

Week 19 – The Choice is Yours – Matthew 7:13-23

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:22-30

Introduction

Last week, we saw how Jesus summed up the major portion or the “meat” of his Sermon on the Mount when he stated the Golden Rule found in Matthew 7:12

But the sermon didn’t end with the Golden Rule as Jesus continued to speak to that crowd on the mountainside for another 15 verses

So we can’t stop with verse 12 and say that what comes afterward is unimportant – far from it

Actually, what comes after the “meat” of the sermon is in some ways the most important part because it contains a call for a decision from the hearers

It would be tragic to be exposed to Jesus’ teaching contained in the verses between Matthew 5:1 and 7:12 and to come away with only admiration for the lofty thoughts expressed in them without taking action

And it would be extremely unfortunate to consider and truly understand what Jesus said and to be convicted but never commit to the radical remaking that the sermon demands

Because every time we are exposed to a radical truth without responding to it we become a little more dulled to it and it becomes increasingly more difficult to ever be influenced by it

So Jesus comes to the closing part of his sermon and says, in effect, “I’ve shown you the character of those who dwell in the kingdom and told you that nothing short of perfection will do. Now what are you going to do with the information?”

And anyone who is exposed to the Sermon on the Mount is presented with a choice as to what they will do with it

The Bible is full of significant choices

In **Deuteronomy 30:19** Moses tells the Children of Israel –

...I have set before life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live...

In **Joshua 24:15** we see the call for the Children of Israel to choose whether they would serve God or something else

Psalms 1 details the choice between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked

We see a number of choices spelled out throughout the book of Proverbs – and there are many others we could name

And in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets four choices before those who hear this sermon

We will consider three of those choices today and take up the last one next week

First, we will consider that there are **Two Roads** that we might travel

Then we will see that there are **Two Guides** that we might follow

And, lastly, we will consider the fact that there are **Two Claims** that we might make when facing judgment

Legendary baseball player and manager **Yogi Berra** once wisely said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it”

And each of these choices presents a fork in the road that every person will face

Each of them requires us to make decisions that have a profound impact on our lives and determine our eternity

So let’s begin by looking at the first two verses under consideration, verses 13-14 [**Matthew 7:13-14**]

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

What we see here is that there are two roads, or ways, by which everyone travels through life and into eternity

I. Two Roads

Notice that Jesus introduces this choice by giving a command – *Enter by the narrow gate*

And then he goes on to describe the nature and the results of the wide and narrow gates

We most often consider these verses, and in fact this whole passage, as having to do with salvation

And I think that interpretation and application are certainly appropriate but also too narrow

Without a doubt, the Bible is clear that the way to salvation is quite narrow –

In **John 14:6**, Jesus said, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

That is certainly a claim of narrow discrimination and one of the criticisms leveled against Christianity, especially in our day of pluralistic thought that says people can choose their own path to God, is that it is too exclusive

But Jesus has just spent a great deal of time teaching his followers about the character of the kingdom and how a citizen of the kingdom of heaven should live and he has now turned to how his hearers should **apply** the sermon

So I think we need to recognize that there is more in view here than the choice of two gates, one that leads to life and one that leads to destruction, there are also two “ways” or two roads to follow...

We tend to view either a wide or narrow road leading up to a wide or narrow gate but, in view of what we’ve seen so far in the Sermon on the Mount it seems more appropriate to see the gates leading to roads beyond them

Picture if you will, a wide entrance that leads to a multi-lane superhighway and a narrow entrance that leads to a pathway that is constricted like a narrow crevice between two cliffs and is, in fact, a difficult pathway to negotiate

Jesus has been showing his followers that the character of the kingdom is constraining, exclusive, and difficult enough to be truly impossible through human intention and effort alone and I believe that is what Jesus is further touching on as he begins to give the application of his sermon

And after Jesus gives the command to enter by the narrow gate he turns his attention first to the wide gate and the wide road beyond it

A. The Wide Road

Perhaps the most frightening thing about the wide road is that the sign pointing to it doesn’t say “This way to destruction and death”

Rather, the directional sign says “This way to the good life, to personal satisfaction and fulfillment, and even this way to God and acceptance into heaven”

And it is the popular way because all you need to do to remain on the wide road is whatever you desire to do anyway

One only needs to follow their inclinations and absolutely no effort is required

In fact, the Greek word used for “easy” generally means spacious or broad and implies that the way is agreeable and pleasant

The wide road is the road of the open-minded and ideologically flexible; it’s the road of uninhibited morality and spiritual inclusiveness it’s the road that promises everything but the trip itself is all it has to offer

It’s the road of indulgence without judgment that says that it doesn’t matter whether you take the right or left lane or whether you go right down the center lane because all lanes lead to the same paradise – at least that’s what its sign says

No one really wants to be considered uncompromising or narrow do they – that’s kind of an insult these days

For that reason, the wide gate and road seem far more inviting and somehow nicer

Generally, people find it’s a whole lot more comfortable to be seen as tolerant and accepting

So it’s really no wonder that the majority decide to pass through the wide gate and to travel the wide road

There’s plenty of elbow room on the wide road and it’s spacious enough to easily carry everyone and all their baggage

But Jesus says here that in spite of appearances the wide road leads to destruction

Solomon said much the same thing twice in **Proverbs 14:12** and **Proverbs 16:25** where he wrote:

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

But the good news is that Jesus teaches that there is also a narrow gate that leads to a narrow road

B. The Narrow Road

Look again at verse 14 [**Matthew 7:14**] –

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few

In contrast to the wide and obvious gate this gate is so small that it is easily missed – in fact, a person would most likely not find the gate if it they aren't directed to it

Also in contrast to the wide gate where one can pass through with all their baggage in tow, the narrow gate requires those who pass through it to leave their baggage behind

Look back at **Matthew 5:3-4** with me and consider that those first two Beatitudes in a very real way form the doorposts of the narrow gate

One must recognize their true spiritual state which leads to a true poverty of spirit knowing they have nothing to commend them to or justify them before God

And one must have a true sorrow for their sin – they must actively mourn over their sin recognizing that they need to renounce it and leave it behind

That imagery accurately portrays how we must come to God with nothing but our inadequacy and our consciousness of sin accepting his grace as the only way to be saved

It is a narrow gate to be sure and not many are actually willing to shed what is necessary to get through it

We tend to want to do for ourselves and to have things our way so while passing through the narrow gate is actually a simple matter it is not typically an easy one

Nor is the narrow gate the end of the constraint as Jesus is upfront about the fact that the road that lies beyond the gate is narrow and that it will be difficult to travel

Jesus was always frank about what his followers should expect

In **Matthew 16:24** he said that anyone who would follow him must deny himself and take up his cross to do so

And in our passage this morning Jesus is perfectly clear that the way to God is exclusive and that the road that follows has boundaries and barriers that make traversing it arduous

But the journey is worth it all because it leads to life and in saying that Jesus obviously is referring to eternal life

However, we have the tendency to think of eternal life only as a *quantity* of life that goes on forever after we die

But there is also another aspect to eternal life that we dare not forget about – and eternal *quality* of life that every Christ-follower can and should enjoy during their earthly life – believers right now today can enjoy life in the kingdom

And the narrow road as Jesus describes it in the Sermon on the Mount is the key to that eternal quality of life

Undoubtedly, there are constraints on the road and boundaries to our thinking and behavior but the road isn't stifling or repressive – it actually permits us to have a complete fullness of life as God has always intended for man to live

Consider a fish swimming in an aquarium looking out through the glass and feeling unfairly restrained

So, one day he jumps out of the tank and lands on the floor below gasping for breath as his life runs out

I ask you to consider, where was the fish more free; where was the fish more alive?

God created mankind to live in a certain way and one is never more alive, never more free, than when they live according to God's rules

Christ-followers are to be constrained by God's Word but that constraint leads to ultimate freedom now and in the future as Jesus makes clear in **John 8:31-32**

And the point I want to make with all of this is that even those who have passed through the narrow gate will be tempted to get off of the narrow road

The narrow road chafes; it scrapes and abrades to remove everything that is not worthy to pass through it

It's a hard road and there will be other roads that intersect it – off ramps to other ways that look quite inviting

It remains possible for the believer to still stray from the narrow road and impact their eternal quality of life even though they remain saved –

There is no question about their eternal life in heaven but they can do great harm to their journey toward sanctification

The only way to be like Christ in this life is to remain on the narrow road

Next, Jesus teaches that there will be those who try to entice believers away from the narrow road

II. Two Guides

Look with me at verses 15-20 [**Matthew 7:15-20**]

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

In this passage, Jesus describes two different guides but focuses on the false guides, or false prophets as he calls them, and the true guides are only somewhat tangentially mentioned

There are three things Jesus tells us about those false guides that I want you to note

A. Deception

The first thing we want to notice is somewhat intuitive – false teachers engage in deception

Jesus commands his followers to “beware” of false prophets and his command is made in the certainty that false prophets will come

That means we need to pay close attention to what those who presume to teach are actually saying – we need to always keep our spiritual guard up as we examine their claims

We all have certain people, preachers, speakers, authors, and so forth that we believe are trustworthy but we still need to stay on our toes and pay attention to what they say

I would dare to say that virtually all believers would run from obviously false teaching but that's not the way these false guides operate

Jesus says they come among us as wolves in sheep's clothing – hiding their heresy in the garb of what may well appear to be orthodoxy to the casual observer

False teachers are only dangerous because they appear to be genuine

Thankfully, Jesus says these false guides can be detected

B. Detection

Notice that Jesus says we can recognize a false teacher by their fruits

In other words, Jesus says if we look at the life of a false prophet, if we take note of what they do and not just what they say, we will recognize them for what they are

Many false teachers are great orators, charming personalities, and very skilled teachers who skillfully attract many of those who are unaware simply through force of oratory and plausible persuasion

Those who were listening to Jesus on that mountainside would have known about the buckthorn plant which has little black berries that could easily be mistaken from grapes with a casual glance

And they knew about the thistle that had a flower that looked just like a fig from a distance

But no one would confuse either a buckthorn berry or a thistle for a grape or a fig once they really looked at it

False teachers can look like the real deal and even their fruit can appear to be genuine from a distance or for a time

But the nature of a false teacher cannot be hidden forever and sooner or later they will be revealed if we really look at them and what they do

In other words, we are to be “fruit inspectors” but we need to be careful because Jesus isn’t deputizing us to necessarily be “heresy hunters” for the purpose of condemnation

In just a moment I’ll flesh that out but the point is that we need to be looking at those who would teach us

We need to make certain that their message and is faithful to the Word of God and that they teach the whole counsel of the Word of God – one of the marks of a false teacher is they typically like to cherry pick which doctrines to emphasize in order to make their claims and support their views

And we need to make certain that a teacher is striving to live a life that is in fidelity with and growing in the character of the kingdom

Jesus says that we are to be fruit inspectors for our own protection and not to be judgmental of false teachers – remember, Jesus had just condemned judgmental attitudes

Our job is to recognize false teachers so that we can avoid them

And Jesus next tells us that the future of unrepentant false teachers is destruction

C. Destruction

In verse 19 [**Matthew 7:19**] Jesus says *“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”*

Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, said much the same thing in **Matthew 3:10**

And in **James 3:1** we read – *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*

Clearly, God takes leading people astray seriously and the ultimate fate of a false teacher is settled and we see it prescribed here and we don’t need to add to it

God will take care of the false teachers our task is to know them for who they are and to avoid them so that we don’t fall prey to their false teaching

Regarding the judgment to come we see next that Jesus describes two claims that will be made at the judgment seat

III. Two Claims

For that let’s look at verses 21-23 [**Matthew 7:21-23**]

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Jesus says here that one claim will be a false profession

A. False Profession

I believe there are quite possibly two different types of people who are categorized here as making a false profession

The first would be **those who are trying to “pull a fast one”** as it were by coming before Jesus and calling him “Lord” while still having things their way

They point to their works that they have done allegedly in Jesus' name and try to have the weight of their works be enough to get them into heaven

They travelled the **narrow road of legalism** that is a counterfeit version of the narrow way that Jesus presents in the Sermon on the Mount but they never passed through the narrow gate of salvation – because legalism doesn't save

They never actually put their full and complete trust in Christ as their Savior or turned their life over to him as Lord – remember that Judas Iscariot mouthed all the right words and did all the same things as the other disciples

And Judas looked so genuine that the other eleven had no idea who would be the one to betray Jesus even to the point of wondering if they might be the one

Some of them may also be the false teachers that Jesus has just warned us of

He speaks of them again in **Matthew 24:24** where he says –

... false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect

So, Jesus naturally rejects them telling them, *"I never knew you"*

But I also think Jesus is saying there will be **some who come to him, presumably reverently and sincerely**, addressing him as "Lord"

And those folks are the ones that really trouble me because I think the Evangelical movement may well be responsible for producing many of them by unintentionally promoting a doctrine of "easy-believism" – belief without commitment

These would be the folks who prayed the "Sinner's Prayer" by repeating the words of a petition that was not their own but they never actually possessed the recognition of their sin and the poverty of spirit that is necessary for salvation

And they believed mouthing the prayer like an incantation against evil was enough – like a "Get out of jail free card"

So they continue on living a lifestyle that shows no fruit of repentance thinking that all is forgiven and they are "okay"

And the profound tragedy is that these people consider themselves to be genuine believers and they fully expect admission to the ultimate kingdom of heaven

But Jesus also says that there are those who will come before him on that day making a true confession of faith

B. True Confession

Of course, one must turn to Christ to be saved that is absolutely essential

But I don't believe it's possible to be saved without intending to obey – in other words, one cannot say "I will accept Jesus as my Savior but I reject him as my Lord" and be saved

And Jesus says the evidence of a true confession is obedience

Let me say that again, Jesus doesn't say the *way* to be saved is obedience; he says the *evidence* of being saved is obedience

He says in **verse 21** that the one who enters the kingdom is *"the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"*

It's not enough to know the Father's will, to admire it, to discuss it, even to teach it – the Father's will must be obeyed

D.A. **Carson** put it this way:

It's true, of course, that no man enters the kingdom because of his obedience; but it is equally true that no man enters the kingdom who is not obedient. It is true that men are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ; but it is equally true that God's grace in a man's life inevitably results in obedience. Any other view of grace cheapens grace, and turns it into something unrecognizable. Cheap grace preaches forgiveness without repentance, results without obedience. In the entire history of the church, has there ever been another generation with so many nominal Christians and so few real (i.e. obedient) ones? And where nominal Christianity is compounded by spectacular profession, it is especially likely to manufacture its own false assurance.

Does this mean that we must perfectly obey and never fail in our obedience?

No, thankfully Jesus knows how we are made and he remembers that we are dust [**Psalm 103:14**] and he has compassion on us – he is merciful and patient as he molds us to the character of the kingdom

There are times when we fail through weakness, ignorance, carelessness, and sometimes, let's be honest, willfulness

But even as we fail our hearts must be characterized by a general desire to obey in all things and the willingness to have the character of the kingdom be formed in us

Citizens of the kingdom should be striving to live in obedience to the standards of the kingdom and in fidelity to the character of the kingdom because they will then enjoy the benefits of the kingdom now and in the ultimate kingdom to come

Conclusion

The Sermon on the Mount is viewed by many as the ultimate standard of human achievement and they believe that all the rest of the Bible could be discarded if only we would so as it says

And, to be sure, the world would be a much nicer and better place if everyone was striving to live up to the standard of the Sermon on the Mount

But Jesus doesn't conclude his first recorded sermon with lofty ideals of human triumph and the ultimate goodness of mankind

After having proclaimed the character of the kingdom of heaven he presented his hearers with a series of choices

And for each choice there are only two options and how one chooses has a profound effect on life here and now and for all eternity

Every person must choose one of the only two gates leading to two different eternal destinies

In **John 10:7** Jesus said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep."* and in **John 10:9**, *"I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture."*

That's the narrow gate that leads to life and the only other alternative is the wide gate that leads to destruction and everyone must choose

Then there are two and only two paths that we can follow and the narrow road is the road of obedience that leads to sanctification, the road to the character of the kingdom, the road to becoming increasingly like Christ

And as we strive to travel the narrow way we must choose whom to follow and whom to trust

When Jesus asked the twelve if they were going to leave him Peter answered [**John 6:68-69**] –

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Then we will one day stand before the Lord and either give a true confession supported by our earthly obedience of a false profession revealed by lawlessness

Love of the Lord is demonstrated by obedience to the Lord as we see in **John 14:15**

The path is narrow and it is difficult but it is the way to life and for those who pass through the narrow gate, victory is assured – those who choose properly are guaranteed victory in the end

May it be said of each of us that we ***always*** chose Jesus

Let's pray