

The Path Less Taken

Matthew 7:13, 14

A married couple was celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary. At the party everybody wanted to know how they managed to stay married so long in this day and age.

The husband responded, "When we were first married, we made this agreement. I would make all major decisions, and she would make all the minor decisions."

At which point the wife took up the tale, "And in 60 years of marriage we have never needed to make a major decision."

Obviously, decision-making is more crucial to some settings than in others. Little depends on whether you choose to buy the grey Buick or the Champagne Subaru. On the other hand, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe" has no place in the Air Traffic Control Tower. Some decisions are more consequential than others. This morning's text suggests what Jesus believed to be the most crucial decision in life.

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. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." - Matthew 7:13, 14

Jesus extended this challenge as He was winding up His *Sermon on the Mount*, recorded in Matthew. He said many provocative things in this sermon about God's kingdom that were not what His listeners expected to hear. He said that entry into this kingdom would require poverty of spirit, meekness, tearfulness and the like. That was contrary to the military coup against Rome envisioned by the crowds. He defined righteousness as a state of heart perfection after God's own heart, not some relative goodness that was secured when a man kept more laws than he broke. The people believed that riches proved God's favor. Jesus said to take no thought for such things. Now, as He brings His sermon to a close, He challenges them to make a simple choice as to what they have just heard.

The rhetoric of choosing between two ways was an Old Testament staple. When God gave His Law to the Israelites, He spoke through Moses:

²⁶"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse - ²⁷the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today, ²⁸the curse if you disobey ..." - Deuteronomy 11:26-28.

Shortly before his death, Joshua, Moses' successor, reminded the people of their choice:

... "But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" - Joshua 24:15

Elijah echoed a similar choice at Mount Carmel:

... "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" - 1 Kings 18:21

Jesus now presented such a choice, echoing Moses, Joshua and Elijah, some of Israel's greatest heroes. It must have sounded quite audacious to His enemies, especially considering that throughout His sermon He had set aside some traditional understandings of certain precepts in God's Law, only to replace them with His own assertions of what those precepts *REALLY* meant. Jesus had taken it upon Himself to tell the people and their leaders that they had missed God's greatest points in the Law. When He finished speaking, it is no wonder that the people responded to Him with amazement: "... he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:29).

That sense of amazement secured a few disciples for Jesus, but it also caused many of the teachers of the law to despise Him. After all, His teachings indicted their own teaching as lacking understanding. Jesus either spoke from God's own authority, or He was completely mad and a danger to the civil order. To demand a choice between two paths was to assert that He knew the way to God that the experts had missed. Would the people believe Him or dismiss Him? No middle ground was allowed. Even today, the path we walk testifies to what degree we trust that Jesus really knows the way to God.

To what, precisely, is Jesus calling us when He demands of us, "Enter through the narrow gate"?

I. Walk with Purpose, not Pointlessness

A. Many Simply Stumble onto a Spacious Highway

Jesus said, "... broad is the road that leads to destruction." The road to destruction is wide enough that you need not live with boundaries. Bring anything you want. The road to Hell is wide enough for any belief system or, for that matter, no belief system at all. Bring any pet sin. Validate any lifestyle choice. The broad road is the road of personal expression, liberty and of being accountable to no one.

In today's philosophical culture, all roads lead to God. In our age of alleged tolerance, the only intolerable religious point of view is that a single body of truth can be exclusively true. This pluralistic drivel has taken a toll. In a spring 2002 PBS poll, only 19% of professed Christians in the U.S. believed that Christianity is the only true religion. Now, if those findings are true, I have to question if the other 81% of professed Christians have ever paid any attention to Jesus' teachings.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Now, if 81% of alleged believers can really just erase all such rhetoric from their confessions of faith, they will get along quite nicely in this world. After all, there are many lovely themes in Christianity of which everyone approves. The world will accept Christians if they will just stop insisting that Jesus only is the Way to God and stop talking about their take on morality.

"Embrace Me on My terms, or don't." That was the crux of Jesus' call. The broad road does not always demand and out-and-out rejection of Jesus. Many today profess to believe fiercely in Jesus and to love Him dearly, but they do not prove their loyalty by doing what He says. Dying to self sounds a bit dramatic. Loving the unlovely, especially enemies, seems unnatural. The wide way to destruction includes rejection of Jesus, but it also includes any response to Jesus short of the one He demands.

B. Few Discover the Narrow Way

"Narrow" in verse 14 comes from a root that means "to compress". There is no room for the baggage that a spacious road can accommodate, but there may more involved here. New Testament scholar, D.A. Carson points out that this word for "compress" is closely akin to a word meaning persecution. Jesus may have been alluding to a path of hardship, something He never hid from would-be disciples.

One of the beatitudes in this very *Sermon on the Mount* spoke to the blessedness that mistreatment for the sake of Christ brings. Jesus warned His immediate disciples in Matthew 24:9, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." Later, Paul warned that every true believer will face some kind of mistreatment: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Timothy 3:12).

On the narrow path, a man is hemmed in on both sides by dangers, but they are only dangers when he veers from the path. If he strays because of sinful enticements, he is certain to encounter divine discipline, which is always intended for his good, to put him back on course. Persecution or ridicule in his path might frighten him and cause him to stray. The encouragement that only Jesus can bring helps us to keep moving forward. The narrow path demands self-denial and some degree of disrespect from the world. Were it not for the worthiness of the destination at the end of the path, there would be very little inducement for any Christian to begin the journey, much less endure it. But, of course, if the destination *IS* worth any cost, that's another story.

II. Walk toward a Reward, Not Ruin

A. Jesus Believed in Heaven and Hell

When Jesus spoke of "destruction" and "life", He was speaking of reward for those who follow Him and ruin for those who do not. People today are more comfortable believing in Heaven than in Hell. Modern man reels at the notion of accountability and punishment, so he fashions a mental idol of a God who is never angry and would never destroy anyone. Hell doesn't fit the new theology.

Typically, love is considered by most teachers to be a better motivator for following Christ than the fear of Hell. Perhaps, that is why these days, so little attention in preaching or teaching is given to the doctrine of Hell. My own experience tells me that love is a better motivator than fear, but only most of the time. Where there is no fear at all, there is no balance. Where there is no balance, man inevitably tends to exploit the love of God and to cheapen His grace. I certainly believe that the grace of God is a more important theme in preaching than the fear of Hell, but escaping Hell is a pretty big part of the whole Gospel package as it is presented in the Bible, so talking about it clearly has its place.

I find it interesting that some of the most terrifying descriptions of Hell in the Bible come from Someone we identify with profound gentleness. It is Jesus Himself who spoke of a place of eternal torment, of the weeping and gnashing of teeth, of outer darkness and isolation, of a lake of fire and of a place where the worm does not die. When we get our minds around the fact that Jesus clearly believed in such a destiny for the unrighteous, His invitation to life is quite remarkable: "Will you be my disciple and follow me into the life of the kingdom, or will you reject me to your own loss and ruin?"

B. We Choose Life at the Outset of the Journey

On a Sunday afternoon, I have been known to just drive around and see where I wind up. Typically, however, I have a destination in mind before I ever get behind the wheel. For most people, most trips begin with the identification of a destination. Next, the cost is considered. If you're only willing to spend *Dutch Wonderland* cash, don't be thinking about a trip to *Disney World*. Nobody picks destruction as a destination. They just settle for it by aimlessly choosing the path of least resistance.

When Jesus invites a man to choose Him, He is inviting that man to choose Heaven as well, but Christians in this current age of the church do not seem to give the attention to a home in heaven that was typical no more than a few decades ago. We don't reflect on heaven until we're either sitting at a loved one's funeral or coughing up our own blood. Has the mindset that we are pilgrims in a world with a home elsewhere become more relic than reality to us? Is it important? In the New Testament, and throughout the ages, the prize of heaven has always sustained troubled and harassed saints.

"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in.' Aim at earth and you will get neither."

- C. S. Lewis

When Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate ..." He called us to follow Him to a destination.

III. Walk with a Minority, Not the Majority

A. A Majority of People Walk the Spacious Highway

"Many enter" the wide gate to the broad road. Most, however, do not acknowledge that they are marching to destruction. Americans tend to let the democratic process determine truth for them. If many people choose a way, then it must be right. If enough people polled on a topic agree, that carries great weight with cable news networks, no matter how little any of them understand the topic. The majority ruled in 1883 Allentown, New Jersey when Abner Robbins ousted incumbent Sam Davis in the race for Justice of the Peace. Was this a banner day for the democratic process? Did a well-informed electorate speak? Abner Robbins turned out to be a wooden Indian from a cigar store.

God warned His people about majority rule: "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd" (Exodus 23:2). If 269 million Americans polled all believe some stupid thing, it is still stupid. If they take a stand contrary to what God has revealed, they are still wrong. If 100% of those polled believe that all roads lead to God, only God could possibly know that, and He says they do not. If He has spoken, and He has, His word must carry the argument.

B. A Small Minority Finds the Small Gate to the Narrow Path

"Only a few find it." God has always been the God of the minority. Noah preached for a hundred years. Only his family, eight people in all, was saved from the flood. Lot preached to the cities of the plain. Three people, Lot and his two daughters, survived the destruction of those towns. As many as a million people passed through the Red Sea in the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Two men from that entire generation, Joshua and Caleb, entered the Promised Land. Never be deceived by the opinion of a majority anytime that God, a majority of One, has already revealed His mind.

IV. Walk into Life, Not Luxury

A. The Wide Gate Is as Wide as the World

"For wide is the gate ..." If you've ever moved a bulky piece of furniture, you've probably gotten hung up in a narrow doorway or in a tiny hall. Jesus is painting an opposite picture. The gate to the road to Hell is wide and easily navigated. Bring all your stuff. Bring it in sideways. There's plenty of room. How wide is this gate? Every negative response to Jesus will get you in. Every idolatrous response to Jesus will get you in. Every non-response to Jesus will get you in.

If I were to ask you to run to *Starbucks* and get me a cup of coffee, would that be enough direction. A *USAToday* piece disclosed that there were 19,000 ways for *Starbucks* to serve a cup of coffee. But, when Jesus says there is a "small gate" that leads to life and a "wide gate" that leads to destruction, does that really sound like He is alluding to 19,000 possible ways to come to God?

B. The Gate to Life Remains as Exclusive as Jesus

"Enter through the narrow gate." Whether people actively pursue truth or whether they just hope to stumble across it, few find the narrow gate. This is because truth is not a matter for self-discovery. We are too sinful. Truth is made known when God reveals Himself. Jesus revealed the Father. Jesus says, "See your need, and I'll show you the gate." To believe Him is to choose life.

Not only must we leave behind our sins and our selfish ambitions, we must also leave behind all our baggage of self-sufficiency. A Pharisee cannot bring his self-righteousness. The rich man must leave His wealth. The strong man must leave his strength. The influential man cannot rely on his connections. The smart man cannot trust his own wisdom. On the narrow road, the grace of Jesus provides the only provisions that are useful.

Jesus would put it even more clearly in John's gospel: Speaking of where God's flock is safely kept, He said, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" (John 10:9). That's not politically correct or particularly tolerant of the notion of diverse paths to truth. In fact, it's not at all compatible with the spirit of our age. Jesus' way is not an easy road through this world. In fact, all this position has going for it is that it is God's truth, the only truth about how we can be saved for eternity.

Majority rule, your feelings, your inner light - none of these determine truth. I do not proclaim a narrow way because I'm trying to be intolerant. I proclaim it because I believe truth is a matter of God's revelation and I believe that Jesus revealed the Father. Many say, "I cannot believe that the way to God is so exclusive. I just cannot believe God would send anyone to Hell."

The real truth is that such a person does not understand the reality of God's holiness so he cannot face the severity of his own sin that keeps Him at a distance from God's holiness. When he does understand these things, he will become utterly broken over his own sinfulness, but he might also become utterly giddy with gratitude at the fact that God has provided even one way for man to be restored to Himself. That one Way, that One Path, is, in fact, a Person. Jesus is the Way.

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