

040: Taking the Road Less Traveled (based on Sermon #35 in the Life of Christ Series)

One of my favorite poems is Robert Frost's classic, *The Road Not Taken*.

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

Jesus speaks of two roads or paths that lead to two entirely different destinations.

- Every believer must choose which road they are going to travel in life.
- The road less traveled is the one that will make all the difference to your life in the coming age.
- Matt 7:13 Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.
- Matt 7:14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Most commentators interpret these words of Christ as referring to initial salvation, that is, regeneration.

- According to that interpretation, those who enter the narrow gate and trod the difficult way, are on the pathway that leads to Heaven.
- On the other hand, those who enter the wide gate are traveling on the broad pathway that leads to destruction, which they claim is Hell.
- Many paintings and drawings have been crafted from this perspective.
- Gospel tracts are written from this angle, and even *Pilgrim's Progress* is based on this interpretation.
- Nevertheless, that raises some very important questions:

- 1. What does the word *life* mean in v. 14? Is it really Heaven, as most suggest?
- 2. What does the word “destruction” refer to in v. 13? Is it taking about Hell, as most suggest?
- 3. If v. 14 is speaking of initial salvation, then why is it referred to as a *way*, i.e., a pathway?
- Is Jesus suggesting that salvation is a process?

In light of other Scripture passages, this is not possible!

- For example, in John 5:24 Jesus said whoever believes on Him for eternal life has passed from death unto life.
- Presumably, those who do not believe on Him remain in a state of spiritual death.
- Once again, there is no pathway, no process; it's simply one or the other.
- One is either regenerated, having believed, or remains unregenerate, having *not* believed.
- It would seem that if this metaphor of the two gates and two paths is referring to the way to avoid Hell and go to Heaven, then it's a very poor metaphor, for it leaves us thinking salvation is a process that involves works.
- To arrive at that interpretation, one must superimpose theology on the passage.

Before arriving at what I believe is the correct interpretation of these verses, it is important to first consider the context.

- Chapter 7 of Matthew is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which begins in Chapter 5.
- Notice the opening verses:
- Matt 5:1 And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him.
- Matt 5:2 Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

- Jesus is speaking to His disciples — believers who want to know more about how to progress in discipleship.
- They want to live the Christian life in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord.
- In fact, the content of the Sermon on the Mount is teaching as to how disciples must live to qualify for kingdom inheritance.
- There is nothing in these chapters about initial salvation or regeneration.
- Jesus teaches on the assumption that His audience is already believing, for they are already on the pathway of discipleship, according to v. 1.
- Thus, Matt. 5-7 is about sanctification unto reward.

As pointed out in previous studies, these qualifications for kingdom inheritance are not merely for the first century Jewish disciples of Jesus.

- They are for disciples of the entire church age.
- How should we live in order to qualify for a position of ruling with Jesus in His coming Messianic kingdom?
- The entirety of the Sermon on the Mount answers that question, but by way of example, consider the Beatitudes, which is the opening text in 5:3-12.
- There Jesus lists the virtues of a kingdom-focused saint — poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, etc.
- To teach that initial salvation results from keeping these virtues is to suggest that salvation is by works.

I don't know of any evangelical Christians who would take that position, so why, then, do they claim that 7:13-14 are about matters of salvation, while 5:3-12 are not?

- That is inconsistent, for it interprets 7:13-14 out of the context of the Sermon on the Mount.

- Furthermore, in Matt. 5:13, Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world.”
- Jesus is obviously speaking to believers.
- Unbelievers are never called “salt” or “light.”
- The same line of reasoning can be applied to the entire Sermon.
- Simply put, it is important to interpret Christ’s teaching within context!

The verse immediately preceding the text of 7:13-14 is the golden rule (v. 12).

- Is the golden rule the way to initial salvation for an unbeliever?
- Absolutely not!
- But it is the means of sanctification for a believer who desires to “pull out all the stops” in discipleship.
- To summarize, Jesus is not teaching about matters of initial salvation in 7:13-14, He is teaching about two entirely different paths of living that any believer can pursue.
- Verse 14 refers to *the way which leads to life*.
- The word *way* in Greek, metaphorically, means “a course of conduct” or “way of thinking.”
- In contrast, v. 13 refers to *the way that leads to destruction*.

Thus, the *way* or *pathway* in these two verses is referring to two possible lifestyle choices that can be chosen by believers.

- It characterizes their way of thinking and their behavior.
- Jesus wants believers to enter by the narrow gate that leads to life, for it will lead to kingdom inheritance.

- Interestingly, the KJV translation does not use the word *narrow*.
- Instead, it uses the word *strait*.
- Notice the peculiar spelling, which is not the same as the more familiar *straight*.
- That is because this word in Greek does not mean “unbending.”
- It literally means “narrow,” thus the word choice in the NKJV.
- In fact, this word is closely related to two other Greek words, meaning “anguish” and “distress.”
- Clearly, this manner of living does not come naturally, even for believers.
- Deliberate choices are required if one would pursue this painful path.

If that were not enough, Jesus also uses the word *difficult* to describe this manner of living that He expects for disciples.

- The Greek word means “to press hard upon.”
- It is the idea of being beset with obstacles and troubles.
- Think of the Strait of Magellan, a narrow passageway for ships to travel through near the southern tip of South America, allowing a major shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific, or vice versa.
- But the Strait is fraught with dangers, for it is quite narrow, and ships can tend to be crushed against the rocks.
- The Greek words in our text carry the idea of being pressed for space.
- The narrow way is treacherous at times, for it is “hemmed in like a narrow gorge between rocks.”
- Without a doubt, the kingdom manner of living is not easy.

- Those who choose to follow this path of frequent hardships will surely pay a price.
- Discipleship is costly.

A close form of the two words described above is found in a single verse in one of Paul’s epistles:

- 2 Cor. 4:8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;
- The Greek word translated *hard-pressed* is translated *difficult* in Matt. 7:14.
- That adds another layer of meaning for the word.
- *Crushed* is a form of the word translated *narrow* in Matt. 7:13-14.
- The narrow way can, at times, seem *crushing*, but we learn from Paul that it does not have to *crush* us.
- Paul is using these terms in a spiritual sense, which is how Jesus is using them as well
- Here is a paraphrase of 2 Cor. 4:18: “We are beset with obstacles and troubles on every side, but we are not crushed by them. Despite the persecution and pressures that come while serving God, we will choose not to allow them to derail or discourage us. We will not get overwhelmed, by the grace of God.”

Is this not the essence of dying to self — choosing the path of hardship that comes with confessing Christ, with the end result of becoming a partaker in His sufferings?

- Keep in mind that those who suffer with Him will be glorified together with Him (Rom. 8:17).
- To help His disciples fully understand what is required for kingdom inheritance, Jesus uses yet another Greek word in the parallel passage in Luke.
- Luke 13:24 Strive to enter through the narrow gate.

- The Greek word for *strive* is *agonizomai*, from which we get our English word *agonize*.
- To agonize is “to struggle,” as pictured by a wrestler competing for a prize.
- Another definition is “to suffer mental anguish.”
- Jesus wants you to agonize to enter through the narrow gate.
- In other words, despite all the hardships and trials and persecutions that will come from living for Jesus, He wants you to die daily.
- He wants you to pursue the narrow path where you will constantly seem under pressure and hemmed in on all sides — for that path leads to life!

What is the *life* to which He refers?

- It is not Heaven, but abundant life in this age (John 10:10), and abundant entrance in the coming kingdom age (2 Peter 1:11).
- It is the privilege of dwelling in the Father’s house in the kingdom of the heavens, New Jerusalem (John 14:2).
- It is the joy of being glorified together with Him (Rom. 8:17) and ruling with Him (Matt. 25:23).
- Incidentally, choosing the pathway of life is not something that happens merely once in a lifetime.
- It requires daily, moment-by-moment decisions to enter through the narrow gate repeatedly, by dying daily.

Those who do not consistently choose the narrow path that leads to life are, by default, on the broad path that leads to destruction.

- That way is undoubtedly more popular, for it does not require pain; it is not agonizing.
- But it leads to destruction.

- The word *destruction* bothers some folks, because their mind is trained to equate this word with Hell.
- But that is not correct.
- The word simply means “ruin or loss.”
- Vine says the word indicates, “loss of well-being, but not of being.”
- This is seen clearly in Matt. 26, the only other time this Greek noun is used in Matthew’s gospel:
- Matt 26:6 When Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste?”

The disciples were upset that the expensive ointment was being wastefully poured on Jesus’ feet. Destruction is waste.

- The same Greek word is also translated *perish* in Acts 8:
- Acts 8:20 Peter said to him (Simon, the sorcerer), “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!”
- Is Peter telling Simon that he is going to Hell?
- Of course not! Acts 8:13 makes very clear that Simon was a believer.
- But being an immature believer, he foolishly desired to gain apostolic power by paying for it.
- Peter essentially says to Simon that, if he continues with that attitude, both he and his money will *perish*, that is, come to spiritual destruction or ruin.
- The point to be made is that this Greek word translated *destruction* in Matt. 7:13 is used repeatedly to refer to the waste or ruin of one’s spiritual life and, consequently, loss of rewards.

This manner of living is characterized by a wide gate and a broad way, because it is easy.

- It is the path of least resistance which most believers take. It does not require tribulation, or suffering for Christ, or being made conformable to His death, or counting the cost, or dying daily, or taking up the cross.
- It is characterized by living for self and temporal things, which is the default for all saints until they get serious about following Jesus in discipleship.

Diametrically opposed ways of living for believers are described by Jesus in Matt. 7, depending on one's choices —

- a narrow gate vs. a wide gate, a difficult way vs. a broad (easy) way.
- A way that leads to life vs. a way that leads to destruction.
- The narrow way represents following Jesus in discipleship, whereas the broad way represents the way of fleshliness and worldliness — following selfish desires and passions.
- Christ's way requires that a high spiritual price be paid, whereas the way of the world requires indulgence, because everything is free.
- The difficult way is eternally focused, but the easy way is temporally focused, on the here and now.
- The end of Christ's way is life and joy and peace.
- The end of the world's way is destruction, ruin, and waste of one's life.
- Consequently, the narrow gate ultimately leads to rewards, whereas the wide gate leads to negative reward, which is punishment, according to Col. 3:25, being repaid for the wrongs done (see also 2 Cor. 5:10).

Many pursue the broad path of destruction, and they are ruining their lives spiritually.

- Few pursue the strait gate and the narrow path. Doesn't this explain a great deal about Christianity?
- First, it explains how so many people can be regenerated and not living like it.
- Second, it explains why there is so little teaching on the kingdom and discipleship.
- Third, it explains why teaching on the kingdom is often rejected.

Jesus has been speaking about way of life choices that lead to abundant life now and kingdom inheritance in the age to come.

- He closes the sermon with a vivid illustration.
- Matt 7:24-25 Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.
- Matt 7:26 But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

Those who take heed to all that Jesus has just preached will be like a house built on a rock that withstands the pressures and tribulations of life.

- However, those who do not take heed to all He has just preached will be like a house built on sand that collapses under pressure — and their fall will be great (v. 26).
- Of course, the two houses are representative of the two ways of life a saint can choose.

- Those who enter the narrow gate and live on the difficult path are like the house on the rock.
- On the other hand, those who enter the wide gate and live on the broad path are like the house on the sand.
- These are metaphors not only for life and how one can live it, but also for the end result of life — the reward or loss one faces at the Judgment Seat.

The apostle Paul uses another metaphor that essentially paints the same picture of two possible lifestyles for believers.

- 1 Cor 3:11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
- 1 Cor 3:12-13 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.
- 1 Cor 3:14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.
- 1 Cor 3:15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Jesus is the foundation of rock. Anything else is a foundation of sand.

- Those who build on Jesus Christ with gold, silver, and precious stones will have a structure that abides – like the house on the rock.
- They will receive a reward, for their soul will be saved at the Bema of Christ.
- However, those who build with wood, hay, stubble on a worldly foundation will suffer loss.
- Their work be burned up, and they will not be rewarded.
- They will not reign with Jesus in His coming kingdom.

- Are you taking the road less traveled, that leads to life, or are you on the highway of destruction?
- Are you building a house on rock or sand?
- Is your building being constructed using imperishable materials or consumables?
- The choice is yours.
- But you will give an account at the Judgment Seat of Christ for what you choose.
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS