

Enter through the Narrow Gate

 Matthew 7:13-14

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We come tonight to the concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-29. This section follows the main body of teaching which is marked by an *inclusio*. An *inclusio* is a section marked by a similar expression at the beginning and ending of the section. This *inclusio* began in 5:17 with the expression "the Law or the Prophets" and ended in 7:12 with the expression "the Law and the Prophets." Since the Law and the Prophets was the first century expression for the entire OT then what Jesus was essentially doing in the main body of teaching was giving His teaching and practical application of the OT in contrast to that of the scribes and the Pharisees, and in particular, the Mosaic Law. In 5:17 He prefaced His views by stating that He did not come to abolish the OT. Why would He make this prefatory remark? Because his teachings and practices were so contrary to that of the scribes and Pharisees that He could be interpreted as abolishing the OT Law. But in all actuality He had come to establish the OT Law and it was the scribes and Pharisees who had abolished it. How had they abolished it? By distorting its teachings and applications. How did they distort the OT? How can you distort a written text? There are three ways you can distort a written text. First, you can add to it. By adding words to it you are shifting the meaning. Jesus gives evidence that they had added to the Mosaic Law. Second, you can change it. By changing it you are changing the contextual meaning of the words. Jesus gives evidence that they had changed the meanings of some of the words of the Mosaic Law. Third, you can subtract from it. By subtracting words from it you are also shifting the meaning. Jesus gives evidence that they had also subtracted from the Mosaic Law. So adding, changing and subtracting are the three basic ways you can change the meaning of a written text and the scribes and the Pharisees used all three. By the way, it is sinful to distort the language of the text since language is the vehicle by which God communicates to man and that's why both the OT and NT give strict warnings not to add to or take away anything from the text. Yet these sinful distortions are what was taught in the synagogues Sabbath after Sabbath rather than the true meaning of the OT Law. This is what most 1st century Jews thought the OT Law taught. They were firmly convinced of it.

Now what are the ramifications of adding to, changing or subtracting from the written OT text? If you receive wrong teaching then the practical expression of that teaching in everyday life will be a distorted righteousness. It won't be the righteousness God was looking for. How do we see this distorted righteousness in the lives of the scribes and Pharisees? They wanted to simply be seen by men. They were not interested in being noticed by God. They wanted to be seen by men. As a result when they got noticed by men what reward did they have with God? They didn't have any reward with God. God didn't notice it. So what was Jesus' instruction to His disciples? That they needed to reject the teachings and practices of the scribes and Pharisees because they were not the righteousness God was looking for on the basis of an honest interpretation of the OT Law. I point up the honesty of interpreting the text because many interpretations are disingenuous. They are given by men who do not believe the text could possibly say what they don't already believe! It's a statement of their unbelief.

Now what is being contrasted in the Sermon on the Mount? Two kinds of righteousness. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees which resulted from their distortions of the OT text and the righteousness of Jesus which resulted from the accurate teaching of the OT text. Which righteousness was necessary for that generation to enter the kingdom? Notice I'm asking a question about the condition for one generation to enter the kingdom. I'm not addressing the question about the condition for an individual to enter the kingdom. That has always been by faith. One has to be born again to see the kingdom and the new birth is by faith. But what was the condition for one generation of Israel to actually see the kingdom come and enter into it? To have a righteousness in keeping with the true interpretation of the OT Law! Remember? Blessing and cursing were outlined for Israel in Lev 26 under the dictates of the Mosaic Covenant and therefore the enjoyment of the blessings under the Abrahamic Covenant were conditioned on obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. Well, if the Mosaic Covenant was being distorted by the leadership in synagogue after synagogue then how can they ever hope to enjoy blessing? That's what Jesus is expressing in Matt 5:20, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." They weren't walking in obedience. Jesus was speaking to that generation of Israel. On the basis of that verse, could that generation see the kingdom come and enter the kingdom without an experiential righteousness that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees? No way. Scripturally, one generation of Israel has to have a righteousness to see the kingdom come from heaven to earth and enter that kingdom in mortal bodies. Jesus is just pointing up the condition that must be met. The generation must be living in obedience to the Mosaic Law. That was always the condition for blessing in the kingdom to come. So I think what Jesus is doing here is challenging His disciples to personally teach and practice His interpretation of the Mosaic Law so that they would be salt and light to that generation of Israel so they would repent of following the scribes and Pharisees and follow Jesus instead.

That is what Jesus continues to teach in Matt 7:13-14. Here He says, **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.** Now what's this all about? What is this illustration depicting? Is this about salvation? This is the first and most common view. Commentators conclude that the wide gate is the way of the world and if you enter through that gate then you are taking the path most people take that leads to destruction in fiery hell. The narrow gate is the way of salvation and if you enter that gate through faith and remain on the path of good works then it leads to salvation in heaven. That's the perseverance view of this passage.¹ It says that all salvation is by grace alone but it's not easy, it is costly and calls for you to stay committed on the path of good works and the end if you do is heaven. What's the problem with that? The Bible just doesn't teach it. It teaches that a believer *should* have good works and *should* persevere to the end of his life, not that he *will* have good works and *will* persevere to the end of his life. Scripture is multitude with exhortations to do good works and persevere, not that we necessarily will do them. If every believer will do them then the exhortations to do so are superfluous. Further, examples are multitude of believers who did not persevere in good works until the end. A second view is that of discipleship. This view says that both gates are entered by those who are Christians. The wide gate is the gate most Christians choose to enter, it opens to an easy path but it leads to a spiritually impoverished life. The narrow gate is the gate very few Christians choose to enter, it opens to a difficult path, the path of true discipleship and if you enter into that gate and continue on that path then in the end you will receive rewards. That's the discipleship view of this passage.² What's the problem with that? There are many problems. One is that Jesus is not speaking to Christians, He's speaking to Jews. Jews were interested in the kingdom. Another problem is that it is unlikely that the language of destruction is used of a true Christian. But really the chief problem with both the salvation and discipleship view is what? That they take the Sermon out of the covenant context of the OT. This isn't a salvific message. This isn't a discipleship message. This is a covenant message similar to the OT prophets who called the nation Israel who were living in disobedience to the OT Law to repent and return to obedience so they could enjoy blessing in the kingdom. You can never lose the context or you end up out in the tullees somewhere.

Let's get the context. Note that as we've pointed out this instruction is given to a mixed group of Jesus' disciples and the crowds. Earlier it had been given to just Jesus' disciples who He called near the Sea of Galilee. But now the crowds have gathered in and so His disciples and the crowds are present. We might venture to say that the crowds were exclusively Jewish but it's possible on the basis of Matthew 4:24-25 that there were some Gentiles present. Jesus' ministry had clearly reached Gentile regions such as Syria and the Decapolis and many had come to be healed. But regardless of Gentile presence or absence, the message of the two gates is an intensely Jewish message. Jesus was a Jew and Jesus came to His own

and what was His message was for the Jews? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repent. What does repent mean? Have a change of mind. Have a change of mind about what? About the teachings and practices of the scribes and Pharisees. Were their teachings and practices truly righteous? No. They were the leaders of the nation and they taught the people this pseudo-righteousness. The entire sermon has been Jesus contrasting their teachings with His own. So what is necessary is that the Jewish people have a change of mind about who they are going to follow. That is the only way to enjoy blessing in the kingdom. So they need to repent of the teachings and practices of the scribes and Pharisees and that is why Jesus has given such a sharp contrast between their teachings and His own. Anytime anyone needs to repent about something what has to happen? They have to see the difference between the two views. You can't rightly have a change of mind from one view point to another if you don't see the difference in the two viewpoints.

So in this illustration of the two gates, and not this one only, but also the two later illustrations, Jesus is challenging them to repent. The first illustration is two gates that lead to two paths that lead to two destinies. The second contrast is two trees that bear two kinds of fruits. The third illustration is two foundations upon which two houses are built that end up in two different conditions. Why is Jesus giving three illustrations of two ways? So the people can see both viewpoints clearly and make an intelligent decision to repent or not to repent. Jesus didn't ask people to repent based on some kind of blind notion. Jesus gave them clear information and told them to decide based on careful thought about the two viewpoints. To decide to follow His teachings and practices would be to repent concerning the teachings and practices of the scribes and Pharisees. To continue following the scribes and Pharisees would be to not repent.

So as far as the theme goes has the theme really changed? No. What has changed is simply the audience; it has broadened beyond His disciples to include the crowds. But the issue is still the same. The nation is in disobedience to the Mosaic covenant. They need to repent and return. The crowd may be composed of believing and unbelieving Jews. That really is not the issue. The issue is repent and return to covenant obedience so that the blessing of life can be enjoyed in the kingdom!

Let's look at the illustration of the two gates. In these verses Jesus pictures the people in the nation Israel as standing before two gates with a decision to make about which one to enter. On the other side of each gate there is a path and each path leads to a destiny. There is one command and the command is verse 13, **Enter through the narrow gate**. What would it mean to **enter through the narrow gate**? If you say believe in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved or choose to be a true disciple you're going down a tortuous exegetical path. What's the context? The kingdom. What was John the Baptist's message in 3:2? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 'at hand' means near, not here, near. What was Jesus' message in 4:17? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The condition for the

kingdom to come was repentance. So I take it that this command to **enter** is synonymous with the earlier command to repent. The kingdom offer was on the table but if the kingdom was to come with all its blessing they needed to repent. I can't emphasize enough the uniqueness of this time and this offer. Never before has the kingdom been 'at hand.' This was totally unique and so the teachings you find here are totally unique. I think that's hard for people to wrap their heads around and I think that's one reason they've come up with these fuzzy views on salvation. That's all we Gentiles think about. It's all heaven and hell talk. This is not a Gentile passage. This is a Jewish passage and it's all about the kingdom. The kingdom offer was on the table and the issue was repent and return to obedience to the Mosaic Law so that the blessing of the 'at hand kingdom' can come. So the context is the kingdom offer and the people of Israel had to choose which way to go, which gate to enter.

Verse 13, **Enter through the narrow gate**. It's a picture we are being prompted to think about as 1st century Jews. Put yourself in their shoes. Before you are two gates; a wide gate and a narrow gate. We have the same thing today. Which gate is the most natural to enter into? The wide gate. Why do we tend to choose the wide gate? Because the wide gate is big, it is comfortable, it is easy to get through and most people are going through that gate. Then over to the side you see a narrow gate. Why don't we naturally tend to go through the narrow gate? Because it is small, it is constricted, it is difficult to get through and very few people are going through that gate. So what Jesus has set before them is a very natural picture we can all relate to. And what is Jesus challenging them to do? To enter the narrow gate; the gate that is small, constricted, difficult to get through and where very few are going through.

What would it mean to take up that challenge? What would it mean to enter the **narrow gate**? It would mean I am repenting of the wide gate, I'm having a change of mind about entering that nice big gate that is so comfortable and easy to pass through and that so many people are entering. So if I accept Jesus' challenge to enter the narrow gate then what have I done? I have repented. I've have thought carefully about the two gates; the wide gate that represents the gate that starts me down a path taught and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees and the narrow gate that starts me down a path taught and practiced by Jesus and His disciples. Therefore what is the narrow gate? The narrow gate is the gate of repentance. Toussaint agrees saying, "Repentance is the narrow gate through which Christ invited His audience to enter..."³

Now what am I entering into? What's on the other side of the narrow gate? A narrow path. It's not just a path, it's a narrow path. Obviously this path is the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ. We might be tempted to say it's narrow because Jesus was narrow minded. Jesus may have been narrow minded but the Greek word **narrow** in verse 14 is *θλιβω* and means "constricted," "compressed," "pressed together." It's not saying Jesus is narrow minded, it's saying that walking according to the teachings and practices of Jesus is a narrow way and therefore is full of difficulties and afflictions. It's not an easy road to follow

the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Toussaint agrees saying, "The narrow way represents the restrictions laid upon one who walks in the way of true righteousness which the King has just outlined."⁴ So Jesus is here predicting resistance and persecution toward those who choose the narrow gate and walk the narrow path. We would say that the resistance and persecution would be led by those who entered the wide gate and were on the wide path of the scribes and Pharisees.

But what's the advantage of taking this difficult path? Where does verse 14 say the **narrow** path **leads?** **To life.** So it's a good destiny. It stands in opposition to the wide path which leads to destruction. What would **life** be in the context? The kingdom. That's where all the blessing is. If you doubt life means blessing note verse 21. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." To enter into **life** is to enter into the kingdom. All three of these illustrations relate to the repentance that needs to take place in the nation so that the nation can return to covenant obedience and enter into the kingdom. This kingdom and its righteousness are what they were to be seeking. In the bigger picture Daniel had revealed the four Gentile kingdoms that Israel would be subjugated to prior to the final Jewish kingdom. Those four Gentile kingdoms are characterized by no Davidic king on the throne and no Shekinah Glory in the Temple. In a very real sense since the Son of Man was not sitting on the Davidic throne and the Shekinah Glory was not dwelling in the Temple they were living in death, a separation from God's immediate presence among them. So if they took up the challenge to enter the narrow gate of repentance and follow the narrow path of difficulty they would ultimately find **life** in the kingdom when the Son of Man took His Davidic throne and the Shekinah Glory returned to dwell in the coming Temple.

But note the end of verse 14. How many were finding this way? Not many. **There are few who find it.** The Greek participle **find it** is a present participle and should be translated, "There are few who are finding it." Jesus is giving a commentary on the Jews of that time. The gate and way had been made plain. They need only seek for it and they would find it; but there were not many finding it and thus the complacency of the Jews at this time is evident. Toussaint says, "Thus Matthew gives a subtle hint as to the lethargic spiritual condition of Israel while the kingdom was near at hand."⁵ This is not new in Matthew. We have seen hints of the spiritual lethargy of Israel in Matt 2 when the leadership of Israel was uninterested in the proclaimed birth of a Jewish King and in Matt 4 when the leadership arrested John, the forerunner of the King. Here we see further evidence that the people of Israel were uninterested in the kingdom and the King. They announce later that they will have no king but Caesar, a deafening rejection.

So in the illustration of the two gates Jesus has put before them both an entrance into a way and the way itself. We might say He set before them the challenge to become a disciple and the way of a

disciple. Toussaint says, "Gate is mentioned for the benefit of those who were not true followers; way is mentioned as a definition of the life of the disciples of Jesus."⁶

Since not many were going that way we might ask why they were not going that way. Probably it was just easier to go along with the status quo. What was the status quo? Verse 13, the wide gate. **For the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.** What's the **wide gate**? The **wide gate** is clearly the gateway to the way of the scribes and Pharisees. That was easiest gate to enter. It didn't rock the boat. It was the way most people were going and it set one on the **broad** path of the scribal and Pharisaic way of life. It was the easy way because there was no persecution or affliction associated with that way. But note the end of that way. What is the end? **Destruction.** What does the destruction refer to? Those who hold the salvation view hold that it refers to hell. Those who hold the discipleship view hold that it refers to Christians who live a spiritually impoverished life. However, in my covenant view, since **life** is the kingdom then **destruction** is the judgment that precedes the kingdom. Those who entered this wide gate and followed this wide path of the scribes and the Pharisees would not enter the kingdom but instead would be judged and excluded from life in the kingdom. That a judgment of Israel preceded the kingdom is a clear teaching from many OT (e.g. Isa 27:12; Ezek 20:33-38; 33:23-29; Zech 13:8-9; 14; Mal 3:1-7; 4:1-6) and NT passages (Matt 3:10-12; 25:1-29; Rev 12).

Therefore, the bottom line is that Jesus is laying out the challenge because the kingdom was still at hand and the people had a choice to continue to follow the scribes and Pharisees by entering the wide gate and continuing on the wide path which leads to destruction or to repent and choose to follow Jesus by entering the narrow gate that leads to the narrow path of difficulty and persecution that Jesus predicted would await them. At that time few were finding the path that led to life in the kingdom and with this sour note the spiritual lethargy of Israel is apparent. Questions???

By secondary application, and what I am doing here is showing how to interpret Scripture and then how to apply Scripture. We first interpret and the interpretation is what is primary. What is interpretation asking? "What does the text mean?" It's not asking "What does the text mean to me?" That's application. But what is most important is answering the question, "What does the text mean?" There is one single meaning and that meaning is what God wants you to know because it is what He intended you to glean from the text. And what the text means here is that God has a kingdom program for Israel and the kingdom was at hand when Jesus came at His first advent and that generation had the choice to repent and return to obedience to the Law of Moses so that the kingdom could come and they could enter into eternal blessing or reject and face destruction. AD70???

Now that we have the one interpretation we can make secondary application of the principles. So we have to find the principles. What's a principle here? The principle of one way. Then we can take that

principle and ask, how can I apply it? In other words, "What does the concept of one way mean to me?" And here we might find many applications. I think by application it is valid to say that there is one way of salvation and few find it, it is faith alone and has always been faith alone. But realize that is not an interpretation of the text. That is an application. And that is what is critical to distinguish. Another possible application of the one way concept is the idea that there is one path of discipleship and it's a hard road to how, but in the end there will be many rewards. So there are applications but the important thing is to see the one interpretation of the text as God intended it. And I'm trying to illustrate here how the process works of interpreting the Bible, asking "What does the text mean?" And going through all the study to draw that out. Then and only then, afterward, applying the Bible by deducing the principles and asking, "What does the text mean to me?" Too many people avoid interpretation because it's too hard. It takes too much research and time investment to understand ancient cultures, contexts, language, customs, etc...and they're so interested in themselves they just don't even bother. They go straight to application because knowing God and His plan really isn't that important to them. What they want is some little verse that they can rip out of context and apply to themselves in some fashion. That is so selfish, so self-centered, so arrogant and so disinterested in what God has to say. It's pathetic. So what are you really interested in? What God thinks? Or your little thing. You don't read the Bible to find out what it means to you. You read the Bible to understand God and His plan for history. And I feel we're so far from that today. I feel so many Christians could care less about the text. But what we're interested in is the text, the right interpretation of the text and after we understand that, then we can talk about application.

In 7:15 we see the second illustration. This one is between two trees that bear two kinds of fruit and this, again, is typically used to say that we can do a fruit evaluation to determine who a believer is. That is nonsense. The interpretation grows out of the OT passages about testing the prophets and I hope to show that the text is about identifying false prophets and not about doing fruit evaluations to see if people are really believers! I would like to go into it tonight but this stuff is requiring a lot of thought and research and the most numbing thing of all is that while there is a lot written hardly any of it is correct. I'm really struggling and having to forge new territory here and that's why it's taking time to get through. Questions...

¹ John MacArthur is representative where he says, "The narrow gate is by faith, only through Christ, constricted and precise. It represents true salvation in God's way that leads to life eternal. The wide gate includes all religions of works and self-righteousness, with no single way (cf. Acts 4:12), but leads to hell, not heaven." *MacArthur Study Bible*, p 1404.

² Joseph Dillow is representative where he says, "...the broad and narrow gates are both choices set before the redeemed." "The narrow way is costly...it will cost the follower radical discipleship, but this

loss has a positive outcome, a rich life now." "Those Christians who repeatedly choose this broad, roomy and comfortable way have indeed entered the kingdom and are saved, but they will die spiritually in the sense of spiritual impoverishment and carnality (Romans 8:12); their temporal life will be ruined." Joseph Dillow, *Final Destiny*, p 288-289.

³ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 116.

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⁵ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 116.

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