

Misunderstanding "I Never Knew You"

Summary

Matthew 7, when decoded through the Greek word γινώσκω (*ginoōskō*), reveals the hidden meaning of "I never knew you" as a map of absent inner communion rather than divine rejection. In this verse-by-verse walk-through of Matthew 7:22–23, we trace the Greek word *ginoōskō*, which conveys intimate, experiential knowing, back to Genesis 4:1, where the same word describes the most complete act of mutual self-disclosure between two human beings. We also decode ἀνομία (*anomia*), the compound word translated "iniquity" that literally means "without inner law," and ὁμολογέω (*homologeō*), the word translated "profess" that means "to say the same word as reality."

The passage sits at the climax of the Sermon on the Mount, which opens with inner states in the Beatitudes and closes here with the absence of inner knowing. In this reading, the entire sermon traces an arc from inner poverty of spirit to inner absence of *ginoōskō*. What tradition frames as a scene of punishment points to something far more personal.

Unfortunately, tradition has reduced this passage to an outward scene of divine gatekeeping, a courtroom where souls are either sentenced or admitted. But the Greek tells a different story. The word *ginoōskō*, translated "knew," conveys an intimate, experiential encounter and is the same word the Septuagint uses for Adam knowing Eve in Genesis 4:1. Matthew deliberately chose *ginoōskō* over οἶδα (*oida*), the word for cognitive knowing he used in the nearly identical rejection scene of the ten virgins in chapter 25. The word *anomia*, translated "iniquity," corresponds in this reading to the condition of operating without an indwelling principle. *Homologeō*, translated "profess," literally means "to say the same word" and points to a public disclosure of what was always the inner reality. The Sermon on the Mount opens with the Beatitudes, descriptions of inner states, and closes with the total absence of inner knowing despite maximal outer performance. In this reading, the passage maps the gap between religious activity performed in the name and the intimate, experiential communion that constitutes an actual relationship.

An Examination of the Passage

The word your English Bible translates as "knew" in "I never knew you" is the same word the Greek Bible uses when a man lies with his wife. This is not a metaphor; it is Matthew 7:23. The word appears 222 times in the New Testament. Again and again, it conveys an experiential, personal encounter. Not mere awareness or bare recognition, but Communion.

Since Jesus had a perfectly normal Greek word for simple awareness, one He uses in other gospels for the exact same type of rejection scene, why did He choose this word instead? The phrase your translation renders as "workers of iniquity" at the end of that verse is not a generic term for sin at all. It is a compound that literally means "without inner law."

We are going to walk through the Greek of Matthew 7:22–23, verse by verse. We will examine what *ginoōskō* actually conveys. We will trace it from Genesis 4:1 to John 17:3 to explain why the word translated "profess" literally means "to say the same word."

The scene opens in Matthew 7:22, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name done many wonderful works." Notice the doubling: κύριος, κύριος (Lord, Lord). That is not casual. In Hebrew literary tradition, doubling a name signals urgency and intensity, as in:

- Abraham, Abraham in Genesis 22.
- Moses, Moses in Exodus 3.
- Martha, Martha in Luke 10.
- Simon, Simon in Luke 22.

Whenever a name is repeated in Scripture, the speaker is desperate and sincere. These people are not faking it; they mean every word. Notice the repetition. "In your name" appears three times. 1) Prophesied in your name, 2) Cast out demons in your name, 3) Done many wonderful works in your name. There are three external credentials and three public performances.

Also, notice what the text does not do. It does not deny any of their claims. They really did prophesy. They really did cast out demons. They really did perform mighty works. The Greek word for "mighty works" is *δύναμις* (*dunamis*). It is the root of dynamite, dynamic, and dynasty. These are not minor miracles. They are the highest tier of charismatic spiritual performance. And the text says they actually happened.

Verse 21 sets up the split before the rejection even arrives: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father." The word "says" is *λέγω* (*legō*), denoting external speech. The hinge word is *ποιέω*, "does." *Poieō* means "to make, to produce, to bring into being." The split between external speech and internal reality is already embedded in the verse before Jesus ever says, "I never knew you."

As noted above, "In your name" is repeated three times, while "knew" appears only once. The ratio is the point. One doubled address, three credentials, and three "in your name" claims. All of it is external. And the response is a single Greek verb that they never examined. They doubled the address, listed three credentials, and repeated "in your name" three times. All of these are external actions.

Before we take a close look at the word translated "knew," consider the last phrase in verse 23. Depart from me, you who work iniquity. Your English says "iniquity." That sounds like a generic term for sin, something vague that covers all wrongdoing. However, the Greek is far more precise. The word is *anomia*. This is a compound word. Alpha privative plus *nomos*. The

alpha privative is the Greek prefix that negates a word. Think of it like the English "a" in "amoral" or "atypical." It cancels what follows. Nomos means law, inner principle, or the governing order within something. Thus, anomia does not mean sin or wrongdoing; it literally means "without law," without an inner principle and without an indwelling order that governs from within.

Now look at the verb attached to it. "You who work iniquity." The Greek word for "work" here is ἐργάζομαι (ergazomai). It is in the present participle. The phrase is οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι (hoi ergazomenoi), meaning "The ones continually working." Not "the ones who once committed." The ones whose ongoing, active, daily occupation is this condition. This does not describe a mistake someone made; it describes a habit someone practices. These are people whose vocation is to operate without an inner ordering principle. The verb's middle voice makes it reflexive. They are doing this to themselves. Lawlessness is their lifestyle, not a momentary lapse of self-control.

First John 3:4 confirms the weight. The verse reads, "Sin **IS** anomia." John does not say sin leads to anomia or that it resembles anomia. He presents it as an identity statement. Fundamentally, sin is the condition of being without inner law. Matthew uses the same word again in chapter 23:28 to describe the Pharisees. They are full of hypocrisy and anomia. Their external compliance is perfect, and their internal emptiness is total. The same diagnosis applies to the most religiously impressive people in Jerusalem.

You know this state. You have gone through entire seasons when every practice was in place, every prayer was on schedule, and every worship service was attended. But underneath it all, there was no inner principle actually driving any of it. You were performing the forms of something that had no inner engine. The motions were correct, but the center was absent. That is the condition that anomia names. It's not bad behavior; it's an absence of inner life.

Anomia reveals one's inner state of operating without a governing center. The passage reads like spiritual automation: activity without inner presence; motion without awareness. The machinery of devotion runs on its own, with no one at the wheel. Anomia is the diagnosis.

But the word that carries the real weight in this verse is not "iniquity." It is "knew." Interestingly, the Greek word Jesus chose for "knew" is not the one he used in the other "I don't know you" scene. There are two Greek words for "know." Matthew chose each deliberately. Before we reach "knew," there is a word in the first half of verse 23 that almost everyone skips: "Then I will profess unto them." Your English says "profess." That sounds like a declaration, like a judge reading a sentence.

However, the Greek says something that shifts the entire frame of this passage from punishment to disclosure. The word is ὁμολογέω (homologeō). This compound word is extraordinary. Homos means "same." Logos means "word." Thus, homologeō literally means "to say the same word, to speak in agreement with what is already real, to publicly voice what already exists as truth." Here is where the irony cuts deep.

This is the same word used to confess Christ. Romans 10:9 states, "If you homologeō with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart, you will be saved." First John 4:2 says, "Every spirit that homologeō's that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." The word believers use to profess their faith is the same word Jesus used to declare the absence of a relationship.

The confession word becomes the verdict word. "Then I will homologeō to them." Then I will publicly declare in agreement with reality. Then I will speak the same word that has always been the truth beneath the performance. Then I will make the invisible visible. This is not a sentencing; it is a disclosure. Jesus is not rendering a new verdict; rather, He is making public what has always been the case.

You have experienced that moment. Someone finally says out loud what everyone already knew was true: a relationship that had been over for months, a job that had been wrong for years, or a commitment that had no inner life behind it for longer than anyone wanted to admit. The pain you felt was not in the words themselves; it was in recognizing that the reality behind them had been there all along. Nobody created anything new by speaking; they simply exposed the existing truth by making an audible statement. That is what homologeō does in this verse. It's not a new judgment; it's just a public voicing of what was always the inner reality.

Now look at what follows homologeō. The Greek reads οὐδέποτε ἔγνω ὑμᾶς (oudepote egnōn hymas). "Never at any point did I experientially know you." Oudepote is the strongest negative temporal word available! It doesn't mean "no longer" or "I stopped." It means "Never, At no point, zero times." The aorist tense of egnōn does not describe a soured relationship; it describes a relationship that never formed. The connection did not break; **it never existed.**

Also, the word for "knew" is not generic. It is so specific, so loaded, that it rewrites the entire verse the moment you see what it actually means. But first, you need to see what it is not. Because Matthew used a different word for "know" in a nearly identical scene. And that difference is the receipt that locks everything. This is the peak of the passage. Everything builds to this word.

The Word Mistranslated As "Knew"

Your English Bible says, "I never knew you." The word "knew" sounds cognitive; it suggests awareness, as if God is saying, "I was not aware of your existence." Or maybe, "I did not recognize you when you approached." Either way, it reads as informational. A fact about perception.

The Greek demolishes that reading. The word is ginoōskō. It appears 222 times in the New Testament, and its core orientation is not cognitive awareness but an experiential encounter, meaning to come to know through direct personal experience, to know intimately and relationally through mutual participation in another person's reality.

Greek has a perfectly good word for cognitive knowing: oida, meaning “to see with the mind's eye, to perceive mentally, to understand through intellectual apprehension.” Think of it this way. In German, there are two words for "know." Wissen means to know a fact. Kennen means to know a person. For example, you wissen that Berlin is the capital of Germany, but you kennen your mother. The two words describe completely different mental operations. Ginoōskō = kennen, and oida = wissen.

And here is what locks it. The parable of the ten virgins appears in Matthew 25:12. The bridegroom arrives at midnight and says to the foolish virgins, "But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you'" (NASB). This is the same gospel, written by the same author, describing the same type of rejection scene. But the word is oida, not ginoōskō.

Matthew uses ginoōskō in 7:23 and oida in 25:12. Two distinct rejection scenes. He deliberately uses two different Greek words. Ginoōskō denotes firsthand experiential knowledge. In 25:24, a servant says, "I knew you were a hard man," using ginoōskō to express direct knowledge of the master's character. That is the word's territory. Not abstract facts, but knowledge gained through direct personal encounter. And that is exactly what makes its negation in 7:23 so devastating. "I never, at any point, had that experiential encounter with you." That is not an accident. That is a choice.

But this is where the floor drops. Open your Septuagint to Genesis 4:1, "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived." The Septuagint translators chose the Greek word ginoōskō for "knew" in that verse. The Hebrew behind it is יָדָע (yada). This word appears 946 times in the Old Testament. Over 490 of those occurrences are rendered as ginoōskō in the Greek Septuagint. These two words are functionally the same word in two languages. When Genesis says Adam "knew" Eve, it describes the most complete, most vulnerable, most intimate act of mutual self-disclosure between two human beings. Every wall is down. Every defense is removed. It is a total mutual presence.

And that is the word in Matthew 7:23. "I never ginoōskō'd you." Not "I was unaware of you." Not "I did not have information about you." Rather, "there was never intimate, experiential, mutual communion between us." You operated in my name. You used my authority. You performed under my banner. But ginoōskō never occurred.

You have probably experienced this difference in your own life. You know people you have information about and people you have communion with. You can recite facts about someone, know their birthday, job, and history: that is oida. You can also sit across from someone in total presence, where no facts are needed because something deeper than information is exchanged: that is ginoōskō. The passage says there was never ginoōskō, not that there was never oida.

John 17:3 takes it further. Jesus prays, "This is eternal life, that they ginoōskō you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life is not a destination you arrive at. Neither is it something you earn as a reward. It is defined as ginoōskō, an intimate, experiential knowing of the divine. The same word.

And Jeremiah 1:5 in the Hebrew reads, "Before I formed you in the womb I yada'd you." God's knowing of Jeremiah before birth is not mere awareness. It is a covenantal, intimate, elective choosing. The same word family carries the same weight and depth. In this reading, ginoōskō describes the inner experience of communion rather than performance, presence rather than presentation. The passage does not describe divine gatekeeping; it describes the total absence of mutual inner knowing despite maximal outward religious activity. The people in the passage are not being rejected for doing evil things. They are being told that despite doing impressive right things, the one thing that matters, ginoōskō, never occurred.

Ginoōskō rewrites the entire verse, but it also rewrites the entire sermon. The Sermon on the Mount does not start with rules; it begins with the Beatitudes, the inner states. And it ends here, with ginoōskō. The question is whether that arc is a coincidence or whether Matthew built it on purpose. The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is an inner state, not a command, not a rule, and not an action item. It is a description of an interior condition.

And it is the first thing Jesus says in the longest continuous teaching in the Gospels. He opens by describing the inside. Every chapter that follows moves the teaching further inward.

- Murder becomes anger in 5:22.
- Adultery becomes lust in 5:28.
- Public prayer is replaced by the secret room in 6:6.
- Fasting becomes invisible in 6:18.
- Anxiety is replaced by trust in 6:25–34.

The Lord's Prayer lies at the thematic heart of the sermon in 6:9–13. The most inward act of all is at the center of the teaching.

The entire sermon systematically relocates every external ethical command within the human being. And then it arrives here, at Matthew 7:22–23. People who performed spectacular external religious acts: prophecy, exorcism, and dunamis (mighty works). The maximum possible resume of outward spiritual accomplishment. And the response is not "you did the wrong things." The response is "I never ginoōskō'd you."

The sermon opens with an inner state that grants access to the kingdom, but it closes with an inner absence that results in exclusion from the kingdom. That is not a random arrangement. That is architecture. Matthew 7:15 is the hinge of the structure: "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." The word translated as "inwardly" is ἔσωθεν (esōthen), the same root as "esoteric."

The sermon has been building toward the inner-versus-outer split for 12 verses before "I never knew you" arrives. The fruit test in 7:16–20 teaches that what grows outward reveals what exists inwardly. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. The outward is an index of the inward. Then 7:22–23 presents the most extreme and disorienting case. People whose outward fruit appears spectacular, such as prophecy, exorcism, and miracles, but whose

inner reality is anomia: having no inner law and no indwelling principle. The outer and inner are in total contradiction.

Now watch the threads converge. When anomia is decoded, we see it is the condition of operating without an inner principle; *homologeō* is the public declaration of what was always true, and *ginoōskō* is the intimate experiential knowing that never occurred. All three words converge in two verses at the climax of the longest sermon in the Gospels. The resulting diagnosis is anomia; the mechanism is *homologeō*; the absence named is *ginoōskō*.

And the very next passage is the wise and foolish builders. In Matthew 7:24–27, one hears and does; the other hears only. Doing without the inner *ginoōskō* is the anomia the passage names. Hearing without inner transformation is the exact absence the entire sermon has been constructing since the Beatitudes.

You have read the Sermon on the Mount as a list of moral instructions; most of us have. But the text traces an arc from inner poverty of spirit in chapter 5 to inner absence of knowing in chapter 7. The moment you see that arc, the Beatitudes stop being nice sayings and become a precise map of everything 7:22–23 says was missing.

Early church readers, including Augustine, recognized that this passage suggests a mutual lack of knowing. "I never knew you" implies "you never knew me." The passage is not about a door being slammed; it is about a door that was never opened from the inside. Not a verdict imposed from above but a reality revealed from within.

The passage says the problem was never the outer works. The problem was the absence of *ginoōskō*. You do not fix that by adding more outer works. You begin by letting the absence be visible. The text shows people who performed without knowing, and the gap between your own performance and your own knowing. Not to condemn it; just to expose it.

That is Matthew 7:22–23 in the Greek. The word was never about awareness; it was always about communion. The question the text leaves you with is not "did you do enough?" It is "was there ever *ginoōskō*, or only performance?" If this changes how you hear "I never knew you," sit with it. The text has been waiting for you to recognize what it truly says.