

“A Call to Decide”
The Way of Jesus
Downtown & Lexington
November 22, 2020

Today, we finally come to the conclusion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. I know some of you are like, “It’s been 15 weeks! On three chapters!” I know, that’s a lot. And believe it or not, we could’ve done a lot more.

But today, we look at Jesus’ conclusion. You might expect that Jesus would conclude his teaching on His way with something inspirational. Perhaps a touching story, or some sort of pep talk with alliterated action steps... “the three P’s to the way of Jesus” to really drive his point home

But, as we’ll soon see, that is not at all how Jesus ties the bow on in his sermon. Instead, Jesus ends this manifesto with three sets of images that really serve as three warnings that in essence force a decision on his audience... it forces them to answer the question, “What will you do with what you’ve heard?” And as we’ll see today, that’s the exact same question his sermon will leave us with, as well.

Here’s how he concludes. He says: “There are only two paths you can take, two voices you can listen to, and two foundations you can build on. You will choose, so choose wisely.”

Let’s get in...

There are two paths you can take.

Matthew 7:13–14

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Jesus begins his conclusion with this imagery of gates and ways. This would make a lot of sense to Jesus’ original audience. In the ancient world, cities were protected by walls and gates. You could only enter the city through its gates and depending on which gate you took it would lead you to different places.

For example, in ancient Jerusalem, there were gates like the Damascus Gate, originally called the Northern Gate, which led you to and from cities in the North like Damascus. There was Sheep Gate, later named Herod’s gate... It was a gate that led to the city market where livestock and other goods would be sold. And there was even one called the “Dung Gate”, I’ll let your imaginations figure out what it was used for. The point being the gate you would enter determined the road you would take and where you could go.

Now, obviously, Jesus is using the term metaphorically to talk about a way of life or a way of living. He says when it comes to life there are only two paths, two gates, or two ways, you can take.

One is wide. One is narrow. One is easy. One is hard. One is what most people will take. One only a few find. One leads to destruction and one leads to life.

Jesus means for his audience to understand that His way is the narrow way and it leads to life - that life is only found in and through Him... Jesus' way is not a way among many ways, but He is *the* way to life.

And this is a side note, this is not what this sermon is about, but I know some of us listening are like, "How can Jesus say that? That's really exclusive." The answer is because he rose from the grave. What gives him the authority to say this is the fact that He beat death, proving once and for all that He is who He says is - the one who through his life, death and resurrection has come to make right all that sin has made wrong. Jesus is the only one who solved the problem of creation by doing what we could not do for ourselves - defeating the power of sin and death. Were that not true, there really wouldn't be much reason to listen to him. He would just be another voice in the philosophical ocean of human history. But, as we like to say it around here, because Jesus is alive that changes everything.

But his primary point is that to take His way will not be a simple or easy endeavor.

Here's what He means. Do you know what's easy? **Anger and bitterness are easy.** It's easy to take offense at something someone said or did and live in anger towards them. But, all that lies at the end of that is a self-made prison of misery and relational dysfunction.

A life of forgiveness and reconciliation is hard. They require something of us, they challenge us and make us uncomfortable. But, they are a way of life that receives peace and freedom from drama and relational breakdown. A way of life that opens the door to deep, meaningful relationships that can withstand any test or conflict.

What's easy is believing that money, status, or the ability to control my circumstances - whatever they may be, whether it's my kids, my career, my relationships, whatever, are the key to my happiness and security. It's easy to operate as though everything depends on me. But, that really only leads to the oppressive slavery of worry and fear and the insatiable drive to control more, have more, and get more.

What's hard is trusting God with those things and seeking first the His Kingdom. That's hard. It requires sacrifice and self-denial, and trust, often in the face of uncertainty. But it's a life that finds peace and contentment and security and freedom in the God of the Universe instead of the insecure nature of money, status, and circumstances.

What's easy is just looking the part on the outside. Just being the person who periodically shows up to church or LifeGroup. Who asks for a few vague prayer requests, usually for something going on with someone else and not you. Sharing a few inspirational quotes here and there online and that being it. But, that's just a religious-looking but shallow, empty and, likely, insecure life.

What's hard is a life of real communion with God. A life that abides *with* God and is about what He is about on planet earth. A life built on His presence and pleasure. That's hard. It requires, it demands to be

lived differently, but it's a life that finds joy and rest and eternal approval and fullness in God instead of the ever-changing opinions of other people.

And these are all things Jesus unpacked about His way in the Sermon on the Mount.

Calling us to a way of life that uproots anger and division with reconciliation and forgiveness. A way of life that puts an end to objectification, treating all of humanity with honor and dignity as image-bearers of God. A way of life that dismantles hate and violence and oppression with radical love for our neighbor, including those who would be our enemies. A way of living that casts aside pretentiousness and religious performance but finds pleasure and enjoyment in God alone. A life of security, and peace, and hope in God - freed from the tyranny of anxiety and fear and judgment. A way of life that blesses the world and draws it to God. Essentially, life as it is intended to be.

When Jesus invites us to enter the narrow gate, it's an invitation to trust Him and walk in this life... but, he makes it no secret - to choose this way will mean to choose the hard thing.

Good things are rarely easy - whatever they may be - a marriage, a career, a family, a healthy mind and body - and easy things are rarely good. Following Jesus is no different.

And the point that Jesus is making here is that the life of true discipleship is the one that passes day-by-day through the narrow gate of trusting Jesus and walking the decidedly uneasy road of the Sermon on the Mount.

The problem that Jesus addresses next, however, is that there will be voices that try to tell you it doesn't have to be that way.

There are two voices you can listen to.

Matthew 7:15-23

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

We won't spend a lot of time here, because I think most of us understand what Jesus is saying. But, "Prophet" isn't a title or a word we use a ton in our context - much less the idea of false prophets - but it's a fairly big role and idea in Jewish thought. Prophets were those who basically served as guides to the

good life. They were signposts indicating this is what God says, this is what God does, this is what God wants. In this sense, Jesus is a prophet.

These days we may not call them “prophets” - we might call them philosophers, or psychologists or counselors, or therapists, or podcasters, or pastors... but regardless we still have people who function like this - who say, “This is what God really wants for you. This is where life is really found! This is what the world really needs and what you really need to do to flourish!”

And Jesus’ point here is to “Beware” literally, “be on the lookout” because there will be those who claim my name or even appear to be Christian - perhaps even especially Christian - and they aren’t. Their message, their advice, their wisdom is not in line with the way of Jesus.

And he says they aren’t always easy to spot. Sometimes they look like “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” In fact, the smartest wolves are the ones that appear to be sheep - ones who look like they belong.

And the only way to tell is in the fruit that they bear. The test is not in how they seem or how they appear - the test is in their life and their teaching. That’s what he means by fruit.

Does their life and teaching follow the pattern and way of Jesus? Does it resemble and point others to the narrow gate or the wide way?

The truth is you will always be able to find people who tell you what you want to hear. People who will tell you that you can have Jesus and the wide path, too. In fact, I would argue, it’s a pretty lucrative endeavor in our society to tell people that.

Very practically speaking, not every book you read, or every person you listen to, or podcast you subscribe to that carries the label “Christian” actually points people to the way of Jesus. Many... and I mean MANY... so-called Christian influencers out there are doing nothing but peddling the wide gate and the easy way. They’re like dangerous versions of Marry Poppins - they give a spoonful of sugar that makes the heresy go down.

And at the risk of saying too much, some of you need to stop washing your face and get on the road to Jesus, not the road back to you. And if you want to be fierce, free, and full of fire you won’t find that in glorious you, but losing yourself in glorious Jesus. If that misses you, I’m sorry, but if you know, you know.

But the point being, if we intend to follow Jesus, we must take care of how and to whom we listen because there will be plenty of people - famous or not - who will tell you, “You can enter through the narrow gate, but you can still take the wide path, too. That you can hold the way of Jesus and the way of everything else in one big, happy hug.

- Yes, you can follow Jesus, but when it comes to your relationships and sex, Jesus would want you to follow heart... especially if you’re older than you want to be and still single.
- Yes, you can follow Jesus, but your sin isn’t your biggest problem... their sin is the biggest problem. Your biggest problem is that you’re too hard on yourself.

- Yes, you can follow Jesus... but Jesus doesn't expect that to really cost you anything - certainly not your dreams, or your standard of living, or the opportunities you want to give to your kids. He understands if those things have to come first. In fact, he wants it.

And the option always before us will be to listen to that voice that offers the wide gate and the easy way or the voice of Jesus that says, "if anyone would come after me, He must deny himself take up His cross and follow me."

And if I may, I think part of the reason so many of us struggle to discern the difference between the two is that if we're honest, we aren't really all that familiar with what Jesus actually says.

And that matters because as Jesus' final image concludes, only one of those voices will take you where you actually want to go.

There are two foundations you can build your life on.

Matthew 7:24-27

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

In Jesus' third and final image he compares the person who builds their life on his teachings and those who don't. He says, the wise person chooses the difficult thing and builds their life on the voice of Jesus, but the unwise - the Greek word *moros*, where we get our word "moron" - takes the easy way and builds his life on something else.

If you've ever done any construction or remodeling you know this - there always comes a point in the project where you can choose to do something the right way - a way that will be harder and likely more costly - or you can cut a corner - do something not quite up to code and hope for the best. One is the hard but wise choice, the other is risky. From the outside, the finished product might look the same... but when disaster strikes and something breaks, the shoddy workmanship gets exposed and it winds up costing more in the long run.

This is how Jesus says it will be for those who do or do not build on His way. When the flood comes, only one of these houses will be left standing.

The flood here represents suffering and hardship which can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The loss of health, loss of a job or loved one, financial need, or even the death of a dream.

Jesus is simply being brutally honest. Life will be hard. Even the easy path isn't going to just be easy. Both houses go through the flood. Both foundations will be tried, but only one can withstand what life is going to throw at it.

The way of Jesus doesn't lead us out of hardship but through it. The flood will come and it will shake your house to the core. And it will reveal what your life was built on... and for some of us that will either be the happiest or the saddest day of our life.

Every other foundation will ultimately fail. If you build your life on success, on getting ahead no matter the cost, on beauty, or sex, or youth, or popularity or pleasure, or the freedom to go and do whatever you want when you want. If it's even built on your kids, your family, your spouse, rather than built on Jesus and His way to be human. It will quote "fall, and great will that fall be." Because all of that is fleeting - it can be taken away in an instant - and thus can't withstand the pressure of what life will throw at it.

I imagine, to one degree or another, we've all had front row seats to watch this play out in the lives of others. A family member, a co-worker, a boss - maybe even in ourselves - if not then, bare minimum a celebrity or someone famous - both inside and outside - the church on the internet. Whose life was built on a faulty foundation and just imploded?

And it's not always a crisis or a scandal, sometimes it's just a slow unraveling. A cumulative effect of a life not built around Jesus and His way that just finally starts to catch up to someone.

Like Paul writes to Timothy, "The sins of some are obvious and go ahead of them, but the sins of others trail behind." Some people you don't see it for a while, everything looks peachy - the house looks good - but beneath the surface, the foundation is off and when the flood comes it catches up.

- **A rejection of Jesus' teaching to not find our identity in the praise of others**, but in the approval of God in Christ it just slowly gives way to a life marked by depression and insecurity.
- **A rejection of Jesus' teaching to trust God over and above material wealth and control** that gives way to crippling anxiety and fear.
- **A rejection of Jesus' teaching to forgive as we have been forgiven, that gives way to a life of bitterness, anger, and resentment.** Perhaps leading some to be marked in their twilight years - years that should be filled with the joy and peace of passing down a legacy of a life well-lived - to instead be marked with a sourness and hatred for others and what's around them.
- **A rejection of Jesus' teaching against objectification** that gives way to porn addiction, affairs, or just an endless stream of relationships and marriages in search of fulfillment... leaving a wake of destruction in its path.

This is his point: you can choose to live in such a way that you experience destruction and will experience more in the future. Or you can live in such a way that you can experience life and will experience more in the future. One is wise and leads to life. One is foolish and leads to destruction.

The choice is yours. We must make a decision about what "our way" will be. Will it be Jesus' or something else?

And this is where Jesus' sermon ends. He just stops. Unapologetically leaving his audience at crossroads. What path will you take? What voice will you listen to? What foundation will build on? What will they do with what they've heard??

And Jesus' conclusion forces the very same crossroads on you and me, as well.

- **You must decide what path you will take.**
- **You must decide what voice you will listen to.**
- **You must decide what foundation you will build your life on.**

And make no mistake, to make no choice is to make a choice. We all choose. We have to choose.

Now all of that might sound real bold and direct to you. Like, "Dang, Jesus. Ease up." To be honest, that's exactly how his audience heard him.

Matthew 7:28-29

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

They knew this is what he was leaving them with. The choice to follow Him and him alone or not. There was no in-between. Jesus was not like their scribes saying, "Here is one possible interpretation, but also here's another." No, it was "This is the way. Will you take?"

But, it's important to note that Jesus is not forcing this issue because He is angry, but rather like a father who raises his voice when his children run into the street, Jesus raises his voice here, not because he is angry with us but because he loves us.

He loves you too much to let you walk down the same patterns of behavior that brought destruction on your parents and on you. He loves you too much to watch you destroy your life chasing things that won't last. He loves you too much to let you miss out on life to the full. He loves you too much to let you take the easy way.

Throughout this entire series, Jesus may be challenging you in any number of ways: how you approach your money, your relationships, your politics, or maybe even just challenging you to stop thinking that following Him is just a cute idea, but something he is very serious about...the list could go on... but it's because he wants life for you. He wants good for you.

But these warnings from Jesus ought to wake us up - they ought to get us asking hard questions about ourselves and get us to take a long hard look at our discipleship to Jesus.

My honest prayer for us as we end this series is that these warnings would arrest your heart. It is far too easy to get lulled to sleep believing that because we believe certain things are true and do a few Christian looking things that's all it means to be on the way of Jesus.

One of my greatest fears for you, and for me for that matter, is that we would spend our 80 years following paths and building lives on foundations that won't last - all while convincing ourselves that Jesus has co-signed it.

Hear me: some of you have called yourself a "Christian" all of your life... but that's just because you grew up with it and loosely believe that the story is true... but to be a Christian is to enter through the narrow gate and follow the rough path, to be a Christian is to listen and bear fruit according to the voice of Jesus, to be a Christian is to build your life on the person and work of Jesus... in short, to be a Christian is both to have faith and to follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth - in fact, faith and following are simply two sides of the same coin. You don't have one without the other.

At the end of the day, you have to decide. I can't decide for you. Some days I wish I could, to be honest. There are about 10 or 15 people that I wish I could decide for right now. But I can't.

And it's not about you what you say. It's how you actually build your life. What you say to me after this sermon doesn't really matter that much. What you tell other people about how you will build your life or what path you will take doesn't matter that much.

What you actually do with the teachings of Jesus is what matters. How you actually build your life is what matters here. What you actually do tomorrow and the next day are what we are talking about. Not what you will say you will do tomorrow and the next day.

There is freedom and joy available but it's on the hard path. It's through the narrow gate. There aren't a lot of people there. There is an easier, more popular path. but the flood is coming. Choose wisely.

You have Jesus' teachings...now, what will you do with them?