

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **How to Get to Heaven**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 7:13-20

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For several months now we have been studying together the Sermon on the Mount—that incomparable message Jesus shared with His disciples early in his ministry, allowing the crowds to listen in. The overall theme of the Sermon is God’s standard of righteousness, which is diametrically opposed to the self-righteous, self-sufficient, and hypocritical standards of men. Jesus has shown us what His kingdom is like and what its citizens should be like. Now He presents us with the choice of entering that kingdom.

Will you follow along as I read what is surely one of the most difficult passages in the Bible for our broad-minded and tolerant culture to process, Matt 7:13-14:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it

What immediately strikes us about these words of Jesus is the absolute and inescapable nature of the choice He presents us.

The inescapable choice that lies before us (13,14)

Our lives are filled with choices and decisions. Most are relatively trivial and insignificant, like what to eat and what to wear, but some are profound and life-changing, like whom to marry or what career to pursue. The most critical of all choices is our decision about Jesus Christ and His kingdom. That is the choice that determines our eternal destiny, and it is the decision Jesus now focuses on.

I want to make it clear that I believe in the sovereignty of God. I also believe in election, which simply means that God chooses us before we choose Him (or to put it in biblical language, “we love Him because He *first* loved us”). Yet it cannot be denied that God has always allowed people a choice—to trust Him or reject Him. He has provided and shown the way, and He has bent every effort and spared no cost in coming after us, but He has never forced anyone to choose Him. Rather He has placed the decision squarely on our shoulders.

Let me try to demonstrate that to you from the Scriptures. While Israel was in the wilderness the Lord instructed Moses to tell the people:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him (Deuteronomy 30:19, 20).

Later Joshua said to the people after they arrived in the Promised land, “Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). Centuries later on Mt. Carmel the prophet Elijah

asked the people, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus presents once again the ultimate choice of choices: “Enter through the narrow gate.” The tense of the verb “enter” demands a definite and specific action. The command is not to admire the gate or to ponder it or to debate it, but to enter it.

I find it curious that many people from many different religions (and some with no religion) admire certain themes of the Sermon on the Mount, like turning the other cheek, and giving to the needy, and not worrying, and especially Jesus’ command not to judge others, which Dan dealt with so effectively last Lord’s Day, but they pay scant attention to these words from Jesus just a few verses later. They respect Him as a great teacher, perhaps even call Him the greatest of teachers, but they are terribly selective about His teaching and ignore entirely what He says here about the broad and narrow roads. He makes absolutely clear that there are not many roads to heaven, but only one. Man cannot come to God any which way, but only in the way He Himself has provided.

And don’t think for a moment that this is the only place where such exclusiveness is taught in the NT. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He said in John 10:9, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.” The Apostle Peter proclaimed, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), and Paul added, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). We proclaim a narrow Gospel because that is the only Gospel God has given us.

This inescapable choice is presented to us here by means of two ways, two gates, two destinations, and two crowds.

Two ways. Jesus didn’t originate this notion that there are only two choices. It is found way back in the OT. Psalm 1 speaks of “the way of the righteous” which leads to prosperity, and “the way of the wicked” which leads to perishing. But Jesus presents the concept in more descriptive terms. One way, He says, is easy because it is broad. There is plenty of room on this road for diversity of opinions and laxity of morals. There are no curbs on the side of this road—no fences and no boundaries on either thought or conduct. Travelers on this road write their own rules and follow their own inclinations. Sin is tolerated and truth is moderated. God’s Word may be praised but it is not studied; His standards are admired but not followed.

The other way is hard because the road is narrow. Its boundaries are clearly marked out by divine revelation. There are curbs and there are fences that restrict the traveler to what God has told us in His Word is true and good. There are limitations on what we may believe and how we may behave. In a sense that is hard, because we naturally rebel at limitations. But in the long run this way is easier, because our lives are better, healthier, happier, and more fulfilled, to say nothing of the better eternal destiny we inherit. No wonder Jesus claimed that His yoke was easy and His burden light.

Two gates. The gate leading to the broad road is wide, indicating that it is a simple matter to enter. John Stott writes about the wide gate, “There is evidently no limit to the luggage we can take with us. We need leave nothing behind, not even our sins, self-righteousness or pride.” A West Indian who had chosen Islam over Christianity said his reason for doing so was that Islam “is a noble, broad path. There is room for a man and his sins on it. The way of Christ is too narrow.” At least he was honest.

On the other hand, the gate leading to the narrow road is itself narrow. In fact, in another place Jesus indicated it is as narrow as a needle’s eye. In order to enter it, one must leave everything behind—sin, selfish ambition, covetousness, even, if necessary, family and friends.

Two destinations. The wide gate and the broad road behind it lead to destruction. The small gate and the narrow road lead to life. This again is not the first time we have heard this in the Scripture. Moses said to his people in Deuteronomy 30:15-18:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

The broad road, friends, is suicide road.

On the other hand, the narrow gate leads to life, life that is abundant and eternal. It begins here and is perfected hereafter when we will share God’s glory and find perfect fulfillment in His presence. It consists of fellowship with God, with the holy angels, and with one another.

Two crowds. There is a large one and a small one. The broad and easy road is a busy thoroughfare, thronged by pedestrians of every kind. The crowd includes both pagans and nominal Christians, atheists and theists, religious people and humanists, Jews and Gentiles, moderns and postmoderns. It includes every person from whatever background, persuasion, station in life, and circumstance who has not come to saving faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ.

A letter written to a Melbourne, Australia, daily newspaper expresses clearly the attitude of one who is on the broad road to destruction:

After hearing Dr. Billy Graham on the air, viewing him on television and reading reports and letters concerning him and his mission, I am heartily sick of the type of religion that insists my soul (and everyone else’s) needs saving—whatever that means. I have never felt that I was lost

If in order to save my soul I must accept such a philosophy as I have recently heard preached, I prefer to remain forever damned.ⁱ

Sadly, this person will probably get his wish. But by all rights he shouldn’t be attacking Billy

Graham, for Graham is just the messenger carrying the words of Jesus.

The narrow road, on the other hand, seems to be comparatively deserted, suggesting that Jesus' followers will be a minority. However, I do not think it is wise to speculate, based upon this reference to "many" and "few," about the final number or even percentage that constitutes God's redeemed. It is true that He states elsewhere that "many are called, but few are chosen." On the other hand, the Apostle John saw a vision of the redeemed before God's throne that consisted of "a great multitude which no man could number." (Rev. 7:9).

We are probably wise not to be preoccupied with speculation about the numbers. In Luke 13 someone asked Jesus, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He declined to satisfy their curiosity, instead replying, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door." (Luke 13:23, 24). In other words, quit worrying about who *else* is going to heaven and make you're sure you're going there.

One thing is clear—no one ever stumbled into the kingdom or wandered through the narrow gate by accident. The phrase, "make every effort" implies conscious, purposeful, and intense effort. The point is not that we can work our way into the kingdom in the sense of earning our entry, because we can't; but we can certainly keep ourselves out by apathy and neglect.

In summary, there are, according to Jesus, only two ways—the broad and the narrow (there is no middle road); only two gates, the wide and the narrow (there is no other gate); only two destinies, destruction and life (there is no third alternative, no purgatory, no reincarnation, no second chance, no annihilation); and only two crowds, a large one and a small one (there is no neutral, uncommitted group).

It is hardly necessary to call attention to the fact that what Jesus expresses here is very unfashionable today. Narrow thinking is detested in our culture, a culture which is tolerant only of moral and spiritual relativism. In the year 2000 the Southern Baptists published a little booklet asking Baptists to pray for the conversion of Jews. Jewish leaders were incensed, accusing them, as one rabbi put it, of "spiritual racism." Mind you, this accusation came not because offensive things were said about Jews—no! Rather it was because prayer for their salvation implies that Christianity is the only way. The exclusivism of Christ's claims will always generate intense opposition.

Now before moving to the second part of our Scripture passage, I must challenge you to ask yourself what you have done (or plan to do) about the inescapable choice Jesus talks about here.

Which gate are you hesitating at? Which road are you on? Which destiny are you headed toward? Which crowd is influencing you the most? Jesus urges, even commands you to "enter through the narrow gate." Will you say "yes" to Him? Will you humble yourself, repent of your sin, and receive Him as your Lord and Savior? You can do that right where you're sitting if you will acknowledge your spiritual need, your sinful rebellion against God, and turn in faith to the one who died for you on the Cross. Place your whole life into His hands; invite Him to come in and clean up the mess you have made. He will.

Now just as there is a misleading gate and a misleading way, there are also misleading preachers and teachers who point to the wrong gate and promote the wrong way. And Jesus addresses them in verses 15-20.

The peril of false teachers who would prevent us from making the right choice (15-20)

Listen to verses 15-20:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

There have always been false prophets among the people of God. They are mentioned again and again in the OT, and we read of them in nearly every NT book. They are called false prophets, false apostles, false teachers, false brothers, false witnesses, even false Christs. Jesus regarded the Pharisees and Sadducees as false prophets, calling them “blind guides of the blind.”

The history of the church since the first century is also replete with these spiritually phony teachers. Every century has had them, and they are still rampant in the Church today. Why? Because most people do not want to hear the truth. They prefer to hear what is pleasant and flattering, even if it is false and dangerous. God told Jeremiah, “The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority; and my people love it this way!” (Jeremiah 5:30, 31).

Now it's extremely important to recognize that in telling us to beware of false prophets, Jesus is making a key assumption—namely that there is such a thing as objective truth or absolute truth, from which falsehood can be distinguished. The very notion of a false prophet is otherwise meaningless. Of course, if a prophet is opposing objective truth, that makes him dangerous and deceptive.

They are dangerous and deceptive. The danger is seen in the word picture Jesus paints for us—they are ferocious wolves. The deceptiveness is seen in the fact that they wear sheep's clothing. In first-century Palestine the wolf was the primary natural enemy of sheep. They roamed the hills and valleys, looking for a sheep that strayed away from the flock or lagged behind. When a wolf found such a sheep it quickly attacked and tore it to pieces. Hence a wise shepherd was always on guard for wolves. Jesus talks about this in John 10:11-12 in His discourse on the Good Shepherd:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.

It is no accident, you realize, that Jesus' warning about false prophets in the Sermon on the Mount

comes immediately after his teaching about the two ways, two gates, two destinations, and two crowds, for false prophets are adept at blurring these issues. Many of them cause their hearers to think that the narrow way is in reality much broader than Jesus said. Furthermore, they imply that to walk it requires little restriction on one's beliefs or behavior. Some even have the gall to blatantly contradict Jesus, asserting that there are many roads and they all lead to God. No wonder Jesus likened such false teachers to ferocious wolves.

I suggest to you that one of the most dangerous places one can go is to a church that doesn't teach the true Gospel. Such places lull people to sleep spiritually, convincing them that they are connecting with God and making progress toward heaven, when in reality they are doing nothing of the kind.

But these false prophets are not only dangerous; they are also deceptive. They wear sheep's clothing. A false teacher never announces and advertises himself as a purveyor of lies. On the contrary, he always claims to be a teacher of the truth and feigns godliness. He uses the language of historic orthodoxy in order to win acceptance from the gullible.

When I was a student in Bible College I was given an assignment to interview a well-known and respected pastor in a mainline church. I will never forget the experience. I asked him a number of questions about his views on spiritual issues, including whether he believed in the resurrection of Christ. He responded in the affirmative. But something about his other answers caused me to come back to the resurrection and ask a follow-up question. I said, "I mean, do you really believe that Jesus died and that His body came back to life in the tomb." "Oh, I don't know about that," he said, "But I do believe that new can come from the old, that real living is possible even after one has given up hope." Now I'm willing to wager that most of the members of his congregation weren't aware that when he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday he was only speaking figuratively and didn't really believe that Jesus was raised after having died!

Watch out, Jesus says! We must be on guard, pray for discernment, use our critical faculties, and never relax our vigilance. We must not be dazzled by a person's outward appearance—his charisma, his sharp mind, his doctorates, his reputation, or his published works. We must look beneath appearance to reality. What lives under the fleece—a sheep or a wolf?

And is there a test we can apply to discover whether someone is a false teacher? Well, yes, there is.

They are recognized by their fruit. Here Jesus switches metaphors from sheep and wolves to trees and their fruit. A wolf may disguise itself; a tree cannot.

So, if you examine the fruit, you can discover what kind of a tree it is. Twice Jesus tells us that it is by their fruit we will know the false prophet.

Well, what kind of fruit reveals the true identity of a prophet? Let's consider three kinds:

1. Their character. If you examine Jesus' own allegory about the vine in John 15, it seems clear that fruitfulness means Christlikeness, very similar to what Paul later refers to as "the fruit of the Spirit." If this is so, whenever we see in a teacher the meekness and gentleness of Christ, His love, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control, there may be the presumption that he is a true teacher, not a false one. On the other hand, when those qualities are missing and "the works of the flesh" are more apparent than "the fruit of the Spirit"—works like sexual immorality, impurity, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, envy—then we are justified in the presumption that the prophet is an impostor.

Of course, it is possible for a false teacher to exhibit good character for a period of time, and that can make his followers especially vulnerable. Jim Jones, who led over 900 of his parishioners to commit suicide, showed great compassion for the poor and helpless early in his ministry. Jan and I have spent a lot of time in Utah in recent years, and we have always noticed how kindly we were treated by Mormon people in hotels, restaurants, and everywhere we went, yet there is no question but that their teachings are false.

So there must be some test besides outward character to determine fruitfulness. In other words, while bad character may be sufficient to conclude that a person is a false teacher, good character may not be sufficient to prove that he is a true teacher. We must also examine their teaching.

2. Their teaching.ⁱⁱ In the NT teachers were judged by whether their message was in accord with the original apostolic instruction, and particularly whether it confessed that Jesus was the Christ come in the flesh, thus acknowledging that He was a divine/human person. The 16th century reformers—Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, and a host of others—were accused by the Church of Rome of being false teachers. But they defended themselves ably by appealing to Scripture to show that their teaching was not the introduction of something new but the recovery of something old, namely the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In examining a teacher's credentials, we must examine both his character and his message. Bishop Ryle summed it up well: "Sound doctrine and holy living are the marks of true prophets." But a third legitimate aspect of fruit inspection concerns the teacher's influence.

3. Their influence. Sometimes the falsity of false teaching is not immediately apparent when we look at a teacher's character or even his message but becomes apparent only in the disastrous results over time. The question is, "What are his followers like?" I think of a man whose church I attended for a short time when I was in college. He was the best pure Bible teacher, from a pedagogical standpoint, I ever sat under. But the effect of his ministry was disastrous in the lives of his congregation. He created a dependency upon himself, a moral laxity in his followers, a penchant for doctrinal precision to the exclusion of holy living, and an emphasis on grace to the exclusion of law. The result was that broken homes, alcoholism, promiscuity, foul language, and many other ungodly behaviors became the norm in that doctrinally evangelical church. The pastor himself had an affair with his secretary and then fired the elders who challenged him about it.

Now allow me a word of caution here. Jesus encourages us to be fruit inspectors, but that is not a full-time job. Some people in the church become suspicious of everyone and take up as their hobby the disreputable sport known as “heresy-hunting.” You know something? Early on in the Iraq war we lost more soldiers to friendly fire than to enemy attacks, and that can happen in the Church as well. I would say that by far the most painful opposition I have experienced in the ministry has not come from atheists or liberals but from very conservative Christians who determined that I had veered away from true doctrine, which being interpreted means “the doctrinal views they happened to hold.”

The bottom line, friends, is that truth does matter. If we care about God’s truth and God’s church, we will take Christ’s warnings here seriously. He and His apostles place the responsibility for the doctrinal purity of the church squarely upon the shoulders of church leaders, but each member of the congregation also bears responsibility. The people in the pew have more power than they often realize to insure that truth *is* taught in their midst. They have the power of the purse, they have the power of electing their leaders, and even the power of separation, a weapon of last resort (i.e. they can leave).

My point is that Jesus’ warning to “watch out for false teachers” is addressed to all of us. If mainline church members had heeded this warning and applied Jesus’ tests, they would not be in the perilous state of theological and moral confusion (nor in the serious decline in numbers) in which they find themselves. But don’t think for a moment that our evangelical churches are immune to the same dangers.

Finally Jesus speaks of the destiny of these false teachers:

They are destined to destruction. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” That is the end result of false prophets, and, tragically, of the people who follow them. Jim Jones is memorable because over 900 people followed him to the destruction of their physical lives. But the fact is there have been far more victims who have lived outwardly prosperous lives while nevertheless following a false teacher to eternal destruction.

Conclusion: In this passage today God is calling every one of us to enter His Kingdom, i.e. to enjoy abundant, eternal life in relationship with Him. But He also gives us a choice—to take the road that leads to life or the one that leads to destruction, to follow false prophets or pursue the truth. Which will it be for you?

I’m going to ask you to make a decision this morning. It is possible that some of you have been sitting under the preaching of the Gospel for many months, even years, but you have not yet entered the narrow gate. I remind you again—it does no good to admire the gate or to stand at the gate. Jesus says you must enter the gate. You can do that by humbling yourself before God, repenting of your sin, and putting your faith in Jesus Christ, who died for you and paid the penalty for your sin. He offers you eternal life.

i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 458. I found MacArthur's discussion on this passage so helpful that I borrowed extensively from his discussion. I also found John R. W. Stott's commentary on this passage (*Christian Counter-Culture*) very helpful and borrowed from that book as well.

ii. On another occasion Jesus used the same fruit tree metaphor, only with a different twist. In Matthew 12:33-37 He said,

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

A great deal of emphasis is placed here upon what a person *says*. A teacher's heart is revealed by his words.