

The Only Way to Heaven

Matthew 7:13-27

Code: 81-139

As we continue in our series—and I don't know how long this will go; we'll have to see—I told you a few weeks ago that I wanted to just go through the four gospels in a somewhat random fashion, selecting very important words and conversations from the lips of Jesus, and that's what we're doing—the very words that He said, and how critical and significant they are. And we come to a third one of those this morning, and it's a rather extended passage. But turn in your Bible to Matthew 7, Matthew 7. It's a very familiar passage; and I want to read verses 13 through 27.

Matthew 7:13-27, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

You have here a very definitive section of instruction from our Lord; it simplifies the complexity of religion. And religion on its surface can be very complicated, and the number of religions and the nuances of religions and the forms and iterations of religion are confusing, to put it mildly. But what you have here is a very simple revelation that there are only two religions: There is one connected to the narrow gate and one to the wide gate. One connected to the way which is broad, and the other connected to the way which is narrow. One leads to destruction; the other leads to life. One has many people on it, and the other has few. And when you move down sort of to the end of the line on those roads, you meet some people who came on the broad road in verse 21, and they lay claim to knowing the Lord, doing things in His name. But definitively He says in verse 23, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." Then in verses 24 to 27 you have depicted a final judgment, in which the religious people are divided between those who built on a rock and those who built on sand; and those who built on the rock fall under judgment, but that judgment doesn't touch them. Their house survives. Those who built on the sand fall under judgment, and destruction is the result.

This is a very, very important portion of Scripture. There are a lot of familiar statements in here that you've heard in the past, but it's the definitive nature of this passage that is so helpful. There are only two religions. There are only two possibilities. To put it simply, there is the true religion, and all the rest is false. All the rest may come under endless labels, but in the end it's false. It's basically a product of the false teachers mentioned in verses 15 to 20, and its fruit, like theirs, is all bad. So whatever the name of a false religion is, it's just a name because there's only two possible religions: the true and the false. There are endless iterations of the false, but only one that is true.

From what we've read here there is the religion that's related to the works that people do, done by the flesh, producing a kind of self-righteousness. I like to call it the religion of self-achievement. But on the other hand, there's the true religion, which is by faith, in the power of the Spirit, that brings heavenly righteousness. That's the religion of divine accomplishment. Just those two—and they don't mix.

If you go over to the ninth chapter of Matthew and drop down to verse 16, our Lord gives a couple of illustrations of how they are incompatible: "No one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine in old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

What is that about? What our Lord is saying there is you can't match these two religions. You can't sew them together. You can't place one within the container, as it were, of another. Doesn't work. They don't mix. Again, there is the religion of human achievement, which is based on works done in the flesh, producing a kind of self-righteousness. The other is faith, operating in the Spirit and bringing heavenly righteousness. And the world is locked in a struggle between these two religions. The true one is under the power of God; the other one is under the power of Satan.

Now the first contrast that we see with these two is in verses 13 and 14, so let me draw your attention to this. In these two verses—and they're very brief—there's a density, however, of reality. There are four contrasts here, verses 13 and 14: two gates, two ways, two destinations, and two crowds. Two gates, two ways, two destinations, and two crowds—and that's all. All religion fits into these two.

Two gates, let's start there: the narrow gate, verse 13, and the wide gate. Now the idea here is that these are gates that are marked "heaven." They're marked "heaven" because down in verse 21 it's obvious He's talking about the kingdom of heaven, and the ultimate end of life, which is either destruction or life, life eternal as is referenced in verse 14.

So these are two gates, you could say, to heaven, gates of salvation. And by the way, neither of them says "hell." Nobody's selling hell. Nobody is propagating a religion that sends you to hell. They're promising you heaven; but unless it's the true religion, it's a damning lie.

So let's start with the gates and understand what our Lord is saying. Let me break it down simply. It's a command in verse 13: "Enter. Enter." You must enter. This is an absolute command. Not enough to stand and admire Jesus or admire His ethics or even the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount on which this is placed. This is a gate, and its purpose is to let in and shut out. Like Matthew 25, you remember, when the ten virgins were getting ready for the bridegroom to come at the wedding feast, and five of them wandered off. And while they were gone the bridegroom came, and the virgins that were there entered in, and the door was shut.

A door is designed to let in and let out. So it's not enough to stand and admire Christ, admire Christianity; you must enter. And you are going to be essentially a part of one of these two religions—if you don't enter the narrow gate, by default you're going to find yourself on the broad road through the broad gate.

So let's just start with that: You must enter. And if you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must enter the narrow gate, the narrow gate. What do you mean by "the narrow gate"? It's as narrow as the gospel; and the gospel is very narrow. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Me." That's narrow.

Jesus said, "I am the Light." "I am the bread." "I am the living water." And those were all singular claims. Acts 4:12 says there's no salvation in any other name than the name of Jesus. Romans 10:17 says faith comes by hearing the message concerning Jesus. First Corinthians 16:22 says if you love not the Lord Jesus Christ, you're damned. And 1 Timothy 2:5 says there's one mediator between God and men: the man Christ Jesus. He's the only gate.

You must enter. If you want to be in the kingdom of heaven, you must enter, and you must enter this gate.

A third thing to think about is you must enter this gate alone, alone. You leave the world behind. You leave family and friends behind.

If you go a few chapters over, to chapter 10 of Matthew and verse 34, Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household.”

This is not a group exercise, not a matter of race, not a matter of circumcision, not a matter of family, not a matter of community; you must enter alone. The kingdom grows one soul at a time. You have to break away from the crowd, and even the most intimate people in your life, who are very frequently going to be your enemies.

There’s more. You must enter this narrow gate, you must enter alone, and you must enter with a certain measure of force. That may sound strange. You might think, “Well, I thought it was easy. Don’t you just pray this prayer?” You see the TV evangelists say, “Repeat after me, and you’re in.” It doesn’t seem too difficult. In fact, it seems ridiculously easy: “Just parrot this prayer.”

But this is not easy, and we know that because at the end of verse 14 it says, “There are few who find it.” It’s hard to even find it, let alone enter it. Why is it hard to find it? Because you’re darkened by sin, because you’re doubly darkened by Satan (the god of this world has blinded your eyes), and because of all the false teachers, verses 15 to 20, spreading lies to deceive.

“Few there be that find it.” And for those who find it, it’s very difficult to enter. You have to count the cost. This is clearly indicated by our Lord. You have to count the cost. You have to be willing to step away from the people that you love the most.

In John 12 it says you have to hate your own life. In Luke 9:23 it says, “If you want to come after Me, you want to follow Me, then deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.” This is why it’s difficult—because it’s a complete surrender.

In fact, in Matthew 11, verse 12, there’s a most interesting statement: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.” It’s not so easy. It’s not so easy. In Luke chapter 13, listen to verse 24: “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” It’s with great difficulty that you enter. There’s a certain violence to it, as you have to be separated from everything that was important to you.

Listen to Luke 16:16, “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.” The people who come into the

kingdom come because they are desperate, so desperate they are willing to abandon themselves. They're willing to confess Jesus as Lord and themselves as His slaves.

According to Luke 14, they're willing to count the cost. According to the parables of Matthew 13, verses 44 to 46, they're willing to sell everything to buy the pearl of great price, sell everything to buy the treasure in the field. It's selling everything. Self-denial: "Take up your cross"—which means it may cost you your life—and follow Him.

So you must enter, you must enter this gate, you must enter alone, you must enter with a certain amount of violence (difficulty), and you must enter naked, in a sense—with nothing in your hands. You can't go through the narrow gate with your baggage; it's a turnstile. It's the gate of self-denial. You can't bring everything with you. That's what our Lord said to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19. He wanted to hold onto everything that he possessed, and the Lord said, "Unless you're willing to give up everything you possess, even your money, you can't be in the kingdom." He wasn't about to do that because he was very rich, and turned his back.

In other words, when you come on through the gate you hold onto nothing. You're basically saying, "Lord, take whatever You want, take whatever You will; I want You, and I want Your blessing and Your reward far more than I want anything that belongs to this passing world." And there's basically a kind of summation in all of that of what repentance means. You're turning your back on everything. So entering the narrow gate, Jesus is demanding essentially what He demanded in Luke 9:23: Deny yourself, take up your cross—that's the only thing you bring with you, is an instrument to be crucified on—and obey Him.

On the other hand, you could choose the wide gate, easily found, easily marked with all kinds of false teachers pointing you in that direction. Lots of crowds, no difficulty, no self-denial. Bring your baggage, bring your sin, bring your self-will. No repentance, no surrender, no submission to Christ. It's the gate of self-indulgence. It's for those who want a little religion, but religion that doesn't ask them to give up everything.

Two gates lead to two ways. There is the wide way, or the broad way, in verse 13, and there is the narrow way in verse 14. Again, the same contrast. The broad way: You come through the wide gate, you bring everything with you—all your sins, all your tolerances. There are no curbs, there are no demands; nothing is forbidden. You can satisfy yourself—gratification, your personal will. This, you could say, is what Psalms 1:6 calls "the way of the ungodly."

But on the other hand, the way behind the narrow gate is a narrow way—narrow in the sense that it's constricted, it's pressed together, it's demanding. It calls for separation. It calls for obedience. It calls for sanctification. It promises persecution. You come on that way, and you essentially will battle all the way to glory.

And there are two destinations. The broad way, in verse 13, “leads to destruction,” which is hell; the narrow way “leads to life,” which is heaven—and there are only those two ways. And there are two crowds. There are “many,” “many” on the broad road, and “few” on the narrow, “few.”

It isn't long in this passage—in fact, it's verse 21—that we meet the many at the end of the broad way. Let's go down to verse 21: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many”—oh, there they are, there are the many—and they will say “on that day”—what's that day? That's the day they face God, face the Lord. And they're going to say, “Lord, Lord, we did do Your will. We prophesied in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles.” “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

That's the end of the broad way. You get rejected, and you get rejected by the Judge. And even though you lay claim to serving Him—you say, “Lord, Lord”; the repetition of that is fraught with a certain kind of passion. To say, “Lord, Lord,” is both polite and respectful, and you could say orthodox and fundamental, and full of passion and zeal and fervor. “[And] did we not prophesy in Your name?” “We were associated with You. And didn't we cast out demons in Your name, and in Your name perform many miracles?” Of course, these are false claims. “We were doing it all for You.” And this is the ultimate deception of false religion: You actually preach, assault the kingdom of darkness, and perform miracles in the name of the Lord, and He doesn't know you. Why? Because those are not the marks of true faith. The marks of true faith are obedience and righteousness. And He makes that clear in verse 23: “You . . . practice lawlessness; depart from Me.”

There has to be in this group the most disappointed people in all of human history. These are not atheists, these are not agnostics, these are not Muslims and Buddhists and whatever; these are people who outwardly identify with Christ, but their lives were not marked by righteousness, righteousness. In fact, a form of our Lord's comment, “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness,” is actually, “You who do always work lawlessness. Your profession is valueless.” This is the blasphemy of the sanctuary, which is worse than the blasphemy of the street.

So many people are in false religion and false forms of Christianity, millions of them professing to know Christ, and it's just empty words. They may call Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” but never submit to Him. They're not marked by righteousness.

Geoff O'Hara wrote, “[‘Why call me “Lord, Lord” and do not the things I say?’] . . . Ye call me the ‘Way’ and walk me not, ye call me the ‘Life’ and live me not, ye call me ‘Master’ and obey me not, if I condemn thee, blame me not. Ye call me ‘Bread’ and eat me not, ye call me ‘Truth’ and believe me not, ye call me ‘Lord’ and serve me not, if I condemn thee, blame me not.” James 1:22 says don't be just a hearer of the word, deceiving your own selves, but be a doer. It's not the profession, it's the reality that matters.

And we come, then, to verses 24 to 27, and we see the end of both roads, both groups. In a picture of judgment, judgment is depicted as a storm, and the individuals who are caught in the storm are depicted as houses. Verse 24, “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them”—that’s what righteousness is like: You hear, you believe, you obey.

“Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them”—does not do them—“will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

These are houses that are indistinguishable. The assumption here is they built these houses in the same location because the same storm hit them. They built a house—so this is common religious enterprise, a life of religious activity. They apparently built from similar materials because it was not obvious before the judgment who would survive and who would not. And our Lord pointed that out, didn’t He, in the wheat and tares. We don’t know who the wheat are and who the tares are until the judgment.

One built a religious house on *petra*, rock bed, and that would be Christ and obedience to His Word. The other built on sand, and that would be any other ideology propagated by the false teachers. And when the judgment comes, the house on the rock stands, and the house on the sand collapses.

And again, just to make the obvious clear, the final story will not be known until the final judgment. It won’t become manifest. And again, that’s why our Lord says let the wheat and tares grow together, because you can’t sort them out. I mean, really, if you have people saying, “Lord, Lord,” and proclaiming His name and going against the kingdom of darkness in His name and endeavoring to perform miracles in His name, pretty hard to tell whether they’re false. Now if you look at the life, and you see lawlessness and unrighteousness, it’s obvious. But hypocrites are hypocrites because they’re pretty good at covering that up. And I think there are people who are deceived about their own hypocrisy.

Everything comes down to this: What do you do with the Word of the Lord? “These words of Mine,” verse 24. “These words of Mine,” verse 26. Those who are truly saved live by the Word of God, love the Word of God, desire to obey the Word of God. They have a commitment to obedience, to righteousness, to sanctification as a dominating commitment in their life. Doesn’t mean you’re perfect; far from it. But this is what matters to them.

The people who build on sand are the people who don’t particularly care about obedience, and their house will be destroyed. Luke 6:47 and 48 makes a distinction I think is interesting, and it’s a parallel passage on this. It says the people on the rock “dug deep.” This man dug deep, meaning counting the cost, submitting will and way and life and possessions and relationships to Christ. It’s just a question of how deep you dig.

And again, it's not just as simple as parroting a prayer. If your house is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness, you have had a deep dive into the kingdom. You understand what you have abandoned and what you have embraced. How deep does your love for the Lord and your obedience penetrate into your heart and soul and life? That's the question that reveals where you are: narrow road or broad road.

And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourself, whether you be in the faith." The most important thing you can ever know—and the Lord will reveal it to you. You may be involved in the church, in a class, a Bible study, a group. You may be involved in the discussions of Scripture and theology as a curiosity or academic pursuit. But if your house is built on the sand, there's a great way to know that, and it is usually that you know you are over-indulgent in sin. You lack penitence. You have no hunger for holiness. You abuse grace. You have a secret life of hidden transgression.

So I repeat verse 13, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it." I hate the fact that it's "many," but that's the reality. Let it not include you. Let's bow in prayer.

And nothing, of course, in the world is more important than the gospel and the salvation that is made available through the gospel. Lord, speak to anyone who's holding onto anything in this world that's keeping them from fully committing to Jesus Christ. Show them the folly of that. Don't let them get away with empty words from empty hearts. Bring the truth to bear and the life both abundant and eternal that is available, because You are such a loving and gracious God. Do Your work in every heart, we pray, for Your glory. Amen.

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