22). The sermon, then, is only rightly understood as an apodisis, a message understood in light of

³²Bauer, *BDAG*, 694.

³³See John F. MacArthur, Jr., “Faith According to the Apostle James,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33/1 (March 1990): 33-34; Daniel Doriani, “The Deity of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/3 (September 1994): 340-41; Pagenkemper, “Rejection Imagery,” 328-29; Allison A. Trites, “The Blessings and Warnings of the Kingdom,” *Review and Expositor* 89 (1992): 190-93; Roy L. Aldrich, “Some Simple Difficulties of Salvation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 111 (April-June 1954): 167-68; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 33a (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1993), 187; Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, trans. Frank Clarke, rev. edition by Berndt Schaller ed. (New York: SCM Press, 1966), 153. Throughout this section the reader will be able to join other commentators to this list.

³⁴Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 93.

a preceding work of grace.” Therefore, like Toussaint above, Lowery concludes: “What follows is an explanation to disciples of the nature of this new relationship which at the same time bears testimony to others (the crowds, cf. 7:28) about the character of those who enter the kingdom and the kind of God who brings them.”³⁵

Immediate context. The key to Lowery’s understanding of the Sermon seems to fall on Matthew’s explanation of the relationship and exemplary character that follow true disciples who will enter the kingdom. Thus, in this view, the overall (5:1-7:12) and immediate (7:13-29) context refers *primarily* to developing and distinguishing the character of those that are saved.³⁶

Exegetical Meaning

The meaning of εἰσέρχουμαι and ὁδός. The immediate context beginning in 7:13-14 seems to make the distinction between false-professors and faithful-possessors. Matthew has one idea in mind in vv 13-14 that illustrates the road that true disciples take. He uses a second plural aorist imperative εἰσέλθατε to “enter,” for salvation “by the narrow gate.”³⁷ Immediately afterwards Matthew switches to the linear present middle participle εἰσερχόμενοι, (“entering”) for those on the ongoing road to destruction, as well as using other linear present tenses for those on the ongoing road “leading” (ἀπάγουσα) “to life,” who are the few “finding” (εὐρίσκοντες) it.³⁸ Robert H. Gundry suggests this means exegetically that “we are to think not only of traveling a roadway *to* one or the other gate at the final judgment..., but also of travelling [sic] a road and entering through a gate as independent figures, both of which stand for the present life of discipleship. Cf. Matthew’s putting the present aspect of the kingdom alongside the future in 6:10-11, 13.”³⁹

Furthermore, Matthew’s use of ὁδός (road) as the way of righteousness (cf. 3:3; 5:20; 7:13-14, 24-27; 21:32; 22:16) seems to be his concern. The understanding of ὁδός is found in

³⁵Lowery, “God as Father in Matt”, 116.

³⁶Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, ed. David S. Dockery, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 132, referring to Matt 7:15-23 understands Matthew to be speaking of OT prophets, an observation that few have made. However, he also relates it to Christians: “At the same time, v. 16 suggests that outward behavior may enable one to distinguish between true and false Christians. Like inspecting vegetation, which inevitably discloses fruit in keeping with its species and state of health, so also one can look for good or bad (literally, *rotten* or *worthless*) spiritual fruit (vv. 17-20). Verse 21 further equates this fruit with doing ‘the will of my Father who is in heaven,’ precisely what the Sermon on the Mount is elaborating.” Although, Blomberg does say that it is impossible to absolutely assess ultimately a person’s salvation.

³⁷Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 126-27, understands this entrance to imply salvation: “The big gates are shut! Hurry into the city of salvation by the one available way.

The narrowness of the small gate prevents the entrance of more than one person at a time and represents the strictures of the surpassing righteousness just taught by Jesus as a requirement for entering the kingdom. In the tradition the narrowness of the door has to do only with the fewness of the saved.”

³⁸Ibid., 127.

³⁹Ibid.

Judaism's equivalent word "*Halakah*," which means literally "to walk," which was indeed God's will.⁴⁰ This "was the Jewish development of rules applying the Torah to everyday conditions; i.e. correct ethical behaviour was the way to God."⁴¹ Jesus' full explication of the correct understanding of the Law from 5:17–7:12 allows one interpret 7:13-29 as the correct character of a true disciple. Furthermore, this *óðòs* begins and continues full of difficulty (*τεθλιμμένη*, cf. 5:10-11). This term *θλίβω* comes from the root word *θλίψις* meaning "pressure, tribulation, distress, and affliction."⁴² This would also imply that vv 13-14 refers to the character of faithful discipleship⁴³ (cf. Matt 13:21; Mark 4:17, et al.)

The relationship between vv 15-20 and vv 21-27. The entire section 7:15-27 also seems to imply the concept of distinguishing the false prophets from the true ones, which distinguishes the false-professor from the faithful-possessor. From vv 15-20, Jesus' warning to believers bears on distinguishing between true and false believers by their fruits.⁴⁴ The false prophets fruits (*καρπῶν*, plural) are their words and their works that should match (as Matt 3:8; 23:13, 14, 15) as developed by Matthew in the entire section (7:15-23).⁴⁵ "Actions" or a

⁴⁰Lowery, "God as Father in Matt," 50, interprets the concept of God as father in Deuteronomy as "related to the covenant and Torah." He further supports the meaning of Torah in Deuteronomy as having its full expression in God's will by citing known authority on the issue B. Lindars, "Torah in Deuteronomy," in *Words and Meanings*, ed. P. Ackroyd and B. Lindars (Cambridge: Cambridge Press University, 1968), 131.

⁴¹John Court and Kathleen Court, *The New Testament World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 256.

⁴²G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 207-8. See also Gundry, *Matthew*, 127, says, "here the way of righteousness is the way of persecution, for *τεθλιμμένη*, 'constricted, narrow,' and its cognates 'tribulation,' connote persecution (see 13:21; 24:9, 21, 29, and many passages elsewhere in the NT)."

⁴³Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 70, defines Matt 7:15-27 as "the material" used by Q that applies to judgment falling on Israel and as now refocused by Matthew to warn the church of "the consequences of unfaithful discipleship (see 7:15-27; 23:1; 24:3)."

⁴⁴Michael Green, *Matthew for Today: Expository Study of Matthew* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1988), 90, explains it as follows: A profession of faith which makes no difference to how we behave, is barren and will never save anybody. There must be fruit, consistent, attractive fruit on the tree of our lives. Fruit that will show there is a Gardener at work. Fruit that will satisfy the hunger of the passer-by. How evil are the fruits to be found in many professing Christians: an arrogance which alienates; an externalism which does not touch the heart; a separation between religion and life; a faith which makes no demands, or consists in legalism; a religion that takes refuge in charismatic jargon—of prophecy, or miraculous healings, or driving out demons, but may not even really know Jesus, and does not really do the will of the heavenly Father. Matthew may well have in mind wild charismatic 'prophets' current in his day, as he recorded these words of his Master.... so much which passes as Christianity will be shriveled up in the day of judgment and be found to be bogus and worthless. *People judge the tree by the fruit. The awesome truth Jesus teaches here is that so does God! If the fruit is not real, we may take leave to doubt the proper rooting in the first place.*" Italics added for emphasis.

⁴⁵Petri Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew's View of Salvation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 97, says, "Thus, it seem clear that verses 16-20 contain a 'rule of thumb' on the basis of which false prophets can be identified. The next section exemplifies their behavior in more concrete terms and describes their final judgement. Of course, there is no reason to deny the fact that verses 21-23 also have a more general character which makes them applicable to a wider circle of people. Verse 7:21, in particular, reminds

“lifestyle” not conforming to one’s profession seems very much a part of this pericope.⁴⁶ The term ποιέω “doing”⁴⁷ or “bears” occurs five times (vv 17 [2x], 18 [2x], and 19) in relations to fruits. Thus, Jesus’ denouncement on those practicing lawlessness (οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι [present linear tense] τὴν ἀνομίαν, v 23) for not “doing” (ὁ ποιῶν, v 21, cf. v 26)⁴⁸ the Father’s will (θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς, v 21), favors understanding those casting out demons and prophesying (προφητεῦω, v 22) in vv 21-23 as being the same false prophets (ψευδοπροφητῶν) of vv 15-20,⁴⁹ whose bad fruits are exposed as a disobedient lifestyle.⁵⁰

This is further supported by the two contrasting metaphors of the builders in vv 24-27. Immediately, the inferential conjunction οὖν (therefore)⁵¹ in v 24 connects the previous section with what follows by way of explaining the ultimate outcome for those who succeed or those that fail to hear Jesus’ sayings and do (ποιέω) them. On this point, Lowery suggests, “The remaining texts refer to behaviour which distinguishes a disciple. 7: 21 (Lk 6:46) identifies disciples as those who do the Father’s will, which means hearing and doing Jesus’ words (7:24).”⁵²

all (v. 21: πᾶς; v. 22: πολλοί) of Jesus’ followers that a mere confession—though expressed with the right title—does not guarantee salvation unless followed by the right behavior.”

⁴⁶R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 228-29.

⁴⁷Lowery, “God as Father in Matt,” 328, translates ὁ ποιῶν in v 21 as “doing.”

⁴⁸Young’s Translation renders the articular present active participle “ὁ ποιῶν” as a continuous action.

⁴⁹Many scholars do *not* identify the false prophets of vv 15-20 as being the same as those practicing lawlessness appearing in vv 20-23: H. D. Betz, “Eine Episode im Jüngsten Gericht (Mt 7:21-23),” *ZTK* 78 (1981): 1-6; G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie des Matthäus*, 3d ed., *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 82 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 137, n 4, 276; D. Hill, “False Prophets and Charismatics: Structure and Interpretation in Matthew 7:15-23,” *Biblica* 57 (1976): 336-37, 339-40. as quoted in James E. Davison, “Anomia and the Question of Antinomian Polemic in Matthew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (December 1985): 628-29. For an opposing view turn to Lowery, “God as Father in Matt,” 330, fn 95, who cites B. W. Bacon, G. Barth, Kasemann, Hummel, Moule, Dupont, et al, as interpreting vv 15-23 as one unit. See also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 701, 711, fn 25; Luomanen, *Matthew’s View of Salvation*; Carter, *Matthew*, 142, understand the “false prophets” of vv 15-20 to be the same individuals of vv 21-23 who indicate through their “wrong motives and failure to do the will of God” to belong to the same group.

⁵⁰J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 98, makes this same link: “Matthew applies the term *anomia* to anyone who deviates from the will of God or fails to produce ‘good fruits’ (see 7:17; 12:33; 21:43). For this reason both the enthusiastic prophets of 7:15ff. and the scribes and Pharisees can be called *anomia* (7:23; 23:28).” See also Eduard Schweizer, “Observance of the Law and Charismatic Activity in Matthew,” *New Testament Studies* 16 (April 1970): 213-30; Davison, “Anomia and Antinomian in Matthew,” 611-35.

⁵¹So important is this and other connectives in the Sermon on the Mount that Douglas B. MacCorkle, “Interpretive Problems of Gospel of Matthew” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1961), 126, understands the οὖν, γὰρ, and ὅτι as setting “forth the basic argument of the sermon.”

⁵²Lowery, “God as Father in Matt,” 359-60.

The fact Jesus uses the plural τοὺς λόγους (these saying/words) in vv 24, 26 suggest He had much more in mind than the singular act of “believing” in Him for eternal life, as also shown by the exegetical insight of vv 13-14 above and the Synoptic parallel in Luke 6:46-47.⁵³ Furthermore, the term οἰκοδομέω is used forty-times in Scripture, and many times it comes with the same building emphasis involving works as developed from vv 24-27.⁵⁴ R. T. France interprets the entire context 7:15-27 to be about “doing” not “understanding:” “The focus on ‘doing’ in both 7:21-23 and 7:24-27 (and implied in the testing by ‘fruit’ in 7:15-20) shows that true understanding will be expressed in the way a disciple lives, and the test of that is his practical response to ‘these words of mine’ (7:24, 26; cf. 28:20), ‘to observe all that I have commanded you’.”⁵⁵

The meaning of γινώσκω in 7:23. As mentioned previously, context must determine the meaning of Jesus’ use of γινώσκω, and in Matt 7:23 the context favors seeing a positional (with eternal verities) *not* an experiential nuance of γινώσκω, perhaps as in John 17:3. The contrast of “life” and “destruction” in vv 13-14 which seems to connect with vv 15-23 also favors interpreting γινώσκω as Jesus’ acknowledgement of lawless-workers’ lack of eternal life or having a relationship with Him. France believes this: “A professed allegiance to Jesus, and even successful ‘charismatic’ activity in a Christian context, are no guarantee of proving ultimately to be among the saved. The key lies rather in a relationship with Jesus (‘I never knew you’, 7:23)....”⁵⁶

Parallel passages. Obedience accompanies believers that “enter the kingdom of heaven.” Examples of other uses of “θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς” (which occurs a total of nine-times) in and outside of Matthew suggest a commitment that involves works. For example, the phrase “θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς” occurs in Matthew 12:50; 18:14; 21:31, and πᾶτερ and θέλημά appear in 26:42; contextually, all of them seem to imply some action or activity on the part of others,⁵⁷ which determines whose a true believer.⁵⁸ The term ποιέω appears in two of the four identical

⁵³Graham N. Stanton, “Matthew as a Creative Interpreter of the Sayings of Jesus,” in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien: Vorträge vom Tübinger Symposium 1982*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1983), 279, understands Luke’s parallel of Matthew’s alleged modification to be supporting obedience as the correct meaning of the Father’s will of 7:21: “...there is an even more important modification in this verse. Whereas Luke 6:46 (»Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?«) and 6:47ff. (the house built near a stream) both refer to carrying out the sayings of Jesus, Matthew reshapes Luke 6:46 and makes it refer to »doing the will of the Father in heaven«. In so doing he makes it quite clear that to hear and obey the words of Jesus is to do the will of the heavenly Father.”

⁵⁴See Matt 7:24, 26; 16:18; 21:33, 42; 23:29; 26:61; 27:40; Mark 12:1, 10; 14:58; 15:29; Luke 4:29; 6:48, 49; 7:5; 11:47, 48; 12:18; 14:28, 30; 17:28; 20:17; John 2:20; Acts 7:47, 49; 9:31; 20:32; Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:4, 17; Gal 2:18; 1 Thess 5:11; 1 Pet 2:5, 7.

⁵⁵France, *Matthew*, 276.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Bauer, *BDAG*, 447.

⁵⁸Lowery, “God as Father in Matt,” 162, says, “Doing the Father’s will marks out the true member of God’s family (12:50). Every instance of ‘will’ in Mathew is linked to the Father (6:10; 7:21; 12:0; 18:14; 21:31; 26:42). The first use of θέλημά is in this petition (6:10), to be spoken by sons of God, and the last use is spoken by the Son (26:42), an example of wholehearted devotion for all who would call on God as Father.”

phrase used in Matt 7:21 of “θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς,” which was established (in the previous and present view) as coming with ethical connotations. Many have also linked the lack of evidence accompanying true believers in Matt 7:15-23 with Matt 25.⁵⁹

Outside of Matthew, John 6:40 is the only passage that defines θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς solely upon belief. In Paul, Acts 22:14 and Gal 1:4, both terms πάτερ and θέλημά are used with implications involving some type of works. In Acts 22:14, the Father’s will seems to involve believing and obeying the Just One, who is Jesus. In Gal 1:4, the Father’s will is accomplished by Jesus’ death on the cross to deliver us. All uses of the Father’s will, except once, involve works.

The meaning of “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου.” Thus, the meaning of “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” in Matt 7:21 involves one who does obey God’s commands. As a result, of not obeying, one can distinguish by the fruits of disobedience whose the false-professor from the true-possessor.⁶⁰

Arguments Opposing this View

Context

One can see the disciples are present in 5:1 at the Sermon of the Mount, however, so are others as acknowledged above (cf, 5:1; 7:28). The content from 5:1-16 seems to fit saved disciples: as blessings, persecution for righteousness, salt, light, lamp and reward are all concepts used of believers. Although beneficial to the unsaved, the real benefit seems to apply best to the saved.

However, from 5:17–7:12, the issue changes to address the broader crowd that are in dyer need to know the correct and only way to “enter the kingdom” (cf. 5:20, 7:13-14, 21), as will be shown in the following section. Sufficient evidence exist within the sermon by the change in content in 5:1-16 from 5:17–7:12 to argue against holding a dogmatic position claiming the Sermon primarily addresses the saved, when the evidence, if this change in content is held, supports the opposite. Therefore, the strength of the view, which argues for the Sermon referring *primarily* to developing and distinguishing the character of the *truly* saved, crumbles. For, if 5:17–7:13-14 addresses an unsaved crowd that needs saving, the only distinction that needs making is not between true or spurious believers, but between true and spurious foundations; which is supplied by false prophets as the basis for righteousness other than the one supplied by Messiah. This latter concept seems to explain in context the meaning of the Father’s will best, which subject matter is of a different nature.

⁵⁹See MacCorkle, “Interpretive Problems of Gospel of Matthew”, 153; France, *Matthew*, 229, 277. Some as Jeremias, *The Parables*, 153, have gone as far as clearly saying that obedience is the condition needed to enter the kingdom.

⁶⁰Other passages used—by many—as verifying of one’s salvation by external fruits or evidence by works are the following: Matt 25:1-46; 2 Cor 13:5; Hebrews; James; 2 Peter 1–2; 1 John; Jude; Rev 2–3.

Exegetical Meaning

The meaning of εἰσέρχουμαι and ὁδός. If the contextual argument above is followed, then Matthew does not intend in 7:13-14 to distinguish between false-professors and faithful-possessors. Instead, after elevating the Law to a higher standard that even the Scribes and Pharisees were unable to meet perfectly (cf. 5:20-48), he aims to tell people the only way to attain that righteousness that surpasses the best attempts of the rulers. Therefore, Matthew does *not* have one but two ideas in mind in vv 13-14.⁶¹ That is, the first idea involves “entrance” (εἰσέρχουμαι) “by the narrow gate” resulting in immediate salvation. The second idea involves “leading a way of life that is difficult” (τεθλιμμένη ἡ ὁδὸς ἢ ἀπάγουσα) resulting in “life,” not just eternal but experiential life.⁶² The understanding of ὁδός found in Judaism’s equivalent word “*Halakah*,” (applying to Torah) which means literally “to walk” (i.e., to live according to the Torah) favors a dual Matthean concept instead of an inference-evidence base that validates a true from a spurious Christian.

The relationship between vv 15-20 and vv 21-27. The idea of equating “prophet” with a “Christian” is faulty for several reasons. The Scripture seems to use the term “prophet” in a strict sense for those who receive special revelation and who teach God’s people with a *special call and gift*.⁶³ Therefore, while all true prophets in the OT sense (which Matt 7:13-28 belongs) believe in Christ (which at this time were *not* called Christians), all OT true believers in Christ at this time were *not* “prophets.” It follows that the warning here—is for the flock to guard against and—pertains to those who have a guiding ministry to the flock, *not* the flock itself. Second, since the words in 7:15-20 were still uttered under an OT dispensation (cf. 5:17-18; Gal 4:4), the fruits of a false prophet need to be developed and checked from an OT frame of reference.

The term ποιέω does not necessarily need to imply “works,” but as seen above in John 6:40, it simply used as doing the Father’s will that means to *believe in Jesus for eternal life*. Just as “obeying” may be a command to “believe” that does not involve works (cf. 1 Pet 2:7; possibly Rom 1:5), so “do” may just mean contextually to “believe” in Jesus as entering “by the narrow gate” that may be defined as being “the will of My Father” in v 21.

⁶¹Blomberg, *Matthew*, 132, wrongly merges the width of the gate “narrow” (στενός) as “coming from the verb *thlibō*, to experience trouble or difficulty, while ‘broad’ in v. 13 can have overtones of *prosperous*.” This is wrong. There is no evidence to suggest στενός comes from the root word of θλίβω. They are two totally different words with related but distinct meanings.

⁶²See Matt 16:24-27; Mark 8:34-38, and Luke 9:23-26 where the way of a disciple leading to life is difficult and costly. The meaning of “life” in Matt 7:14 seems to be equivalent to the fullness of life mentioned by Jesus’ statement in John 10:10b: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

⁶³Bauer, *BDAG*, 890-91, in all of its sections and subsections classifying προφήτης *not* once does one find this term applies to true Christians in a general sense, but it always brings a special calling or gift, which is not held by all. Furthermore, this type of office, calling and/or gift are believed by many not to be operative today, for it may have ceased after the completion of the canon of Scripture. See also Gerhard Friedrich, “προφήτης,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, index compiled by Ronald E. Pitkin, vol. 7. 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964-76), 828-61.

The relationship between “ὁ ποιῶν,” (v 21) “οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν” (v 23), and the concept of judgment, perhaps distinguishes those who claim to “enter the kingdom of heaven” through their works instead of *entering by the narrow gate*, (i.e., Jesus’ righteousness). Therefore, the “good” and “bad” καρπῶν in 7:15-20 defined as “deeds” being the determining factor of distinguishing true from spurious Christians cannot be sustained, because in v 22 the peoples’ claim to do the Father’s will is based on works. Thus, how can this be the distinguishing mark when it happens to be exactly what they claim, which seems to hold true for two reasons: first, 7:15 suggests that external activities may *not* be the way to determine these false prophets since they come in “sheep’s clothing.” Second, Jesus does not deny their deeds, but calls them those “who practice lawlessness.” It may be that they are “lawless” in the sense they claim entrance into the kingdom or eternal life based on works. Thus, to this type of claim, Scripture has always been clear in calling it lawless and unrighteous: “all our righteousness are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away” (Isa 64:6), and “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Rom 3:20a).

Furthermore, the theological rubric taught by many that suggests genuine believers cannot sin or have such a life style is *not* supported by Scripture as Thomas L. Constable suggest:

... This cannot be true in view of hundreds of commands, exhortations, and warnings that Jesus and the apostles gave to believers in the New Testament. It is possible for a believer to do bad works (e.g., 16:23; Tit. 2:11-13; 3:8; 1 John 1:9). That they will not is the teaching of sinless perfection. Other interpreters say that some bad works are inevitable for the believer, but bad works will not characterize the life of a true believer. This quickly turns into a question of how many bad works, which the New Testament does not answer. Rather the New Testament writers present some people who have departed from God’s will for a long time as believers (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18). The point Jesus was making in verse 18 was simply that false prophets do what is bad, and people who follow God faithfully do what is good. He already told His disciples not to judge one another (vv. 1-5).⁶⁴

Parallel passages. Certainly, most parallel passages where “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός” occurs in and outside of Matthew, the idea of works is present. However, this is not to the exclusion of the view that understands accepting or rejecting Messiah (i.e., believing in Him) as being the meaning or part of the meaning here, as other passages (Matt 12 and 21:23-46) suggests (cf. Acts 22:14). Thus, “false-prophets” are not necessarily excluded from entering the kingdom of heaven due their lack of evidence of good works—as fruits, but due their rejection of Messiah, which resulted in trusting and building on a faulty foundation (called “sand,” vv 26-27). Whether Matthew penned this phrase with the original intent of warning the “church” to evaluate an individual’s eternal status by their works is highly questionable.⁶⁵ Conversely, the historical context where the Sermon on the Mount arose in Jesus ministry demands another explanation, than an anachronistic reading. This will be developed in the final section.

⁶⁴Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew*(Online: <http://soniclight.com>, 2002, accessed December 12, 2002).

⁶⁵Blomberg, *Matthew*, 133, who believes view no. 2, understand the difficulty of assessing a person’s eternal status by his/her fruits. Thus, he ends by saying, “It is worth emphasizing, however, that one can never know with absolute certainty the spiritual state of any other individual.”

In summary, interpreting “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” as distinguishing false-professors from faithful-possessors by obedience to the Father’s Commands is a theological rubric imposed on and contrary to what the Sermon on the Mount seems to be teaching. Thus, based on these objections, this view should be rejected. However, the final view seems to come closest to Matthew 7:21.

**Option no. 3 Interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου”
as Accepting Jesus the Messiah
as the Only Means of Righteous**

Unlike the previous view, this view interprets “τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου” as accepting Jesus the Messiah as the only means to obtain righteousness to enter the kingdom (5:20, 7:21). This view does not have as many advocates as the second view but has more followers than the first view.⁶⁶

Arguments Commending this View:

Context

Overall context. Contrary to the first view, Matthew 5:1–16 addresses believers. However, from 5:17–7:29, the unsaved seem to be the primary recipients, since 5:20 calls for righteousness beyond acceptable norms. Thus, Jesus elevates this righteous to an unattainable standard (5:28, 48). The pivotal point comes in 5:20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Perhaps, at this point Jesus turned and faced the broader ὄχλους, which Scribes and Pharisees were very much a part. Consequently, from 5:20–7:12, Jesus debunks Pharisaic righteousness, which fell short of God’s standard:

In Matthew 5:21–7:6⁶⁷ the Lord’s ministry is one of conviction....

In order to accomplish this purpose Christ, first of all, rejects the Pharisees’ *interpretation* of the law. Such is His intent in 5:21–48. In this consideration we must notice that the Lord is instructing those disciples that had come together to Him concerning what actually constitutes righteousness. The multitude was familiar with the

⁶⁶The following advocates hold to his view. However, various of them nuance their view differently than how this writer argues for in Matt 7:13-29: Dwight J. Pentecost, “The Purpose of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115 (October–December 1958): 31-18; Dwight J. Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*, ed. John Danilson and Ben Chapman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 32-33; Dwight J. Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ*, ed. Joh Danilson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981); Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works*, 216; Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, 19-25; James F. Rand, “Problems in Literal Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 112 (January–March 1955): 34; John A. Witmer, “A Review of Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (July–September 1992): 275-76; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation*, 1945 ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1917), 7, et al.

⁶⁷Pentecost divides his section in 7:6. He probably sees the prayer of 7:7-12 as being answered in 7:13-14. That is, perhaps he sees the connector “therefore” in 7:12 as referring back to the prayer in vv 7-12 (instead of the whole section 5:17–7:12) that may be found answered in the following verses vv 13-14.

standards of the Pharisees, but the Lord rejects such interpretation (v. 20), and demands righteousness on the basis of an interpretation of the law that exceeds that of the Pharisees.

[Thus, one can see]... the Lord's purpose in the whole section from 5:21–7:6 was to present the true requirements of the law as over against the Pharisaic misrepresentation of the law so that they might be brought under conviction and be brought to Him, the source of all true righteousness. No one could claim to be in His kingdom who did not possess this righteousness.⁶⁸

Immediate context. Once uneasiness and conviction⁶⁹ sets on Jesus' audience—by feeling unable to meet such standards—He narrows the possibility to one tight gate (i.e., Himself), as oppose to a spacious and broad gate (i.e., other than Himself). Thus, Pentecost aptly captures the essence of the overall and immediate context in his summary of what Jesus intended to do:

... the Lord seeks to instruct and exhort those who would be in the kingdom.... and extend an invitation to enter to those who were looking 'for the consolation of Israel.' Such our Lord does in 7:7-27. In verses 7-11 He instructs them concerning prayer; in verse 12 He instructs concerning true righteousness; in verses 13-14 He instructs concerning the way of access; in verses 15-23 He warns them against false teachers who would turn them aside from their anticipation of Messiah and His kingdom; and in verses 24-29 He exhorts them concerning the two foundations upon which they may build.

Thus we find that the Lord sought to show the multitude of disciples that the kingdom which he offered would be the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises concerning that kingdom. He shows them His own relation to the law. He speaks a lengthy word to convict the multitude of their need of Him, and closes with an invitation to enter into their hope through Himself.⁷⁰

Thus, sufficient evidence exist within the sermon by the change in content in 5:1-16 from 5:17–7:12 to suggest that one's exegetical analysis of 7:13-27 must be primarily about answering the hearers' concerns raised by the previous section beginning in 5:17: "How can one attain such righteousness needed to enter the kingdom of heaven?"

Exegetical Meaning

The meaning of εἰσέρχουμαι and ὁδός. As the objection to view two showed, Matthew has two ideas in mind in vv 13-14 placed along side each other by entering through two

⁶⁸Pentecost, "Sermon on the Mount," 314-16.

⁶⁹Arthur W. Pink, *An exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953; reprint, 1966), 66, says, "It will be found that this Sermon returns again and again to one main idea: That of awakening men to a sense of their wretchedness, and shutting them up to the righteousness of God. That object could only be obtained by a spiritual application of the Law and by enforcing its inviolable exaction: thereby alone could they be prepared to appreciate and embrace the Gospel."

⁷⁰Pentecost, "Sermon on the Mount," 317-18.

gates and traveling down two paths.⁷¹ That is, the first idea involves “entrance” (εἰσέρχονται) “by the narrow gate” resulting in immediate salvation. The second idea involves “leading a way of life that is difficult” (τεθλιμμένη ἡ ὁδὸς ἢ ἀπάγουσα) resulting in “life,” in the fullest sense of the word.

After Jesus elevates the Law to a high standard that even the scribes and Pharisees were unable to meet perfectly (cf. 5:20-48), he aims to tell people the only way to attain that righteousness that surpasses the best attempts of the rulers. The only way to attain this righteousness comes by entering through the narrow gate.

The “entrance” through the gate leaves one with the idea that one is either entering a city or perhaps as Jesus’ earlier term suggests “the kingdom of heaven,” but only by exceeding the rulers’ righteousness could this occur. Thus, if the Scribes and Pharisees were the most pious and righteous of the day and could not enter the kingdom, how could anyone else? Jesus answers it, “Enter through the narrow gate.” The only possible meaning here is that this gate is Jesus, as in John 10:9.

The Greek word used in Matt 7:13 is πύλης, but the term used in John 10:9 is θύρα. The Greek word πύλης may refer to house doors and gates or to large doors and gates such as were used in a palace, temple, or a city wall.⁷² Yet, the Greek word θύρα refers to a small opening that seems fitting in the context of John 10:1-9 since it refers to the opening of a sheep’s pen, not a city or kingdom. This may answer the different usage of Greek terms in either context. However, both terms carry the same conceptual meaning in both places because it refers *only* to Jesus as the gate/door.⁷³ Different contexts may call for a slightly different Greek wording to convey the overarching theme of the immediate contextual thrust. Luke 13:24-25 seems to refer to the same concept as Matt 7:13-23, but uses John’s word θύρα, because the contextual idea there is “house ... door” (v 25). BDAG sees both words in 7:13-14 and Luke 13:24 synonymously.⁷⁴ No doubt, Jesus refers to Himself here as possessing the complete righteousness needed, thus, being the only way leading to life. Notice these OT similarities:

LXXNKJV

<u>Ps 117:19</u> ἀνοίξατέ μοι πύλας δικαιοσύνης εἰσελθὼν ἐν αὐταῖς ἐξομολογήσομαι τῷ κυρίῳ	Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, And I will praise the LORD.
<u>Ps 117:20</u> αὕτη ἡ πύλη τοῦ κυρίου δίκαιοι εἰσελεύσονται ἐν αὐτῇ	This is the gate of the LORD, Through which the righteous shall enter.

⁷¹In Jewish and Christian literature there was a common figure illustrating two ways: Deut 30:19; Jer 21:8; Ps 1, and *Didache* 1–4; Barnabas 18–20, see A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1930), 61.

⁷²Bauer, *BDAG*, 897.

⁷³In fact, the idea here is so constricted that the term “narrow” suggests only one individual can enter at a time.

⁷⁴Bauer, *BDAG*, 897.

<p>Ps. 117:21 ἐξομολογήσομαί σοι ὅτι ἐπήκουσάς μου καὶ ἐγένου μοι εἰς σωτηρίαν</p>	<p>I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation.</p>
<p>Psa. 117:22 λίθον ὃν ἀπεδοκίμασαν οἱ οἰκοδομοῦντες οὗτος ἐγενήθη εἰς κεφαλὴν γωνίας</p>	<p>The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone.</p>

Rom 9:32; 1 Cor 1:23 and 1 Pet 2:7-8 develops in the NT the righteousness needed to enter the gates of the Lord but was rejected (cf. Isa 8:14). The NT reveals this gate to be Jesus Christ.

Grammatically, Matthew uses a second plural aorist imperative εἰσέλθατε to “enter,” for salvation “by the narrow gate.”⁷⁵ Then he switches to the linear present middle participle εἰσερχόμενο, (“entering”) for those on the ongoing road to destruction, and the linear present tenses for those on the ongoing road “leading” (ἀπάγουσα) “to life.”⁷⁶ Perhaps, making such distinctions on grammar may be wrong since present participles are contemporaneous with the main verb, which in this case it is aorist.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Wilhem Michaelis believes one should not see “gate” as entrance and “way” as a “desired goal” to be reached, but instead says, “...he who passes through the narrow gate has already entered and is at the goal.”⁷⁸ On the other hand, Frederick Dale Bruner’s critique of Michaelis quoted by Bonnard may be correct:

While I like the evangelical christocentricity of Bonnard’s exposition and believe he correctly interprets gate and the (aorist) once-for-all force of the verb to ‘enter’ (and the truth that a personal relationship with Christ precedes everything), I feel he fails to do justice to the ‘way’ in the sayings and to the (participial) continuing force of the other verbs in the sentences. Matthew’s Jesus is appealing *both* for an evangelical decision (the gate) *and* for an ethical endurance (the way). Taken together, then, the narrow gate and the tough way are simply the difficult choice for Jesus *and* the constantly challenging decisions for discipleship to him.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Gundry, *Matthew*, 126-27, understands εἰσέλθατε (“enter”) to imply salvation.

⁷⁶Ibid., 127.

⁷⁷Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 614, does not discuss this verse but defines this category.

⁷⁸Wilhem Michaelis, “ὁδός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, index compiled by Ronald E. Pitkin, trans. index compiled by Ronald E. Pitkin. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 5. 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964-76), 71.

⁷⁹Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: A Historical/Theological Commentary Matthew 1-12* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 283. He also mentions Patte, 99 to take this view, as well as believing that Ps 1 is a “perfect commentary on this Warning.” See also Constable, *Notes on Matthew*(accessed).

Furthermore, Matthew's use of ὁδὸς (road) as the way of righteousness⁸⁰ (cf. 3:3; 5:20; 7:13-14, 24-27; 21:32; 22:16) makes an even better argument of understanding vv 13-14 to be stressing a dual concept of entering and traveling that are related but distinguished. As mentioned above, ὁδὸς compares to the term "*Halakah*," in Judaism that literally means, "to walk," which was indeed God's will equated with Torah involving correct ethical behavior⁸¹ as the way of life.⁸²

The relationship between vv 15-20 and vv 21-27. Verses 13-14 seem to connect with vv 15-20 by way of developing the identity of the false-prophets that lead people through the wide gate ending in destruction. On the other hand, it also seems to contrast the true prophet, who is Jesus, to the false-prophets, which could be the rulers. This gate is wide in the sense of trying to enter by many other avenues other than Jesus. Furthermore, many false prophets come teaching other avenues of eternal life as 7:15-23 develops.

False Prophets are in view in this section, perhaps Pharisees who were in the crowd (cf. 3:7, 10),⁸³ not Christians in general.⁸⁴ Hence, one needs to ask what are the fruits of false prophets as developed in the OT. Since the term ἐπιγινώσκω ("You will know") means *to acquire exact information in a detail and full form*, one may absolutely recognize them by their fruits.⁸⁵

⁸⁰France, *Matthew*, 267, says, "Matthew's use of δικαιοσύνη then, is with reference to right living; it is not like Paul's use, an indication of his belief that salvation is the gift of God... For, even if he does not use this term to express the idea, Matthew does believe that salvation is a gift from God."

⁸¹Court and Court, *NT*, 256.

⁸²Luomanen, *Matthew's View of Salvation*, 93, sees "the way of life characterized in Jesus' teaching in the middle section and summarized by the Golden Rule is to be identified with the 'narrow gate and hard way that leads to life.'" He also connects it with contents mentioned in v 24ff. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 204, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 186. He says, "In Jewish writings, it [ὁδὸς] was a metaphor for how one lives, one's loyalties and practices (Deut 11:26; 30:15-20; Josh 24:15; Ps 1:6; Jer 21:8-10; Wis 5:7; Sir 15:14-17; *T. Ash.* 1:3-5:4; *T. Abr.* 11-12 perhaps dependent on Matt 7:13-14)."

⁸³Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 20 vols., vol. 1 (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance Press, 1976), 539, says, "Jesus is thrusting at the Pharisees again, some of whom were in His audience." The Messiah picks up where the Baptist left off in debunking the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Matt 3:7-10; 23). See also Pentecost, *The Life of Christ*, 186-88, who believes Jesus contrasted His way to the way of the Pharisees that were present.

⁸⁴Bing, "Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response", 41, understands "the subject of the passage is false prophets... not prophesying Christians in general." For an opposite view see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 702, believes these are "professing Christians."

⁸⁵Louw and Nida computer version. Also see Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 16, 2 Cor 6:9 and Yeager, *Renaissance*, 540.

Two places develop how to discern between a false and a true prophet, Deut 13:1-5 (performs signs but teaches and does contrary to the law) and 18:20-22 (pays attention to the law but tries to perform prophetic signs that do not come to pass).⁸⁶ The fruits of a prophets are then doctrine⁸⁷ and duty that follow as a result of the teaching and signs performed that comes to pass 100% of the time.

One needs to then ask, “What are the particular doctrine or wrongdoings that will set apart these false prophets from true ones?” The teaching that Jesus Christ is the only way to God is the doctrine/fruit that God wants from His prophets or workers that are the fruits of a true prophet. However, the fruits of a false prophet can be distinguished by *rejecting* Jesus Christ,⁸⁸ as seen in other places in Matthew 12:22-50 and 21:21-43, and denying His coming in the flesh, thus being the only way to God (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7).

It is possible that bad fruit refers to the corrupt life style that exposes these false prophets. However, as Charlie C. Bing points out: “Strictly speaking, the test in 7:15-20 is not for discerning true salvation but for discerning whether a prophet is of God.”⁸⁹ Nothing in the context of vv 15-23 suggest they committed sins. In fact, James E. Davison believes the opposite. Their external garb (sheep clothing) to the human eye may look like good works.⁹⁰ Their claim on works and their success in accomplishing (v 22) also supports this conclusion. Davison says, “There is nothing that suggests an antinomian attitude; rather the group appears to display a laxity about the call to righteousness inherent in the gospel.”⁹¹ However, since they do not trust in Christ as the only means of righteousness to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt

⁸⁶Other passages that speaks of false prophets are Jer 6:13-15; 8:8-12; Ezek 13; 22:27; Zep 3:4. See also Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 197-98; Margaret Davies, *Matthew*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 66-67, believes this is primarily addressing OT prophets, but can equally be very significant to Christians today.

⁸⁷R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 301. He understands commentators are divided on whether the fruits of false prophets are doctrine, works, or both. He believes that “the fruits of a false prophet are undoubtedly the doctrines he teaches. The fact that his own personal works are not the criterion by which we can without fail judge him is established by 24:24 (‘great signs and wonders’); Deut. 13:1-3 (to the same effect); Matt. 23:1-3 (we are to observe what the scribes and Pharisees bid us do, not what they themselves do).”

⁸⁸Bruner, *Matthew 1–12*, 284.

⁸⁹Bing, “Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response”, 41.

⁹⁰Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 197, comes to this same conclusion: “In Mt. 7 their life-style outwardly seems to indicate they are Christians. They are called sheep; they look like Christians; they perform miraculous works in Jesus’ name. They do some of the works that Christians do. Therefore, the reason that Jesus ‘never knew them’ is not that their outward behavior is corrupt.” It is because they have not done the will of the Father, which he understands is “to believe in Him” John 6:40.

⁹¹Davison, “Anomia and Antinomian in Matthew,” 628. See also Witmer, “Review of Wrongly Dividing the Word,” 275-76. For a contrary point of view see W. Clyde Tilley, “Matthew 7:13-27,” *Review and Expositor* 89 (Spring 1992): 274-76. However, Tilley qualifies his *strong* point of view that argues for works as an evidence of one’s true faith by saying: “Thus it is not doing, as such, that has been rejected, only doing that is not rooted in being and so attempts to make it on its own as a substitute for authentic being.”

5:20, 7:13-14), by default they remain in their corrupt sins. Hence if they teach incorrect doctrine, they do incorrect things.⁹² Thus, they remain in their sins (John 8:21, 24; 9:41) when they face the Judge. Good fruit, trees and fire (referring to judgment) are all terms present in Matt 3:7, 10, when John the Baptist confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees. Perhaps, vv 15-20 refers to these rulers.

Finally, what 7:21-29 simply teaches is building on the right foundation. This foundation is none other than believing in Jesus Christ. If He is the foundation, then it will never falter. Jesus is the rock (Matt 16:18; Eph 2:20; 1 Peter 2:8). Thus, rejecting (i.e., to believe,) to build on this rock but on sand will result in destruction (vv 14, 25-29). However, according to Zane C. Hodges vv 24-27 does not exclude the disciples who by faith entered the gate, but there were equally sobering truths to be learned. How the disciples build will depend on what foundation they use and how they follow Jesus.⁹³ Thus, the phrase “whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them” unites both concepts taught here and in the entire Sermon on the Mount: *to have faith in Jesus* (by doing the will of the Father) *and follow Him* (by deciding to build on the proper foundation). Of course, these are related but distinct concepts.

Although Michael Green holds to view two, his understanding of the Sermon’s conclusion is correct: “. . .he [Jesus] says that there are two ways we can build (7:24-27). Not many ways, just two. We can either build on him and his teaching, which we will find is solid as rock; or else we can build on any other religion or philosophy in the world, and we will find that it is sand, and in the last day it will spell ruin.”⁹⁴

The meaning of γινώσκω in 7:23. A lack of personal relationship has been firmly established as the meaning of γινώσκω here. This renunciation expresses an equivalent concept of “I never recognized you as my own,”⁹⁵ since those “who practice lawlessness” never solely believed in Jesus for eternal life but tried to earn it by pointing to their works (7:22). That is why they are classified as those *who practice lawlessness*, because they were counting on their works; and before God’s righteous judgment, works count for nothing (Isa 64:6; Rom 3:20-21; 4:2-3; Eph 2:8-9) only those who believe in Christ (Rom 3:22-31).

⁹²Bing, “Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response”, 41, fn 137, suggests, “That words are the fruits spoken of in Matthew 12:33-37 is quite clear when the subject of the entire context is considered (especially verses 31-32).” However, as he also points out Hodges argues from 12:33-37 that the fruits of 7:20 is strictly “words,” i.e., doctrine, see Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, 15. Yet, as Bing, and this writer acknowledges by other passages, its clear that Scripture declares “fruits” can include works: Matt 3:8; 13:23; Luke 8:14-15; John 15:2-8, 16). However, Bing says, “While it may be admitted that the primary test of a false prophet in the Old Testament was his words (Deut. 13:1-6; 18:20-22), the New Testament distinguishes false prophets by both words and works (2 Pet. 2:1-3, 10, 12-15, 18-19; Jude 4, 8-11, 16).” Two things are incorrect with Bing’s final analysis. First, in Deut 13:1-6, disobedience of the law is works, which is predominantly the point which the prophet and the people are in danger of doing. Second, Matt 7:15-20 is *not* part of the NT prophets even if one concedes the last point. It still falls under the OT prophets. Such distinctions seem superficial. Of course, in a given context words may be the only point of referent.

⁹³Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, 24.

⁹⁴Green, *Matthew for Today*, 91.

⁹⁵Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 717.

Parallel passages. Other passages in Matthew also suggest the same thing. Matthew 12:50 seems to suggest one achieves the Father's will by becoming part of Jesus' spiritual family that comes by believing in Jesus as the Messiah, contrasted to His earthly family (except His mother of course; cf. John 7:5) that like the rulers had rejected Him (12:22-49). The other context where "the will of the Father" is developed as believing in Messiah (21:31-32) shows the Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah (21:21-46). The will of his Father, clearly, is to believe as the previous v 25 and the following v 32 suggests, as well as the opposite show that "unbelief" or rejection of Christ is the concept in vv 23, 25, 30, 41-44. Thus, one may define "fruit" (vv 34, 43)—which the Jews should have accepted—as the doctrinal truth that teaches belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

Similar terms and concepts of "fruits," "will of the Father" and "prophet" appear in 7:15-21 as in Matt 21:23-46. If one allows seeing what Matthew teaches in 7:13-29 to be paralleled to what He teaches in 21:23-46, rejecting or accepting Jesus defines "the will of the Father," as being the sole condition that allows entrance in the kingdom. Thus, the connection of the "wide gate" leading to destruction that many enter are *other* avenues—than simply *just* believing that Jesus is the Messiah—that false prophets teach as ways of attaining the kingdom/eternal life as 7:15-23 develops.

In John 6:40 it has already been seen the very phrase τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου refers to believing in Jesus for eternal life. At one point some one asked Jesus, "What shall we do [ποιέω], that we may work the works of God?" He answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:28b, 29b).

Thus, believing in Jesus is the sole condition needed to "enter the kingdom of heaven."⁹⁶ Many commentators have also made the connection that "the will of my Father" refers to believing in Christ. Robert N. Wilkin says, "This is merely a variation of obeying the gospel," (i.e., to obey the Father's will is to believe as 1 Peter 2:7).⁹⁷ James F. Rand says, "Not by works of righteousness will men enter the kingdom but on the basis of their knowledge of the Messiah (Zech 12:10)."⁹⁸ Lewis Sperry Chaffer also understood the Father's will in Matt 7:21 to refer to believing in Christ.⁹⁹

The interpretation of "τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου" here should be understood as believing in Messiah, or as John W. Robinson said, "he who does the will of My Father in Heaven," is equivalent to *believing the gospel*.¹⁰⁰ However, 7:13-14, 24-27 also includes discipleship, but should *not* be confused, merged or used as a fruit inspecting tool for validating an individuals eternal status. Only God has the sole right to do that. We do not have an objective

⁹⁶Constable, *Notes on Matthew*, 114, says, "During Jesus' ministry doing the will of God boiled down to believing that Jesus was the Messiah and responding appropriately (John 6:29)."

⁹⁷Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works*, 216.

⁹⁸Rand, "Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount," 34.

⁹⁹Chaffer, *Salvation*, 7.

¹⁰⁰John W. Robinson, "Justification and Judgment," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 28 (Spring 2002): 74.

mechanism to validate the mind. However, the objective mechanism of Scripture teaches that *those who enter through the narrow gate* are those that *do the will of the Father* (7:13-14, 21), defined contextually in Matthew 12:50 and 21:31-32, as those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah in contrast to those who reject Him as Messiah (cf. 12:22-49; 21:21-46). Hence, John 6:40 says:

“For this is **the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life**; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (NASB)

Arguments Opposing this View

Objection and Answer

First, a distinction between “gate” and “way” seems superficial and pressed. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison suggests, “[That]... ‘gate’ and ‘way’ seem to function synonymously. They are, in a sense, set not one before the other but side by side.” This may be true. Yet, three observations may argue for seeing a distinction: obedience is very much a part of the Sermon of the Mount for the disciples (5:1-16) as well as a tool used for pre-evangelism since no one can obey perfectly all of the commands and thereby showing the inadequacy of human righteousness (5:20; cf. 5:17–7:12). Second, something commonly overlooked, Jesus is still preaching the gospel of the kingdom, which involves repenting and believing (Mark 1:15). Since the sermon occurs at the inception of His ministry and His audience is predominantly Jewish, which at this point He was exclusively devoted to reaching (cf. Matt 10:5; 15:22-28), He continues to present the kingdom and its conditions predicated on faith in Messiah. Matthew 21:32 teaches believing in the Messiah where it is defined as the Father’s will shown through the obedient son in v 31. Third, the concept of “way” linked to Torah as the way to God is so steeped into OT thought and Judaism that its possible Jesus refers to Himself *not* only as the way to enter the kingdom but also as the way showing people *how*¹⁰¹ to have fellowship with God as the entire context of the sermon on the mount seems to suggest; but the latter concept should not be confused as defining the *Father’s will* in the immediate context of 7:21 since whenever *entering the kingdom* is discussed it always appears conditioned by a *righteousness* that surpasses that of the leaders conditioned on childlike faith alone in Christ (Matt 18:4, 10, 14).

Objection and Answer

Second, Matthew does not seem to support “believing in Jesus as the sole condition to “enter the kingdom of heaven” as the will of the Father. It seems the Father’s will defined as *believing in Jesus* appears only in John 6:40. However, the concept of the Father’s will related to “little ones” (Matt 18:4, 10, 14) not perishing is very much a conceptual way of understand His will in redemption terms as in John 6:40.¹⁰² Matthew 12:50 suggest one achieves the Father’s

¹⁰¹Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 699, says, “Matthew’s τῆ, which adverbial, bears the sense of ‘how’ (cf. *māh*), as in Lk 12:49, an is Semitic.” Although he thinks “‘Life’, a word commonly part of two-way passages, [it] means in our text ‘eternal life,’ the life of the kingdom of God. Compare 1QS 4:7; Ps. Sol. 9:5 (‘life’ opposed to ‘destruction’).” While this may be true, it seems that the life of the kingdom is what Jesus is preaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which involves behavior.

¹⁰²Lightner, “The Father”, 28, says “... this aspect of God’s work for the redeemed [is developed] in two central passages, Matthew 18:14 and John 6:39-40. In both passages the determinative will of God is that those

will by becoming part of Jesus' spiritual family, since it is contrasted to His earthly family. Hence rejecting or believing Jesus as the Christ appears as the main thrust contextually as the Father's will (12:22-50), for those of national (Israel) and biological (immediate family) kinship are not the ones forming His spiritual family but only those who have already believed in Him. In Matthew 21:31-32 "believe" in Messiah is indeed contextually defined as the Father's will.

Conclusion

The three possible interpretations of "τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου" set forth in this paper were: 1) One option interprets "τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου" as applying to believers' faithful response to the Father's commands. 2) A second option understands "τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου" as a distinguishing marker setting apart false-professors from faithful-possessors demonstrated by one's obedience to the Father's commands (i.e., "will"). 3) A third option interprets "τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου" as a marker of accepting Jesus the Messiah as the only way to become righteous, which should result in righteous living.

The biggest weakness to view one lays in a plethora of exegetical assumptions. The context argues against it because the major part of the Sermon of the Mount addresses the unsaved to which the view those not account for.

Although view two ought to be commended for its strong stand on discipleship and obedience to God's commands, it should be rejected for two major reasons: 1) it fails to consider the Matthean Israelite context, therefore, it immediately bridges the meaning to contemporary Christianity without considering the *Sitz im Leben*. Of course, this is a general statement, for some do consider the historical Matthean context and interpret it as such. 2) The most severe fault of view two comes by its forced-theological-grid imposed on the text by interpreting it as written to validate a person's salvation.

Finally, view three has much more to commend it since it seeks to validate both points touched by Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount (i.e., justification for the unbeliever and sanctification for the believer). Jesus keeps these two points at hand (i.e., justification and sanctification) that are related but distinguished, since He was still offering the messianic kingdom to Israel. Furthermore, it seeks to solve the problem of the Father's will and entering the kingdom of heaven in contradistinction with other texts by giving maximum weight to the historical context, *but not* in contradiction with other texts that teaches entrance in the kingdom by faith alone in Christ alone. Thus, one may ask, "What does "τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου" mean in Matt 7:21? To believe in Christ for eternal life is the will of the Father. Hence Pentecost concludes: "When the kingdom is instituted, as it most surely will be in spite of Pharisaic opposition to the King, many will come and seek admission *but only those who put faith in the person of Christ will be accepted.*"¹⁰³

given to the Saviour should be redeemed." Also, John M. King, *The Theology of Christ's Teaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), 53, says, "It is the uniform testimony of Scripture, that it is God's will in the strong sense of the term, the sense in which will is the equivalent of act, that all who believe on Christ should attain eternal life."

¹⁰³Pentecost, *The Life of Christ*, 188. Italics added for emphasis.

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