

JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT XVII. "Crossroads"

2-25-07

Ken Peterson
Matt 7:13-14

- 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.*

INTRODUCTION

This certainly has to be two of the more disturbing verses coming from Jesus' lips. Jesus began this Sermon on the Mount with unqualified tenderness and inviting phrases from the beatitudes to: "the poor in spirit", "the merciful", "those who mourn", "those who thirst", "the persecuted." Now, Jesus ends His sermon with unqualified warnings that what He is teaching is not just one of many options or good suggestions on how to live, but it is a life and death matter. It's decision time and Jesus is clearly preaching for a verdict.

The word "enter" that begins our text is in the imperative. The KJV conveys a better sense of command, translating this, "Enter ye!" There comes a point, a crossroads where a choice must be made. This is why someone said, "All life concentrates on a man at the crossroads." It is there we see the motivations of the heart, what controls us, and our goals. Here, the past influences and the future we desire focus upon the present moment.

Bill Keane is a Christian cartoonist, best known for his "Family Circus" cartoon, the most widely circulated comic panel in the world. He sometimes slips in some significant Christian content. I like this one I've put in the bulletin where the grandmother is walking past a church sign with her three little grandchildren. The sign reads, "What about the Hereafter?" And the grandmother says to the children, "The 'after' depends upon the 'here.'"

That is a good summary of what Jesus is emphasizing in his closing three illustrations in this sermon, the first of which we are considering this morning. He gives us a very descriptive word-picture here— two gates in a road. The obvious, big, wide gate is on a broad super-highway where the masses of people are going. The other gate is very small and easily missed. The road is narrow and looks insignificant and not many people are on that road. Most people pass it by without even noticing. Jesus is clearly saying, our eternal destiny, our "hereafter," depends upon which gate we choose. The broad, easy, popular way leads to eternal destruction. But, the

narrow, tiny gate that only a few find, is the only gate leading to eternal life.

The ending of Robert Frost's famous poem comes to mind:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference.*

Jesus is talking about far more than the road less traveled, though it certainly is that. Here it is about salvation and the ultimate question of life, "Where we will spend eternity?" I want us to ponder the implications of this metaphor, for it also has much to say about how we live now.

1. What does He mean by "narrow?"
2. What about the "few?" Will only a few be saved?

THE NARROWNESS

The narrow gate and narrow road are not particularly attractive terms to us. It is, I would guess, where the term, "walk the straight and narrow" comes from. But none of us wants to be considered narrow-minded. When you consider all else that Jesus has said, it doesn't make sense to think Jesus is saying that to be a Christian we need to be narrow-minded, except in one respect—our relationship with Him. There is an exclusive way that leads to life brought to us in Jesus. It is not just one philosophy of life among others that are equally good. Jesus' way happens to be the only way that offers life now and eternally. We'll consider this more in a moment.

I don't think most of us would define Jesus as being narrow-minded. Throughout His teaching, He is opening up life to God and the mind-boggling purpose He has for each one of us. To the atheist, there can be no purpose in our existence beyond right now—so be selfish, pursue your animal pleasures. Why not? Against this we have Jesus telling us and demonstrating that we are created to partner with the Creator of the universe in a colossal battle against darkness and evil being fought on planet earth. Throughout this sermon, Jesus has been sparking our imaginations to catch a glimpse of what life is meant to be. He came to break us loose from legalism's confining rules so we can discover the liberty of the children of God. Love is expansive and forgiving is wide, whereas hate is confining and narrowing to a soul. Self-absorption is narrow, giving is broad. Anxiety constricts the forces of life but trusting in a loving Father in heaven opens us up to live in peace and joy. Darkness imprisons and light opens us up to life. The lure of moral permissiveness tempts us with the illusion of freedom, but soon we find ourselves bound by the power of sin and driven by our own lustful desires. While the narrowness of sexual purity and not getting even with those who hurt us may be hard to accept in light of the broad free-for-alls going on through the wide gate— as we pass through its narrowness we find what freedom is.

This narrow gate is Jesus and His way. The person who Jesus is and His teachings are at one with one another—there is no dissonance. They form a seamless whole. Jesus later defines Himself as the Gate in John 10—

Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.... I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.

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, 9-10)

That last verse is also translated, *I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly* (KJV). “Abundant life” or life “to the full” hardly sounds narrow. So, while the gate is exclusive, Jesus alone, the life beyond is as broad as Jesus is. When Jesus uses the word “life” He is referring to more than just the here and now. It is spiritual life now but that is eternal. So, as we receive the life Jesus gives us, it continues on into eternity– we live forever.

A few weeks ago, the news was filled with the sad story of astronaut Lisa Nowak who was arrested for the attempted kidnap and murder of another woman she saw as a rival for her affections for another astronaut who was not her husband. Being an astronaut is about the pinnacle of success in our world’s eyes. The news media seemed incredulous with the “whys?” They kept wondering about why someone so talented, so well-educated, so well-put-together as to pass NASA’s rigorous psychological testing would do something so stupid and sordid. And of course there are demands now for NASA to do a better job of screening astronauts. I heard other “possible” explanations put forward– too much stress, depression, etc. But the real problem of course is sin. How do you screen for that? And sin is not just for the uneducated and unsuccessful. Her story is an example of the bondage that sin places us in. She was unfaithful to her husband, and was in love with another astronaut. But then she found out she had a rival for that astronaut’s affections who was 13 years younger. Bound by hatred and fear of losing out to her rival she felt she needed to destroy her. This jealousy became so consuming, she wore a diaper to eliminate time lost in pit stops and drove straight through for 900 miles to destroy the other woman. Does that sound like freedom? While that may be a more extreme example than we ordinarily see– it is the nature of sin and rebellion against God’s ways to put us in bondage.

Jesus says, if we enter through Him into the way that supplies life– and we do this by choosing Him as Lord of lives– then, this loving Lord who has only our best interests in mind breaks the dominion of our fallen natures and the powers of this dark world. He triumphed over them on the cross. He redeems us, buys our freedom from the prison we find ourselves in to the world, the flesh and the devil. He then offers us His power to live no longer controlled by these destructive powers. That is true freedom, and what George Matheson meant when he wrote: “Make me a captive Lord, and then I shall be free.” Being captured by the narrow way, the Jesus way, sets us free. As Jesus affirms later, *if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed* (Jn. 8:38).

There is a creeping universalism in the church today which says essentially everyone is going to be saved in the end. Well, maybe some of the very, very evil people won’t be, like some child pornographer, but most all who’ve done their best will be saved. The thinking of our age in 21st century America goes something like this. “While Christianity may be for me, who am I to impose my way on anyone else? All religions teach good things, so any religion will do as long as a person sincerely practices it. Even no religion is okay as long as a person is doing the best they can. And of course, it would be intolerant to say another religion or religious practice is wrong.” We’ve almost made a god out of tolerance in our time in America. This kind of thinking sounds good to us and feels right. We want to be broad and open-minded to all ideas. The

problem is, Jesus clearly didn't teach this. While Jesus is highly inclusive of people, He is exclusive when it comes to the way of salvation. This is only the first of many times Jesus indicates that He is the only way of salvation. This text is at the beginning of His ministry. The last night with His disciples, He declares, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn. 14:6). So, Jesus brackets His ministry with the claim that eternal life and salvation are through Him.

This is unreasonable if we are saved by what we do, by good works. For why should anyone who is sincere, doing their best to be a good person be excluded from heaven? But if Jesus is merely defining a spiritual law, then it is simply the way things are whether we agree and whether we like it or not.

Suppose I purchase a new truck with a diesel engine. But, I think it is terribly narrow-minded that I should use only diesel. Regular unleaded gas is cheaper, so I decide, since it is my truck, I will do as I please. Can I do this? Well, yes I can. But will my new truck be "saved" in this way. I could argue it is not fair and I don't like such a rule to use only diesel. But in the end, I'm bumping up against reality and some laws of physics and combustion. By not operating within those laws, I am only hurting myself in the end. (I don't know what happens when you put gasoline in a diesel engine, but I'm sure someone will tell me at the end of the sermon).

The Bible lets us know there is a spiritual law involved which required God's only Son to die to atone for our sins. It's just the way it is, a spiritual fact. I don't think anyone fully understands why this is the only way salvation can come. You can like it or not. You can think it is narrow and you can refuse to accept it. But that doesn't change the fact that it is God's only provision for the salvation of humankind. We must each one receive Jesus as our Savior and our Lord by faith to be saved. This is the essence of Christianity. We are not saved by our good efforts and good works, but by the atoning act of Jesus Christ. That is why salvation is through Christ alone. Proverbs 16:25 warns: *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*

You see, the central problem of the human race, one that has been amply demonstrated throughout our history, is that knowing what is right does not make us do the right things. Moral law and following rules can never save us. Our problem is that our hearts are bent in the wrong direction, they are corrupted, they are pulling us toward evil. External reforms and rules cannot change what is deep inside. Only Jesus can do that through the miracle of the new birth. We can be born again. That is why Jesus came. Through Him, and Him alone, our hearts can be recreated and made new because He is the Son of God, died for us, and rose from the dead to offer the gift of eternal life— a heart made new. That's why He is the gate.

THE FEW

We hate to be part of a minority. Think about how many products are sold on the basis of "everybody's doing it/ has it/ etc." As a child, I think we were the last in neighborhood to get a TV— how embarrassing! All my friends had TVs long before my father broke down and bought one (still over the protest of my mother who could see nothing good to come of TV). Also, I think we were the last in the neighborhood to get a power mower. Isn't it remarkable that I

survived such humiliation among my peers?

These words of Jesus, "*Only a few find it*," are not encouraging to our herd instinct. "Everybody does it" will not be a helpful criteria for Christian ethics. Christians can expect to be lonely. In Luke 13:23-24, Jesus repeated some of the substance of this teaching in response to a question from the disciples, "*Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?*" Jesus' response was,

"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to."

Certainly we see this in Jesus' own ministry. He was very popular early on. At end, the fruits of 3½ years, we apparently have about 120, gauging from the number in the upper room.

We live in a deceptive time in this regard. Polls show that 94% of Americans say they believe in God or a higher power, 84% believe the Ten Commandments are valid today, and 75% believe in heaven and think they have a good or excellent chance of getting there. One-third of our adult population claim a life-changing religious experience and for one-fourth of them this included asking Christ to be their personal Savior. But George Gallup, himself a devout Christian, who has been polling the American people for 50 years, says:

"we have concluded much of religion, unfortunately, is superficial—'feel-goodism.' People want the fruits of faith but not the obligations... People are following their own agendas and not Christ's."

Our challenge is to be sure we have not been seduced by the broad, popular way of our culture. We need to continue to work on the application to all of life. While finding the narrow gate is speaking of salvation, it is also speaking to the choices we make in our everyday lives. There is always an attractive, "easier" alternative to Jesus' way. He's been confronting that throughout His sermon. We want to be self-sufficient, in control of things, secure in our own strength rather than choosing the Jesus way of letting go and letting Him be in control. We want to hide our light, our witness, rather than shine for Jesus and face possible rejection. The same can be said for every other truth Jesus has taught in this sermon.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this series, the Beatitudes with which Jesus begins this sermon, are a good summary of some of the most important truth of what it looks like to follow Jesus' way of coping with life and making decisions. In closing, I want to read those again for you, from The Message. They give us a good start on what it means to choose the narrow gate.

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. Which choice offers more of God and His rule?

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. Are you willing to feel your loss and reach for God rather than a cheap substitute?

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. Which gate is the one to less striving?

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat. Choose the way that heightens your hunger for God.

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'careful,' you find yourselves cared for. Seek the way that leads you deeper into caring and loving as Jesus does.

You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. Go through the gate of uncompromising purity of mind and heart.

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. Make decisions that lead toward peace.

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Welcome the pain and rejection that propel you into a closer dependence upon God.

CONCLUSION

Whatever you are facing now, I want you to think about what the narrow way is— the way of Jesus. It is always more attractive to go the broad, popular way and trust man rather than God. In business, in vocational choices, and in moral choices, I see those on the Jesus way shunning the easy worldly way and demonstrating the glories of the abundant life Jesus offers. Apply Jesus' way to every part of your life, every decision, every problem. It probably won't be popular and it may well be difficult. But it is the only way that leads to life.