

I want to spend a few weeks preaching on a number of texts that are not part of a series. I've done most of my preaching in series, either a series on a book of the Bible or some kind of topical series, but in between those I like to take individual texts, usually texts which deal with basic gospel themes. So this morning we will look at this familiar passage in the Sermon on the Mount about the narrow gate that leads to life and the wide gate that leads to destruction.

So let's think carefully about what Jesus says here.

This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount and what Jesus says here is applying what he has teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The hard path is living according to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not easy to put Jesus's teaching into practice. But it is the way that leads to life and Jesus, in verses 13-14, is urging us to enter the narrow gate that leads to the hard path that leads to life.

Now there are certain parts of the Sermon on the Mount that are admired by people in our society who are concerned with ethics and the way that people live. People who think about such things no doubt admire the golden rule and the beatitude that says blessed are the peacemakers. Probably not too many (who are not Bible believing Christians) will have too much use for what Jesus says in these verses about entering in by the narrow gate. This is not exactly popular teaching! This is not exactly teaching that is consistent with the spirit of our age.

There are at least three issues that these verses raise. These verses contradict the common convictions regarding pluralism – the view that all religions and world views are equally valid and no one has the right to say that their way of looking at the world is true and all others are false. Jesus teaches here that there is only one way that leads to life. All others lead to destruction. There is also the teaching that a large part of the human race will experience what Jesus here calls destruction. That is certainly something that many people in our society do not expect and find offensive. And then there is Jesus' teaching here that there are few who find the road that lead to life and many who are on the road that leads to destruction. We will consider each of these issues as we proceed in our consideration of these verses.

Now if we consider what Jesus is teaching in these verses it is clear that Jesus is confronting us with a choice. One of the popular evangelism methods that evangelical Christians are using in our time is called "Two ways to live: the choice we all face." That title sums up what Jesus is saying in this passage. From the perspective of the Christian message there are only two ways to live. From the perspective of Jesus' teaching here there are only two ways to live. You are either on the narrow way that leads to life or you are on the wide way that leads to destruction.

Now at first glance you might wonder about that because there are in fact many ways to live. There are Hindus and Buddhists and Jews and atheists and there are those who claim no religious affiliation at all. Then you have hard working people who live moral lives and you have criminals and you have the sexually

promiscuous and you have drug addicts. Clearly there are many options when it comes to how a person might live his or her life. But Jesus is saying that there is only one way that leads to life. It is a hard way and there are few who find it. On the other hand all other ways are lumped together; Jesus calls it the easy way and its end is destruction. Jesus is saying that we all must make a choice. There is the hard way and there is the easy way. And we all confronted with a choice: which of these two ways we will walk? That is the teaching of Jesus. That is the choice with which the Christian message confronts us.

It sounds very arrogant in a context in which there are so many different convictions about life and the way that we should live. How can Christians say that we are right and that everyone who disagrees with us is going to hell? Why not be more moderate and say that everyone has a right to their opinion and no religion or world view is better than any other? We must understand, however, that if we take that option we part company with Jesus. No matter what may be fashionable in our day, we must understand that in this passage and in many other places, Jesus and the other authors of the Bible teach that there is only one truth and there is only one God and that God requires that all men serve him and there is only one way to be right with that God and that is through Jesus Christ. So we are either with Jesus or we are against him.

Certainly the Bible presents itself to us in that way. There were many other ways of thinking about reality in the ancient world. There were many other ways of thinking about how the world came into being and there were beliefs in many different gods. Into that world, the Bible came. And it began by saying ... "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And it continued by teaching that this God was and is the only God and that all men must bow before him or perish. And it was exactly for this reason that the early Christians were persecuted. There were many different religions in the world in which the early Christians lived. If you believed that they all were legitimate in some way you were left alone. But the early Christians did not do that because of the teaching of Scripture. That is why they were hated and persecuted. It was because of the truth that Jesus teaches in this text. There is a narrow gate which leads to a hard way that leads to life. There is a wide gate that leads to an easy way that leads to destruction. There are no other options. The hard way has to do with following Jesus. The easy way is every other way to live. It is that absolute antithesis that gets people's goat. It is that exclusive claim of Jesus that makes Christianity such a despised religion. But that is the message of Jesus and of the bible.

Now as I have said, this is not the only part of the teaching of this passage that people find objectionable. There is also the fact that Jesus teaches that those who enter the wide gate and are on the easy way are on the way that leads to destruction. There are two issues here we will briefly consider. One is the question of why there needs to be such a severe punishment for not following Jesus and walking the hard way. The second is what is meant by destruction.

First why does there need to be destruction at all. Why can't God just save everyone? What kind of God destroys so many people? When **people** do that we think it is a horrendous evil. Think of the genocide in

Rwanda some years ago. The whole world was rightly horrified. Why does God destroy those who will not obey him and do what he says? How can such a God be accepted as a good God?

Well first we have to make a distinction between God and human beings. Human beings are not God. They do not have the right to kill other people except in very specific cases of capital punishment. God is not a human being. He is ruler over all and so it is possible that there is a good reason for God to destroy those who do not submit to him and who live in rebellion against him.

We must admit that this is a difficult question to deal with. It's hard not to think that there is something not quite right about huge numbers of people ending up in hell. And many of those people are not really bad people at least compared with others. It's hard to imagine that it could ever be right that so many people are going to end up in eternal suffering.

There are a number of thoughts that put this matter into a biblical perspective. One is that God has gone to great lengths to provide a way of salvation. Just think of John 3:16 "God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That is part of the answer when we are tempted to question why God should send so many people to hell. There will be many people in hell who had the opportunity to avoid hell, but chose not to take it. They were not willing to submit to Jesus and receive salvation even though the consequence of such rejection is destruction.

There is also the biblical perspective on the seriousness of sin. We tend not to understand how sinful sin is. That is because we have sinful natures and so our values are skewed. We do not see things as they really are. But we need to think of it from God's perspective. He made us to serve him. He made us for his own purposes. And we refuse to live under that arrangement. We insist on living for ourselves. That is rebellion. That is cosmic treason. Even nice people who live respectable lives, if they are not living for God are living in rebellion against God. They are siding with the devil against God. God made us to love him with all our hearts and if we are not doing that we are living in rebellion against God. That is much more serious than we tend to think.

And then there is the biblical assurance of the justice of God. There will be no injustice when the final judgment has been completed. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive **what is due** for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." Everyone will receive what is due for what he has done. There will be no unfairness. There will be no injustice. That does not answer all the questions. That does not completely take away the discomfort with the idea of hell. But from a biblical perspective we need to understand that what is really amazing is not that some people go to hell, but that some people are saved through Jesus Christ. We all deserve hell. The amazing thing is that Jesus saves some and offers to all who hear the message deliverance from the just consequences of our sin.

I must also say something about the meaning of the word “destruction” in this passage. Those who enter through the wide gate travel the easy way that leads to destruction. What does that mean? Well there are some Christian teachers who say that destruction means annihilation. It is their opinion that those who are not saved through Jesus Christ will be annihilated at some point so that they cease to exist. And we can understand why someone might want to embrace such a position. The idea of eternal suffering in hell is so horrible that there is a tremendous temptation to interpret our way out of it. It really does not make sense however, in the light of all that the Bible teaches about the final state of those who are not saved. In Matthew 8:12 speaks about hell and he says that it will be a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. That is not annihilation. That is conscious torment.

J.I Packer writes “New Testament teaching about hell is meant to appall us and strike us dumb with horror, assuring us that, as heaven will be better than we could dream, so hell will be worse than we can conceive. Such are the issues of eternity, which need now to be realistically faced.” (Concise Theology 262). If we think about this text about the wide gate and easy way that leads to destruction and the narrow gate and the hard way that leads to life, we need to understand that the point of the passage is to urge us to enter by the narrow gate and travel the hard way that leads to life.

A third issue that this passage raises is the fact that Jesus says that there are many on the easy way that leads to destruction and there are few on the hard way that leads to life. Does that mean that there will only be few who are saved?

Well there are passages that speak of many people being saved. Matthew 8:11 tells us that “many will come from east and west and recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” Revelation 7:9 speaks of “a great multitude that no one can number from every nation and from all tribes and peoples and language standing before the throne.” There is no doubt that there will be many people saved and spend eternity with the Lord.

And yet there are verses like our text and others which speak of few. Matthew 22:14 says that many are called, but few are chosen. And certainly that is the experience of many of God’s people through the generations. We see it in OT Israel with the doctrine of the remnant. Even within Israel there was only a remnant who were faithful to God. It is certainly often the experience of God’s people to be in the minority. And even among confessing Christians, there often seems to be only a minority who are really walking the hard way that leads to life. So there are different perspectives in the Bible – when the final number of the elect are called in there will be a great multitude that no one can count. And yet there are the passages which speak of few and throughout history that has often been the experience of God’s people.

There is a verse however, which gives a very helpful perspective on this question. Luke 13:23-24 – Someone asks Jesus, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And this is Jesus’ answer. ²⁴“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” That really puts things into

perspective. This passage shows that it is natural to ask that question, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” But Jesus does not answer the question. Like so many other questions that we have – the Bible does not answer them, but what it does do is tell us what we need to know and tell us what is most important. “Strive to enter through the narrow door, For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” That must be our focus.

Now all of this highlights the seriousness of our lives. If what Jesus says here in this passage is true then our lives are serious business. Just think of the situation as Jesus describes it. The way to life is a hard way that is entered through a narrow gate and there are few that find it. The way to destruction is an easy way that is entered through a wide gate and there are many who are on that way. These are very sobering thoughts. The issues of life are momentous. The dangers are great. Many people are heading for destruction. Only few are heading for life – that is eternal life.

This is something to which we must give serious thought. The question of what way we are on is one that must be seriously considered. This is not a question to be glossed over and taken lightly. What does Jesus mean when he speaks about entering by the narrow gate?

I like the way that this is answered by a NT professor named Scot McKnight. In his commentary on this passage he writes, “Jesus isn’t here calling someone merely to a better moral life. Rather, his own presence looms in the entire Sermon as the one through whom God speaks, through whom God redeems, and through whom God reigns. So the “enter” demand is a summons to Jesus first and foremost.” We must understand Jesus’ call to enter by the narrow gate in the light of the rest of Matthew’s gospel and in the light of the gospel message in general. It centers on Jesus Christ and the central exhortation is to embrace Jesus Christ himself as Saviour and follow him as Lord. There is no doubt that to enter by the narrow gate is to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself refers to himself using the imagery of a gate or a door in John 10. John 10:9, ⁹“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.” The way to life is Jesus Christ. Jesus also says in John 14:6 “I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” So we enter the narrow gate by believing in Jesus and by becoming followers of Jesus Christ. But that begs the question – why does Jesus refer to himself as the narrow gate? Is there not a wideness and a freeness and an expansiveness about the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ? Think of the wonderful word “whosoever” in connection with the offer of the gospel. “Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life.” Think of how Jesus is described in John 7:37: “On the last day of the feast, the great feast, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” Think of Revelation 22:17 one of the last verses of the Bible. “The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”

Whatever Jesus means when he says, “Enter by the narrow gate”, it does not negate the freeness and the generosity of the offer of salvation. Think of those wonderful words of Peter in 2 Peter 3. The Lord “is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” The narrowness of the gate does not mean that God is miserly and stingy and unwilling to save sinners. The very opposite is true.

Jesus does not actually explain why he refers to the way to life as the narrow gate. But we can think of a number of biblical reasons. It is narrow because Jesus is the only way to the way that leads to life. As we have just heard the words of Jesus – “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” There is a restrictiveness in the sense that Jesus is the only way.” No one gets onto the way that leads through life except through Jesus. Being nice people will not get us there. Being faithful practitioners of another religion will not get us there. Doing many good works will not get us there. There is only one way to the road that leads to life and that is through Jesus Christ.

There is another biblical reason that it is appropriate for Jesus to refer to the way to life as the narrow gate. To become a believer in Jesus Christ requires actions and attitudes that are very much against the grain of the inclinations of our sinful nature. Believing in Jesus requires acknowledging our sin and our helplessness to save ourselves. It requires that we humble ourselves before God and confess our sin. That is not something that comes easy to us. We are, by nature, very resistant to humbling ourselves before anyone including God. Believing in Jesus also involves total submission to Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives. His will trumps our will every time. As Frances Havergal wrote, “Take my will, and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine.” That is what it means to become a disciple of Jesus.

It also means trusting in Jesus alone for our standing before God. We make no contribution at all as far as our acceptance before God is concerned. We place our trust wholly on another – on Christ and we acknowledge that nothing from us or about us has anything to do with being accepted by God. That does not sit well with our sinful inclination to pay our own way – to be independent and self-sufficient. All of that must go out the window when we embrace Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. And then there is repentance. The way to the road of life is the way of repentance. No sin may be cherished. We must hate the sins that are so dear to us and turn from them. That is painful. It involves putting to death certain behaviors and attitudes that we are quite fond of.

And so there is a narrowness also from that perspective about the gate to the way of life. Not only is Jesus the only way. The way of believing in Jesus and following him is a way that goes against the grain of our sinful nature. In fact the only way this is possible is through the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

But there is not only a narrow gate to consider. Once one is through the narrow gate the way to life is a hard way. The way to destruction is an easy way. The way to life is a hard way. And here we just need to think about the Sermon on the Mount itself. It is not exactly an easy way to live. It flies in the face of the sinful inclinations that are still active within us. To live for ourselves and for our lusts is to go with the flow. What

comes easy to us is to obey our sinful inclinations. The way that comes most easily to us, is to pursue our own selfish passions and interests. Jesus calls us to completely different priorities. Love God. Love your neighbor. Resist what comes so easily. Embrace the hard way. The way of discipline and self-sacrifice and giving and love. Give instead of take. Resist instead of giving in. Focus on God and others instead self. Give up your life instead of keeping it.

Why bother with a narrow gate and a hard way? It is the way to life. It is hard but it is good. It is the way of life. Life in the Bible is rich and full of joy and satisfaction. That is because it is focused on God. That is because in Christ we are accepted by God as his beloved children. That is because it is the way of true humanity. Jesus in Mark 10:29-30 give us his perspective on the relationship between the hardness of the way to life and the reward both now and in eternity. He says "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

Let us then Enter in by the narrow gate and walk the hard way that leads to life. And may none of us go through the wide gate and walk the easy way that leads to destruction.