

The Narrow Gate

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Introduction.

In our adult Bible class recently, we've been grappling with a difficult and counter-intuitive idea. Even though God wants all men to be saved, He did not make salvation as easy as possible. During His ministry, Jesus spoke in parables to the multitude, so that only the people who cared enough to come to Him to find out the truth would hear it.

To this present day, we see people deterred from becoming Christians by the requirements God has imposed. God could have said just as easily that all you have to do to be saved is to pray the sinner's prayer. That would have made true Christianity a lot more popular in our time. However, He didn't. If we want to be saved from our sins, we have to be baptized according to the Scripture, and all of us know people who aren't saved because they won't accept that.

This is not some oversight on God's part. He tells us in Isaiah 55 that His word does not return to Him without accomplishing His desire. He knew what would happen if the command to be baptized were part of the gospel. He knew that the humble would hear it and obey, and he knew that the proud would hear it and reject it. From that, we can only conclude that He intended both effects. Anybody who was willing to humble themselves and be baptized was someone God would welcome with open arms, but He wanted nothing to do with anyone too proud to listen.

Nor is baptism the only command like that. There are all kinds of stumbling blocks in Scripture for those who aren't truly committed to obeying God. He tells us that He has to be first in our lives, and that means that anything we want to put before Him is going to doom us. The consequences of this are both predictable and tragic. Because most people aren't willing to put God first, most people are going to be eternally lost. In the seventh chapter of Matthew, Jesus issues several dire warnings about how we can end up in that group. Let's pay attention as we study the narrow gate.

Principle and Prophets.

Jesus begins His discussion of this topic by setting forth **THE PRINCIPLE** He'll be exploring. We see this in Matthew 7:13-14. Although it is no less true than any other portion of Scripture, this must be one of the grimmest passages in the entire Bible. It tells us that the majority of people are going to be eternally lost, and only a few are going to pass into eternal life. Contrary to Calvinist dogma, this is not a fate that God is going to force on anyone. The Scripture here doesn't say that anyone is going to be driven through the gate that leads to destruction. Instead, everyone who ends up in hell will have chosen to go down the path that leads there. They didn't have that end result in mind, but they freely made the decisions that made eternal torment inevitable. Their tragedy is of their own making.

Why would they do such a thing? Why would anyone live a life that results in hell? According to Jesus, it's because it's easy to follow the road that leads there, and it's hard to follow the path that leads to life. Anybody can end up with the devil and his angels strictly by accident, but nobody is going to accidentally make it to heaven. The only way for us to enter into the joy of our Lord is if we spend our entire lives diligently seeking for the things above.

Needless to say, this is not a concept that the world around us accepts. Precisely because most people don't want to put in the hard work required to go to heaven, they prefer to believe the comforting lie that God expects nothing more from them than what they're already doing. Isn't that what people mean when they say, "All God wants me to do is be a good person"? They don't really believe that at all. If they were truly interested in being good, they would turn to God's word to learn how. Instead, if they were being brutally honest about their beliefs, they would say, "All God wants me to do is be me." They expect God to be pleased with the times they obey Him because they want to, and for the times they disobey Him. . . well, God wouldn't want them to be unhappy, would He? They do what is right in their own eyes, and expect God to cope. And then, on the day of judgment, they will be appalled to learn that God meant what He said.

We see this so clearly in the world, but we must take care for ourselves. Christians can strike comforting, self-deceiving deals with their consciences too. It's so easy for us to cling to our favorite sins, while reassuring ourselves that God is OK with us putting our jobs before Him, or lusting after people we aren't married to, or carrying bitterness in our hearts toward another. It's so easy to live with our own evil, day after day, and not hate it, and not do anything to fight against it. The fact that it is so easy to do that tells us everything we need to know about the road we're on when we do.

One of the easy roads to destruction is by following **FALSE PROPHETS**. Consider Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:15-20. Many people today have a mushy, worship-at-the-church-of-your-choice view of organized religion. All churches are equally good. All preachers are equally good. Such people would do well to recognize the message of 1 Kings 18. When Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, there was only one of him and 850 of them, and I wouldn't be surprised if the proportion of teachers of righteousness to teachers of lies was about the same today. However, most people don't spend much time questioning whether their preacher or pastor or whatever is a false teacher. They show up at church and accept whatever he tells them, and don't bother to study it in the word on their own, and

don't waste time thinking about whether their church is actually doing what God wants. They don't think and they don't question because it's easy not to. By now, we should have a pretty good handle on what easy religion gets us. That's why Jesus calls such people wolves in sheep's clothing. They look innocent, but they devour souls.

If we want to make it past the obstacle of the false teachers, we have to judge all teachers by their fruits, and the only fit standard of judgment is the word. We need to consider their personal lives to see whether they're living up to God's requirements. Most of all, though, we need to compare their teaching to what Christ and the apostles taught. Sometimes, the teaching of the sincere false teacher doesn't bother us as much as the deception of the religious hypocrite, but think about the results in each case. Let's say that some preacher is an adulterer. His adultery ruins his relationship with God, his family, and his church. He may even cause some to fall away and be lost. Pretty evil, right?

Now think about the preacher with an upstanding moral life who teaches that all we have to do to be saved is pray the sinner's prayer. As the result of his false teaching, everyone who believes him is going to be eternally lost. He can be responsible for hundreds or even thousands of people taking the broad way to hell. Adulterous hypocrites are bad, but false teachers are even worse. Their fruit, whether they realize it or not, is a harvest of death. We need to be cautious in our own lives to make sure that we aren't taken in by one, so that our souls are a part of that harvest.

Saying and Doing

Once we make it past that hurdle on the narrow way, we must also recognize that **WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH** to satisfy God. Let's ponder the scene that Jesus describes in Matthew 7:21-23. The day of judgment is going to be a glorious day for the people of God, but it's also going to be a day filled with many tragic and pitiable sights, and this is going to be one of the most horrifying sights of all. Imagine some poor soul who lives his life thinking that he's doing right. He goes to his death fully convinced that he's right with God. Then, on the day of judgment, he calls out to Jesus as his Lord, only to discover that Jesus was never his Lord at all. All he receives from the King is an abrupt dismissal. Words cannot express the despair that such a man would surely feel. Such hope, such expectation, dashed in an instant, and replaced with the terrifying certainty that the lake of fire that waits for the wicked waits for him too.

Brethren, if I fear anything in heaven or on earth, I fear that. What if I presume a relationship with God that I never had or that I lost? Thankfully, in a world that is filled with uncertainty, that is one thing that we don't have to be uncertain about. The standard that Jesus will use to judge us is no mystery. He tells us in John 12 that we will be tried according to the word that He spoke. We have that word. We have everything that God wants us to do. We can hold it in our hands, we can read it, and we can understand it. The reason why all those sincere, deceived sinners will be punished so harshly is that they should have known better. In at least a dozen different places, the Bible tells us or shows us that we must be baptized, and any one of those Scriptures is enough warning by itself. After that, the way to heaven is difficult, but it is simple. There is not a single Christian here who is incapable of grasping what God wants him or her to do. The more we study, then, and the more we put into practice what we read, the more we are assured of our salvation.

In fact, it's upon this hopeful note of **HEARING AND DOING** that Jesus finishes. Look at His message in Matthew 7:24-27. This is a passage that is perhaps best known to us because of the children's song we sing about it. Even as I read it, I feel like I should be getting my hammers ready. However, we must not let our familiarity with it obscure the depth of the reassurance it gives us. After all of these dire warnings that Jesus gives us about what will happen if we don't hear the word, or if we don't obey it, He tells us that if we do hear and obey, we will be safe.

This security through all the storms of life and beyond is priceless. I can remember, back when Lauren and I lived in Beaumont, in 2005, we had to evacuate out of the path of Hurricane Rita. They wouldn't even let us back into the city for two weeks. During those two weeks, I had no idea what we were going to come back home to. I knew that the devastation had been immense, that several brethren had lost their homes to wind or flood or falling trees. I wondered more than once if everything in our apartment was now hanging from pine trees halfway to Houston. Imagine my relief to return to the apartment complex to find that the roof hadn't even leaked. Admittedly, the whole apartment stank to high heaven because of the food that had rotted in the fridge and the freezer, but everything was basically all right.

I had to wait until after the storm until I could be sure that the foundations of our apartment were secure, but the joy of a life founded on Jesus is that we don't have to wait to know. He has promised us that if we hear Him and obey Him, there is no rain or wind or flood imaginable that can destroy us. What a comfort! We don't have to live in fear every day. We don't have to be uncertain about what will happen to us after we die. We only have to trust in Him.

Of course, the opposite is true. If we hear the words of Jesus and don't obey them, we can also be certain about what will happen to us. Just as the house that is founded on the rock is secure, the house that is founded on anything else is sure to be destroyed. We don't have the promise of His protection through all the challenges of our lives, and after our lives are over, we have to confront the grim prophecy of our ruin. Without Jesus on our side on the day of judgment, we will lose it all, down to our souls themselves. As we've said throughout this lesson, it's not easy to be a follower of Jesus. However, when that day comes, all who haven't will discover that true hardship lies in being apart from Him.