

Entering by the Narrow Gate

Matt. 7:12-14

In just two days millions of people across the nation will enter the voting booth and choose to pull the lever for one of the presidential candidates. This year's election is by far the most emotionally charged elections I've ever witnessed and for some it might feel like a discouraging and distressing place that our country is in. Let me share a different perspective from Chip Ingram about the times we live in:

It may sound strange, but I'm feeling very encouraged and optimistic. Why? Times of crisis and uncertainty have a way of causing us to awaken from our idols and distractions.. Now is not a time to be dismayed. Now is the time to seize the day!

God is willing and He is able! He invites you and me to use this pivotal season in America's history to draw near to Him, get in a Christian community...if you're not in one already, and reach out to others like never before. Chip Ingram

I think that's good advice. The sermon on the mount is all about the kingdom of God and Ingram's thought is a good reminder for us, no matter how we intend to vote on Tuesday, to hold onto a kingdom perspective in this election cycle. But come Tuesday those of us old enough to vote have a choice to make - we will step into a booth and *choose* to pull the lever one way or another. By Wednesday, the choosing will be over and the consequences of those choices - good or bad - will be just beginning.

That's how it is with choices. Everyone of us make countless choices a day. Sometimes we do it without even thinking about it, other times we agonize over our choices. Choices are really powerful things and have tremendous consequences in our lives - for good and for bad. Choices determine what path we'll take and at the same time determine what paths we won't take. When we choose to say yes to one thing, we choose to say no to a dozen other things. Our choices put us on a trajectory that can change a hundred other factors of our lives down the road. Choices are powerful things and as much as possible we want to be inclining our ear for God's leading when we're making important choices.

Jesus ends the sermon on the mount by highlighting the most important choices we will ever make. In these closing verses Jesus tells us we must choose between:

- the narrow gate and narrow road or the broad gate and the broad road
- influences that produce good fruit or influences that produce bad fruit
- building our lives on the rock or building our lives on the on sand

These are choices that affect us not just for time but for eternity. And there's no way to get around these choices. If you don't make a choice, that's a choice. Every person who has ever lived long enough to be capable of rational thought makes these choices. And each of these choices is really centered on one thing: Jesus Christ. Jesus is the narrow gate, Jesus is the choice that leads to good fruit, Jesus is the rock that we can build a life that weathers the storms on. Bottom line is everyone of us is confronted with this choice: *what will we do with Jesus?*

We'll spend our last couple weeks in this sermon looking at these choices and this morning we're going to look at the choice between entering by the narrow gate or the broad gate. But before we do, Jesus segues to this section with what has come to be known as the "Golden Rule".

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (vs. 12)

The negative form of the Golden Rule had been around for hundreds of years. Confucius said, *What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others*. In the fourth century BC, Greek orator Isocrates said, *Whatever angers you when you suffer it at the hands of others, do not do it to others*. So the negative version was out there, but Jesus is the first recorded instance of putting the Golden Rule in the positive, and there is a big difference. We can satisfy the negative form by doing nothing. Don't do to others what you don't want done to yourself. OK, all I have to do is avoid doing bad things to others and I'm good. But the positive form moves us to action: we are to *do* to others what we would have done to us. Do we want kindness shown to us? Then we should show kindness to others. Do we want someone to stand up for us when we are being unfairly accused? Then we should stand up for others when they are being unfairly accused. We can't obey the Golden Rule by being inactive, we need to be proactive!

Jesus says the Law and the Prophets can be summed up in the Golden Rule. It's not complicated - love others with the same love you have for yourself. If we do that, we won't cheat, steal, lie to or about, defraud, covet, or sin against them in any other way. It is powerful when we begin to pray, *Lord, help me to treat others the way I want to be treated*.

Jesus then begins to lay out a series of most-important-choices-we-will-ever-make in verse 13.

¹³ *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

Let me point out three truths contained these two verses:

I. The choice is between eternal life and eternal destruction

Gates lead somewhere. Roads lead somewhere. Jesus says there is a narrow gate and a narrow road and there is a wide gate and a broad road, and the difference is their destination: the difference is where we will go after death, where we will spend our eternity. Heaven is real and hell is real. What Jesus calls destruction isn't destruction as in ceasing to exist, it's much worse than that. The Bible describes an eternal existence that is so devastatingly horrible that it is like being destroyed forever. This eternal destruction is called hell. The idea of hell isn't a popular thing to talk about or believe in today. It's offensive to a lot of people, and I totally get why. It's a frightening and difficult thing to contemplate. But here's why it's foolish for us to reject the teaching about hell because we don't like it or we think it's unfair. The Bible teaches that God is perfectly just. On Judgment Day no one will be able to argue with God that His verdict is unjust. It will be like the guy who was brought to trial for a crime fully intending to enter a plea of not guilty. However, at the close of the trial, when the judge asked him how he pled he said, "guilty". The judge was amazed and said, "I thought you were entering a plea of not guilty." The man answered, "your Honor, that was before I heard the evidence against me." When the evidence is

heard on Judgment Day we will know we are guilty and no one - no one - will argue with the sentence of the Judge.

There is a narrow gate and narrow road that takes us to eternal life. That gate takes a specific choice, a narrow choice, in order to enter through it. That road takes a specific choice, a narrow choice, in order to travel on it.

On the other hand, Jesus says, the gate and the road to destruction is wide and broad and easy. There is one narrow choice that leads to eternal life and every other choice leads to destruction. The wide gate and the broad path is the path of least resistance, the path that seems natural. It is the road that accommodates every belief, every philosophy, every lifestyle, every degree of religious devotion from fanaticism to atheism. It welcomes thieves and murderers and liars and adulterers, and then equally welcomes decent, hard-working, honest people who give to charities and help the needy and go to church and are upstanding husbands, wives, children, and citizens. It is a broad road!

One second after we draw our last breath, we will see that heaven and hell are real. Our eternal destiny - whether it be eternal life or eternal destination - will stretch out before us and we will have to live forever - forever - with the choice we made in this life. No chance for a redo.

If that doesn't sound fair, and sounds offensive to you, that's exactly the point of Jesus' warning. He's not trying to spare your feelings, he's trying to spare your life. Like the doctor who tells a patient that she has cancer and the only hope of surviving is a specific type of surgery, Jesus is telling us that there aren't a hundred or a dozen or even two ways to heaven, there is only one way. Only one gate, only one road, and it is narrow. But it is open and available to all if they will but choose to enter by it. Jesus is urging us to make the right choice here and now. But what is the right choice? What is the narrow gate and narrow road?

II. Jesus is the narrow gate and the narrow road to eternal life

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:7-10 (NIV)

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

Jesus is the only way to eternal life, there is no other way. Not because God wanted to make it hard for sinners to be saved, but because there was no other way that God could save us from the consequences of our sin other than for Jesus, the Son of God, to pay the price and die for our sins. Think about that: God Almighty for whom all things are possible, had only one way, one option for saving the lost sinners that He loved so much. The only way God could remain just and justify us was for His righteous judgment to be poured out on His Son, who was uniquely qualified as the Son of God and the Son of Man to stand in our place condemned. What can take away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

If we reject Jesus, we are left to bear our sins and the weight of our guilt before God ourselves. That will be our choice for all eternity. The amazingly good news is that Jesus gave his life so that anyone who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.

The choice we have is whether to believe in Christ or not. One second after we die, there is no more choice. We are left with the consequences of our choice for all eternity. Either we die trusting that Christ took all our punishment upon himself, or we die to face that punishment ourselves. Those are the only two possible options: two possible gates, two possible roads. Faith in Christ or anything and everything else. Those are the two choices. Faith in Christ leads to eternal life, everything else to eternal destruction. If you have never received Christ as your Lord and Savior, I urge you with all my heart not to put it off. You don't know when that last second will come. None of us do. At the close of the message I will offer an opportunity for you to pray with me to receive Jesus as your Savior and I pray that you will do so if you haven't already.

III. The narrow way of following Jesus is free, and it's hard

There's nothing we could ever do to earn salvation, it's a free gift. All we do is to receive it by faith. But following Jesus isn't easy. Jesus says the way is hard that leads to life. Jesus often discouraged people who wanted to follow him by making it hard for them to follow him. Being a Christian isn't like buying a life insurance policy that we then put away in a file and forget about until we're close to death and then we pull it out and say, I have eternal life because I have this policy. Being a Christian isn't just going to church, throwing a few bucks in the offering, and slapping a Christian bumper sticker on our car.

No, being a Christian is following Jesus on a day by day, moment by moment basis. Our salvation is free - but being a Christian doesn't mean that we are free to live any way we want to. Jesus calls us to live in a way that pleases and glorifies him. We aren't free to live a life that smells like pride, or arrogance, or dishonesty, or unforgiveness and bitterness. Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. To die daily to our pride. To die to bitterness and hatred and forgive. Forgive the way Jesus forgave us. It's a hard path, but a wonderful path and we have the help and power of the Holy Spirit and the word of God to help us walk it. And when we mess up, and confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

See, living how we want and doing what we want, being the lord of our own lives and decisions isn't the narrow road of a disciple. It's the broad and easy way. Jesus didn't give us that option. There isn't a side road marked: "just believing in Jesus - not a disciple". There's no detour for someone who wants to be a follower of Christ but doesn't want to follow Christ.

And being a follower means being submitted to his Lordship over our lives. The narrow road of following Jesus is free, but it's hard. Blessedly so. It's the easiest hard we'll ever experience. It might cost us our lives, but it gives us so much more. Jesus is, as that 12 year old in Aleppo believed, worth more than life itself. He didn't come to ruin your life, he came to give you life. Not the easy life, but the abundant life.

As we close in prayer, I believe the Holy Spirit wants to speak to those of us who are in one of two places:

- Those who have never received Christ as Lord and Savior. I feel like there are some here who have put off that decision. Not making a choice is, in itself a choice, and not a good one when it comes to Jesus. Don't put it off any longer. Reach out in faith, take a step of faith, and receive Christ as your Lord and Savior. Believe that he has a better plan for your life than you do, and

commit your life to Christ to follow him. It's not easy in that it calls for dying to self but it is easy and light in that Jesus helps us, and he lifts the burdens of sin and emptiness and guilt and shame and meaninglessness and hopelessness off our shoulders and we have an amazing reason and purpose to live for! If that's you, I ask you to pray with me in just a minute.

- The other place some of us are in, is a place of spiritual coasting. Talking to believers now. You're on spiritual auto-pilot. To be honest, I've been convicted of ways that I've been spiritually coasting, and that's not what I want for my life. I don't think it's what you want either. We want to live our lives for Christ, and yes to die to our pride and selfishness and unforgiveness and laziness and worldiness and all that other stuff that robs us of our joy and keeps us from experiencing the power and presence of God the way He intends for us to experience it. We want to be filled with the Holy Spirit and used by Jesus to help others know him as well.

As we pray, if you're in either of these two places, will you pray with me?