

"Depart From Me"

Who Was Jesus Actually Talking To?

Introduction

"I never knew you" — Matthew 7:23 — may be the most feared verse in the New Testament. But who was Jesus actually addressing? The context, the Greek, and the grammar point to a far more specific audience than the traditional reading allows. For centuries, this verse has been preached in isolation — pulled from the Sermon on the Mount and used as a universal anxiety warning. But Matthew placed it as the climax of a warning against false prophets (7:15–20), and the speakers in verse 22 do not plead — they present credentials. The Greek word behind "knew" is γινώσκω (*ginōskō*), which conveys a relational, intimate sense far deeper than simple recognition. Combined with οὐδέποτε (*oudepote*), meaning "never at any point," the verse does not describe a relationship that was lost. It describes one that never existed. The word behind "iniquity" is ἀνομία (*anomia*), meaning without-law or without-authority — not general sinfulness. This reading does not soften the warning. It sharpens it to its intended target.

Matthew 7:23 uses *ginōskō*—the same word Jesus uses in John 10:14 for mutual, intimate knowing between shepherd and sheep, and the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 8:3 and Galatians 4:9 for being "known by God" through love. The *oudepote* ("never at any point") makes the negation absolute: there was never a relational connection. The people in this passage defend themselves with three power credentials—prophecy, exorcism, miracles—repeated three times "in your name," yet never mention love, the Father's will, or transformation. Jesus calls them workers of τὴν ἀνομίαν (*tān anomian*), THE lawlessness—using an articular present participle that marks this as a habitual, defining pattern. The KJV renders *anomia* as "iniquity," flattening a structural term into a general term for sin and widening the target. Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, read this passage as targeting gifted religious leaders who lacked virtue rather than anxious, sincere believers. The warning stands, but it stands where the text places it.

An Examination of the Text

There is a verse that follows people home from church—a verse that lingers at the edge of prayer and never fully goes away. Jesus said, "Depart from me. I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). This may be the most feared sentence in the New Testament. What if you do everything right—and He still turns you away? Yet almost no one asks the harder question about this passage: not what it means, but who Jesus is actually addressing. Fortunately, the text answers

that question. When it does, the warning does not disappear; it becomes sharper. But it may also become something the anxious believer has never been allowed to hear—precise.

Before we look at the Greek or the context, let's first see what these rejected people actually say. Verse 22 says, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works?" Notice what they are *doing*. They are not begging, confessing, or weeping. They are presenting a résumé!

They provide three instances in which they claim to be doing things "in your name." Prophecy, Exorcism, and Miracles. But notice three things they never mention:

1. They never speak of love;
2. They never mention the Father's will;
3. They never describe having a relationship, a transformation, or an inner change of heart.

Their entire defense is built on performance, saying "Look at what *I did*," rather than "Look at *who I became*."

This is not the profile of a frightened believer. This is the profile of a religious operator — someone who built an identity on spiritual credentials. Notice that Jesus does not question whether their credentials were real. He does not say, "You never prophesied." He does not say, "Those miracles were fake." He says something far more unsettling: their relationship with Him never existed. These people did not appear out of nowhere in the Sermon on the Mount. They came from somewhere in the text. And that is the part of the passage almost everyone skips.

This passage comes directly before "I never knew you." Matthew 7:15–16, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (NASB). This is not a separate topic; there is no paragraph break, no change of audience, or shift in subject. Jesus moves from false prophets, wolves dressed as sheep, known by their fruit, directly into verse twenty-one, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord." Notice the test Jesus gives for identifying these false prophets: not their doctrine, not their success, but their fruit. "You will know them by their fruits." A good tree bears good fruit; a corrupt tree bears corrupt fruit. The test is not whether they perform impressive works. The test is what those works produce—what kind of life grows from them.

Look again at their list of accomplishments in verse 22. Prophecy. Exorcism. Miracles. These are indeed impressive works. Yet they are not fruit. They are credentials; they are résumé lines. The false prophets of verse fifteen and the "Lord, Lord" speakers of verse 21 share the same condition—outward religious power with no inner transformation to show for it. When this verse is preached in isolation or out of context—pulled from the sermon or quoted alone—it sounds like a universal threat. It could apply to any believer, anywhere, who hears these words.

We need to remember that Matthew did not write this in isolation. He placed it as the climax of a warning against false prophets. The people who say "Lord, Lord" in verse 21 are the wolves in sheep's clothing from verse 15. The subject was there all along. It was lost only when the passage was removed from its context. The inherited reading treats these verses as a warning to

every anxious believer. The text presents them as the unmasking of religious impostors—people who wielded power in Jesus' name yet were never transformed by it.

This is where the Greek matters. Jesus does not simply say, "I reject you." He says something more specific. He says, "I never knew you." And the word behind "knew" is not the one you might expect. The word translated "knew" in Matthew 7:23 is *ginōskō*, the most common Greek word for knowing. Unfortunately, English collapses its full range of meaning. In everyday use, *ginōskō* can mean "to learn, to perceive, to understand." But in biblical Greek—especially in the Jewish tradition that shaped the New Testament—*ginōskō* carries a deeper layer.

It is the word used in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, to translate the Hebrew word *יָדָע* (*yada*), a deep, experiential, and intimate kind of knowing—the word for intimate, personal, even covenantal knowledge. It is the word used when Genesis says Adam "knew" Eve. That is not merely information about her or recognition of her existence. It's a relationship. This is not a fringe reading. In John 10:14, Jesus says, "I know my sheep, and my sheep know me." The word is *ginōskō*—Mutual, Intimate, and Relational. It is not a credential check or a performance review. It is a knowing that goes both ways.

Paul uses the same framework in First Corinthians 8:3, "If anyone loves God, he is known by God." The word is the perfect passive of *ginōskō*. Being known by God is tied to love—not to prophecy, exorcism, or miracles. In Galatians 4:9, "Now that you have come to know God — or rather, to be known by God." Again, the word is *ginōskō*, and the emphasis is relational. The pattern continues. In Second Timothy 2:19, "The Lord knows those who are his." The verb is *ginōskō*. Thus, knowing equals belonging. It is identity, not inspection.

Even the Old Testament carries this. In Jeremiah 1:5, God says, "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you." The Hebrew word is *yada*—the same word translated as *ginōskō*. God's knowing is not distant awareness; it is intimate, generative, and personal. It precedes performance entirely. So, when Jesus says, "I never knew you," the word points to a relationship, not mere recognition or awareness, but to intimate mutual knowing. This pattern is not built on a single verse. It is woven throughout the Gospels, Paul's letters, and the Hebrew prophets.

But there is one more word in the sentence that matters; in Greek, it is *οὐδέποτε* (*oudepote*). It means "not even once"—never, at any point, at any time. This is not "I stopped knowing you." It is not "I once knew you, but you fell away." It is absolute. There was never a relational connection. The relationship did not break; it NEVER existed! For the anxious believer—the one who fears this verse most—this may be the most important detail in the passage. If you are in a relationship with God and have ever genuinely sought the Father's will, *oudepote* does not describe you. Jesus never said your name.

There is one more phrase in verse twenty-three that the English obscures. In the King James, Jesus calls these people "workers of iniquity." The Greek word is *ἀνομία* (*anomia*), often translated as iniquity, wickedness, or lawlessness. The inherited reading treats it as general sinfulness; you sinned too much, so you were rejected. But *anomia* is a compound word: A (not) and *nomia* (law), thus, "without law," or "without legitimate authority or order." It does not

simply describe someone who commits sins. It describes someone who operates outside proper structure, that is, someone who functions without genuine authorization.

The grammar tightens this even further. Jesus says οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν (hoi ergazomenoi tăn anomian), "The ones working the lawlessness." The article tăn ("the") before anomian marks this as a specific, defining characteristic. The participle ergazomenoi is in the present tense, indicating a habitual, ongoing attitude. Not just a single failure, but a pattern and a regular way of operating. These are people whose defining characteristic is functioning in Jesus' name without genuine relational authority. They prophesied, exorcised, and performed wonders, all "in your name," yet without doing the Father's will. Their lawlessness is not moral weakness; it is structural. They operated the machinery of religion without the relationship behind it.

This is where verse 21 becomes the key that unlocks the whole passage: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." The standard is not performance volume, spiritual gifting, or the number of miracles you can list. The standard is doing the Father's will. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, the Father's will is not a checklist; rather, it is a way of being that demonstrates mercy, a hunger for righteousness, peacemaking, and purity of heart. It's an inner reality, not an outward spectacle.

The workers of anomia failed this standard not because they lacked power, but because they traded power for relationship. They had the name, just not the will behind it. The verse is not describing a believer who fell short. It is describing someone who built an entire religious career on a name they never had genuine access to. And the difference between the King James "iniquity" and the Greek anomia matters because "iniquity" sounds like general sin. It makes anyone feel targeted. But anomia, meaning operating without authority, narrows the scope. It points to a specific kind of person.

Now, we need to ask, "If the text clearly narrows the target, how did the verse become a universal anxiety warning?" It did not arise from conspiracy or malice. It arose from something quieter—de-contextualization. For centuries, preachers quoted verse 23 without first reading verses 15–20. They lifted the rejection line from its structural position, the climax of a false prophet's warning, and preached it as a freestanding threat. This is crucial to understanding the passage: when you remove the context, the subject disappears, and when the subject disappears, every listener becomes the target.

The King James translation, by rendering anomia as "iniquity," a broad moral term, opened the verse to a wider reading than the Greek demands. Anomia denotes structural unauthorized action. "Iniquity" denotes sin in general. The English word widened the net, and the theological traditions that followed further widened it. In the Western church, heavily shaped by Augustine and later by the Reformation, this verse became fuel for election anxiety.

In Calvinist traditions, this raised the question of perseverance: can the elect fall away? In Arminian traditions, it served as a warning that salvation can be lost for lack of holiness. Both readings assumed the same thing: that the verse addresses believers in general. Unfortunately,

neither tradition emphasized what the surrounding text makes clear: that the target is narrowed before the warning is issued.

There is also a detail in verse 23 that most readings overlook. The word translated "profess" or "declare" is ὁμολογέω (homologeō), which does not imply surprise. Jesus does not say, "I looked at you, but I do not recognize you." He makes a formal, public pronouncement. Homologeō carries the weight of a legal declaration. This is a verdict, not a discovery. Jesus is not learning anything new at judgment. He is stating what was always true.

This is not a modern reinterpretation. John Chrysostom, one of the most important early church fathers, writing in the fourth century, read this passage as targeting religious leaders who possessed spiritual gifts yet lacked virtue and inner transformation. He did not read it as a universal warning against anxiety for sincere believers. He read it as an unmasking of religious power without relational substance. The fear-reading is not ancient. It is the product of isolation, a verse cut from its setting and preached to an audience for whom it was never written.

There are honest objections to this reading, and they deserve fair answers:

- The first objection: Jesus says "many" in verse 22, "Many will say to me in that day." If the target is specific, why does He say "many"? Doesn't that make the warning universal again?

The response is that the word "many" describes how common the pattern is, not the width of the target. Many people treat religion as a performance of power; they build careers on credentials rather than on relationships. The word "many" indicates the pattern is prevalent, not universal. A virus can infect many people and still be a single specific virus.

- The second objection: Doesn't Matthew 25 show that works matter in judgment? The sheep and the goats, "I was hungry, and you fed me." If works determine the outcome there, why not here?

Notice which works are described. In Matthew 25, the accepted works are relational—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. In Matthew 7, the rejected works are performative—prophesying, exorcising, and performing wonders. Scripture itself draws a line between relational obedience and religious performance. Notice the tone. The sheep in Matthew 25 are *surprised* by Jesus' statement. They ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry?" They did not keep a record, nor did they build a case. They barely recognized what they had done. The workers in Matthew 7 are the opposite; they are confident, informed, and ready with a list. One group forgot their works because those works originated in a relationship with Jesus. The other group memorized their works because those works were their sole focus. The text does not contradict itself. It distinguishes between two kinds of action and two kinds of relationship. The third objection is worth naming because it may be the one the reader is thinking but not saying: isn't this just cheap reassurance? Isn't this just softening a hard verse to make people feel better?

No, and here is why. The inherited reading makes the verse vague. It threatens everyone equally, so it warns no one specifically. A warning that could apply to anyone loses its precision, and a warning without precision is not more serious. It is less useful. The textual reading does the opposite. It sharpens the warning to its intended edge. It says: if you are operating in God's name for power, a platform, or a credential, but you have never submitted to the Father's will or been transformed by relationship, then this verse is aimed directly at you. That is not a softer warning. It is far more dangerous for the person it actually describes.

The context narrows the audience. The Greek deepens that narrowing. The grammar specifies the pattern. The cross-references confirm the relational standard. The reception history explains how the fear-reading was constructed. And an early church father read it the same way before any of us opened a Greek lexicon.

The warning in Matthew 7:23 is not dissolved; it is not softened; it is not explained away. It stands, sharper than the inherited reading ever allowed. But it stands where the text placed it: aimed at religious operators who performed powerful deeds in a name to which they had no relational access. This is what precision does that vagueness never could. A vague warning haunts everyone and corrects no one. However, a precise warning names the condition, identifies the pattern, and lets everyone else breathe. The text is not being generous here; it is being exact. And exactness, in Scripture, is a kind of mercy.

The verse that follows sincere believers home from church, the verse that sits at the edge of prayer and whispers, "What if it's you?" has an address. It was written for a specific audience. And the text is more careful, more precise, and more just than any fear-driven reading ever allowed.

If you are the kind of person who has feared this verse, who has lain awake wondering whether everything you believed and everything you gave would still not be enough, then the Greek may carry a word of relief you were never given in a sermon. Jesus never said your name. The warning remains, but the weight can be set down because Scripture is not a trap. **It is precise enough to say exactly what it means.**