

THE ONLY WAY TO GO MATTHEW 7:13-14

The two verses we are going to study are the beginning of the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. From the middle of chapter 5 until verse 12 of chapter 7 Jesus has been giving a commentary on the Law. Every person listening to Jesus preach was intensely interested in the Law. They loved the Law. The Law was as much a part of their identity as the blood that flowed through their veins.

But as they listened to Jesus, something happened to their sense of spiritual well-being as it related to the Law. Up until this time they thought everything was fine. They thought they were doing all the right things. They thought they were safe, secure, in good standing with God. After all, they were God's covenant people, the guardians of Scripture, the subjects of the kingdom, the heirs of promise. They were righteous, because they were Law-abiding.

But after listening to Jesus they came to the realization that they were in trouble. That's one of the things Jesus intended to do in this sermon. He was showing them that no matter how much they loved the Law, esteemed the Law, and attempted to keep the Law, it wasn't enough to make them righteous.

They were guilty—every single one of them—and all of us too. Guilty at every point. Jesus proved that we cannot claim to have obeyed *any* of the commands—since murder, according to Jesus, is not merely taking the life of a person, it's attacking his character. Jesus said, "You're guilty of murder when you are so angry you call someone 'a fool,' and that is serious enough to be sentenced to hell" (5:22).

Likewise, adultery is not just sleeping with another man's wife, it's *wanting* to. Jesus said when you look at a woman lustfully you're guilty of breaking the command (Matt. 5:27-28).

What does this mean? Everyone is guilty! Everyone is in trouble. Because it's not just murder and adultery, it's *all* the commands. We cannot keep *any* of them the way God intended for them to be kept. There is no one righteous, not even one!

So if you think you are going to heaven because you have kept the Law, you are deceiving yourself. You have *not* kept it. You *cannot* keep it. Oh, you can keep it some of the time; you may be able to keep it *most* of the time; but you cannot keep it all the time.

Jesus has deliberately created a spiritual crisis in the lives of those who heard or read His words. Why? Is He mocking us? Is He dangling a carrot in front of our faces and saying, "Here it is, try to get it, but you'll never have it?" Is He saying, "C'mon people, you're not trying hard enough...Put some more effort into it?"

No. Jesus is creating a crisis because He was exposing our self-delusion. He didn't say anything new. He was merely interpreting the Law in the way it should always have been interpreted—without any excuses, without any crutches, without any escape routes. And only when they saw the righteousness of God in the Law as Jesus interpreted it, could they say, "Uh oh, I'm in trouble. I don't measure up. I can't do this!"

Is that good? Absolutely! It's good because it's true. You see, up until this time the Jews had been influenced by the teaching of their religious leaders who made a game of tweaking and fine-tuning their definition of righteousness and then imposing it on the general Jewish population. They interpreted righteousness as religiosity and rule keeping, and they competed with each other to see who could be the most religious and keep the most rules in the most extreme ways.

And the Jews were enamored with these religious fanatics, thinking they were the models of righteousness they should aspire to imitate. And Jesus astonished them when He said in chapter 5, *“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:20).

Jesus was saying, “Look, the righteousness that is required for admission into the kingdom is far purer and far more comprehensive than even the most righteous human being possesses. It’s a righteous-ness that is perfect and complete; a righteousness that far exceeds rule-keeping and religiosity; a righteousness that none of you possess or are even capable of possessing through your own efforts.”

So are we doomed? Is it possible to go to heaven? Or do we stand condemned forever? Jesus gives us the answer in **Matthew 7:13-14**. ¹³ *“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. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

This is an allegory—an illustration of a spiritual reality. In an allegory each of the elements of the story are important and are intended to have a spiritual counterpart, and so we need to look at all the details because they all have meaning.

Jesus likens people to travelers on a journey. Implicit in the story is that all travelers are trying to get to heaven, which Jesus refers to as “life” in verse 14. Heaven is the desired destination (after all, no one wants to go to hell, and no one sets out to go to hell). But Jesus makes it clear that not all travelers will *get* to heaven; in fact, *most* will not. So please listen carefully as we study this allegory, for its meaning is absolutely crucial in understanding our eternal destiny.

The story begins with an imperative. An imperative is a command and it is nonnegotiable. Jesus says that there is something you must do if you are going to have eternal life, and if you don’t do it you won’t have it. And it’s the same for every person.

“Enter by the narrow gate.” That’s it. You’ve got to go through a gate. Please note: Nothing is said about how well people prepare themselves for the journey, or about the spiritual heritage or reputation or credentials of the traveler—how much theology he knows, what kind of spiritual pedigree he has, how many good works she has done, or how religious she is. Nor is anything said about the *sincerity* of the traveler—how badly he wants to get to heaven or how earnestly she pursues heaven.

The emphasis is on the gate. Jesus is saying that if we are to enter into the kingdom, if we are to have eternal life, we must enter through a *gate*. And not just any gate. Not the gate of the traveler’s choosing or the gate which is most pleasing or popular or accommodating to the traveler’s lifestyle or preferences. No. It is a single, specific gate. Jesus identifies it as the *narrow* gate.

That narrow gate is contrasted with another gate—a *wide* gate, and notice what He says about *it*. **Verse 13b.** *For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.* He then, in verse 14, contrasts this wide gate and easy way to the narrow gate and a difficult path that leads to life that only a few find.

Most every time Jesus tells a story there are surprise elements, and the gate is the first surprise element of this story. Typically, when you think of traveling to a destination and you think of the *safest* route, you think of the road *most* traveled; the road that is widest and easiest to navigate; the road that is able to accommodate the most people. Conversely, the road that is perceived to be the most perilous is the one that is narrow, steep, crooked, and

less traveled.

Hear what Jesus is saying in this story: A wide gate, an easy path, many people on it; its destination *destruction*, and *destruction* is a metaphor for hell. A narrow gate, a difficult path, few people on it; its destination *life*, and *life* is a metaphor for heaven.

Every person has entered one of these two very different gates and is currently on one of these two very different paths leading to two very different destinations. Now here's the hard part. *Most* people are on the path that leads to destruction. Relatively few are on the path that leads to life.

Is that a fair assessment of what Jesus has said? I'm not asking if you like what He said, I'm asking if you see it in the text.

One other thing before we look at the meaning of this allegory. Jesus said that the gate that leads to life, though *accessible* to all, is not *apparent* to all. He says "*those who find it are few.*" And I presume that few find it either because they don't *know* about the narrow gate, or if they do know about it they do not think it's necessary to go through it, or they know about it but reject it as the way that leads to life.

Okay. It's time to find out what is meant by these two gates and two paths. What do these gates represent? In a literal sense, a gate is the entrance or access into something. In the ancient Near East cities were surrounded by walls, and there were gates in these walls that enabled traffic to flow in and out of the city. Jerusalem, for example, had twelve gates, each wide enough so that traffic could go in and out smoothly, without a great deal of congestion.

At night, however, those gates were closed to protect the city from enemies and intruders. The only access to the city at such times was through a small, narrow door usually located adjacent to the main gate. It was wide enough for one person to go through with not much besides the clothes on his back.

Everyone listening to Jesus would have had a mental image of these city gates. In this story Jesus is saying that there are two gates which are both open and accessible. They represent the starting point, the access or entrance into one's eternal destination—either heaven or hell. And what is implied in the story is that you *have* gone or *will* go through one of these two gates.

You might be thinking, "I don't *believe* in heaven or hell, and I certainly haven't made a choice to go through any gate! I don't believe there are such gates; I don't even believe in *God!*"

Jesus, who is the authority on eternal life, says that you have gone or will go through one of these two gates, and you have been or will be on one or the other of these two paths. Even a nonchoice is a choice. Unless you go through the narrow gate of your own volition, you *have already* gone through the wide gate. That's why Jesus says, "*Enter by the narrow gate.*"

It is only through that narrow gate that you will get on the path that leads to life. You cannot go through the wide gate and be on the road that leads to destruction and then decide, later on, to take a detour and get on the way that leads to life. The journey to eternal life in heaven begins through the narrow gate.

So, what does this gate represent? The gate represents the *terms* of admission into heaven. It represents the condition that enables one to have eternal life. And the reason this gate is so narrow is because there is only *one* term and *one* condition for admission into the kingdom. In other words, contrary to popular opinion, there are not many paths that lead to

God and heaven. There is *one* path and *one* gate and they are both narrow.

Perhaps the closest parallel we can make in our day is to compare this narrow gate to a turnstile that you see at a stadium or amusement park. Picture, if you will, a turnstile that is so narrow you cannot carry anything with you through it.

That is the point Jesus is making. When we come to the gate leading to God and eternal life, most people come laden with all kinds of spiritual luggage. They've got a trunk full of good works, a suitcase full of their own ideas, a satchel full of the world's philosophies, a briefcase containing important documents like church membership, baptismal certificate, family tree, church attendance records, good citizenship awards, Bible reading schedules, charitable contribution receipts, etc. And they come to the gate with one or more of these pieces of luggage, wanting to be able to take them through the gate.

Why? Because most of us want to (and think we *have* to) contribute something to our own salvation. We have a natural desire to try to earn God's acceptance. "If only I can be religious enough; if only I can do enough good things; if only I can impress God enough to make Him take notice of me and pronounce me righteous."

But Jesus says, "No. It won't work. The gate is narrow. You cannot get any of that spiritual baggage through. There's no room for it."

That is another surprise element in this story. We don't secure eternal life through our own efforts or good deeds. We don't bring anything to the door of salvation! In fact, we must forsake those things—leave them behind, renounce them and confess that they are not what gets us admission into the kingdom.

So what are the terms and conditions? How do we get through the gate?

Jesus said in John's Gospel, "*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved...*" (10:9). The gate is a Person. The gate is Jesus Christ. And the gate is *narrow* because it is *only through Him* that you can be saved and have life. Jesus also said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (14:6).

Now, the people who were listening to Jesus did not yet understand what this meant. They understood, after His teaching about the Law, that they fell short, that they could not live up to the standard of righteousness prescribed in the Law. But I submit to you that they *could* not yet understand what this meant, not even His closest disciples. It wasn't until after Jesus' death and resurrection that the *meaning* of the narrow gate became clear to them.

Jesus Christ is the only One who has ever perfectly obeyed the Law. He Himself said in Matthew 5 "*I came to fulfill the Law*" (5:17). And that He did. He never once had an impure thought, a bad attitude, or an ulterior motive. He didn't have a self-centered bone in His body. He was tempted in every way that we are, yet He never once gave in. He was perfect. He completely measured up to God's standards of righteousness.

You know what that means? Only Jesus is worthy of admission into the kingdom of God. The rest of us fall short. The rest of us don't have what it takes. We are morally and spiritually impoverished, bankrupt, high and dry. If the Law tells us anything it tells us how sinful we really are, and how it is impossible to measure up.

So where does that leave us? In the only position in which it is possible to enter the kingdom of heaven. A position of utter helplessness. I take you back to the first statement Jesus made in His Sermon on the Mount. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 5:3).

You are on the threshold of the gate of the kingdom when you are poor in spirit—when you recognize your moral and spiritual poverty. In order to cross that threshold into the

kingdom you've got to trust in the righteousness of Jesus.

You see, the righteousness that is required to get into the kingdom is not yours, it is His. One of the things Jesus did when He died on that cross is to take our sin upon His body. The Apostle Paul said, "*God made him who had no sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21). That was God's plan all along. He knew we couldn't keep the Law. He knew we would never be righteous on our own. So He voluntarily, out of pure love for us, became sin for us. He bore our sins in His body and experienced the punishment we deserved so that we wouldn't have to be punished by being condemned to hell. He became our Substitute!

And when we come to Him, acknowledging our moral and spiritual bankruptcy, and say, "Jesus, I come on the basis of what you did for me on the cross. Please wash me, please cleanse me, please make me righteous!" The Bible says that He takes His very own righteousness like a garment, and wraps it around our spiritual nakedness, so that we stand before God in His merits.

Where are you in relation to Jesus' words? Have you gone through Him, the narrow gate, and are you on the path that leads to life?

You say, "But why are there so few who find it? I can't believe a merciful God would condemn people just because they didn't go through the proper gate."

My friends, God is merciful. He didn't have to send His Son into the world. He could have sent us all to hell and been perfectly just in doing so. In His mercy He provided a way. But it's the *only* way. We don't come to God on our own terms, we come to Him on His terms. And His terms are very narrow—we come through Jesus. On the merits of His righteousness, and His alone.

I was talking to someone who asked me why there couldn't be more than one way. He couldn't believe that God would condemn sincere seekers. And so he has constructed his own theology which goes like this: "Everyone really believes in Jesus, they just interpret Him in different ways. Hindus who believe in 336,000,000 gods are really worshiping Jesus, they just don't know it. And Muslims who say it was really Judas and not Jesus that died on the cross and deny His resurrection really, in fact, do believe Jesus died for them, they just don't know it. Everybody is going to be saved ultimately. Such is the mercy of God."

What are the words of Jesus? And *few...and few...and few* there are who find it.

Don't bet your life on the prevailing opinions of our day. Hear and heed the words of Jesus.

You may be here and you've always thought your status with God was secure, based on your own good works, your background, church attendance, and your efforts to obey the commands of God. You've thought all along that when you stand before Him He would commend you for your righteousness.

I hope today you've seen that could never happen. You are incapable of being righteous enough. That's why you need to trust Jesus. Our entrance into the kingdom of God demands perfect righteousness, and that's something none of us is able to produce. We need the righteousness of Christ, transferred to us.

If you've never trusted Him and Him alone for your salvation, won't you make this the day of your salvation? Jesus Christ loves you. Jesus died for you. He was crushed by the weight of your sin when He hung on that cross. He paid your penalty. He made it possible for you to be forgiven and freed from sin's dominion. And He offers to give you a new

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March 3, 2019

nature—one that is capable of being like Him. One that is capable of reading the Sermon on the Mount and saying, “By God’s grace, I can do that.”

Won’t you receive Him?

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THE ONLY WAY TO GO MATTHEW 7:13-14

MAIN IDEA: THE ONLY WAY TO GOD AND HEAVEN IS THROUGH JESUS AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

THE CONTEXT

JESUS' COMMENTARY ON THE LAW

JESUS CREATES A CRISIS IN EVERY PERSON

THE ALLEGORY

TRAVELERS ON A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

THE NECESSITY OF ENTERING THE *NARROW* GATE

THE WRONG GATE AND ROAD

THE *NARROW* GATE AND PATH
ITS DIFFICULTY

ITS OBSCURITY

ITS UNPOPULARITY

THE MEANING

WHAT THE GATE REPRESENTS

WHY THE GATE IS SO *NARROW*

HOW TO ENTER THE *NARROW* GATE

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

Matthew 7:13-14

1. Read **Matthew 7:13-14**. Jesus does not explain the specific meaning of this allegory to His audience, even though it is about the most important issue of life—how to have eternal life. Why do you think this is?

What does it tell you about Jesus' understanding of salvation?

2. Have you entered the narrow gate? How can you be sure?

3. What does Jesus mean that the “way” or “path” to life difficult?

Can you think of some specific ways your personal journey on this path has been difficult?

Can you discern any reason *why* it has been difficult?