

The Sermon on the Mount: A Narrow Gate and a Good Tree

Matthew 7:12-20

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For the past 17 weeks we have taken our place amongst the crowd who surrounded Jesus on the side of a mountain listening to him speak. Today Jesus starts to wrap up his most well-known sermon. In aviation language he is beginning his final descent. The landing gear has been engaged, we can feel and hear the wheels drop into place. The plane isn't on the ground yet—that will happen next week, but he is lining us up with the runway. At this point his core teaching is done. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has laid out his grand vision. He has come, he says, to establish a new kingdom. He arrives in the midst of the kingdoms of this world with the purpose of calling to himself a people from the world to form them into a kingdom that reflects the character and purposes of God.

He has gone to great lengths making it “plainer than plain” that his kingdom is entirely different from anything the world has ever known. He is inaugurating the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of light, the kingdom of heaven. It's so different, so utterly unique that he paints a picture of it, one brushstroke at a time, a picture that we've examined in detail over these past few months. Now, as he begins to bring the sermon home, to “land the plane,” he shifts from teaching mode to exhortation and application. “I've laid it all out for you,” he says in effect: “I've taught you the character of this kingdom I am forming. This is the kind of life I am going to give you, the life that I want you to live and to manifest to the world. That's my whole purpose for being here with you, so now, what are you going to do about it? Are you in or are you out? Are you ready to follow me or are you not? It's time to make up your mind.”

Everything we have heard from Jesus in this Sermon leads us to expect that following him is going to be demanding. Hearing what we've heard, we cannot say that *much* is being demanded of us; no, it's more the case that *everything* is being demanded of us which becomes abundantly clear as we delve into verse 12.

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” It's popularly known as the Golden Rule, of course. The danger and the choice for followers of Jesus is that we would detach this text from the context in which Jesus said it, and the truth is that that's exactly what often happens. A lot of people who are familiar with the sentiment of the Golden Rule

don't even realize it is found in the Bible or that Jesus said it. It has become for many people nothing more than a statement of the need for basic politeness, an aphorism that might be espoused by Miss Manners. Two researchers, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, found just that as they studied the religious and moral attitudes of contemporary American teenagers. Their research revealed that one of the core beliefs of young people is that "God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."

But, problems arise almost immediately when I determine that what is good *for me* becomes the measure of what is good for all. In our self-centeredness we make ourselves the standard of judgment. But notice that Jesus didn't say, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." He added the critical phrase, "for this is the law and the prophets," and in doing so, he points out that the standard we are to use about what is good for ourselves and others is the standard of God's justice. It is yet another way for Jesus to say, "love your neighbor as yourself," and because it is grounded in love, the Golden Rule places an affirmative demand on us. It is not enough to avoid doing things that we would find objectionable if directed at us. We have an obligation to go further, to act with love towards others "in everything." Even if others fail to reciprocate those actions, for the follower of Jesus, the rule of love must determine what we do. Seen in its proper context, then, the Golden Rule is much more than an ethical principle appropriate for polite conduct. It is the call to embody the love of God and to work out that love in community.

You do realize, I'm sure, that calling us to embody the love of God is absolutely the hardest, most radical thing Jesus could ask of us. Anybody can love the person who loves them in return. Anybody can love the people who are easy to love. Jesus reminded us of this back in chapter 5 when he said, "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors [the spiritual nobodies] do the same? And if you greet only your friends, what are you doing that is more than anybody else? Even the Gentiles do that! But you, *you* be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (5:46-48)

The Kingdom way, the way of being perfect in love, is a way of life that is extraordinary. The word that's used in the Greek is "perisson" which means "much more than," not your usual matter-of-course but the unusual. This is the life of the Beatitudes, of poverty of spirit and humility and a pure heart; it is being salt and light and a city set on a hill; it is the life of going the second mile, turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies and leaving judgement to God; it is having clear vision that focuses singularly on Jesus, for we cannot serve two masters. Over and

over again, Jesus has said that the Kingdom way is patently, wholly different from the way of the world, and as he draws his sermon to a conclusion, Jesus asks us again: what will you choose? Which way will we go?

In order to enter into God's kingdom purposes, the follower of Jesus will do God's will which will necessitate discerning and rejecting false options. Jesus' language is stark and dramatically dualistic: opposites such as wide and narrow, easy and hard, many and few, destruction and life, good and bad, set out the alternatives before us. To follow Jesus requires us to be intentional and focused. Not all roads "lead to Rome," as the old adage goes, or perhaps more appropriately in this case, "not all roads lead to God's kingdom." The wide gate calls for no particular thought or serious purpose, but the narrow one calls for both. The wide gate allows everyone and everything to pass through without much consideration. There is apparently no limit to the baggage we can take with us. We need leave nothing behind, not even our sins, our self-righteousness or our pride.

The gate leading to the hard way, on the other hand, is narrow. One has to look for it, to search it out to find it. It's easy to miss, and in order to enter it we must leave everything behind—certainly our sin and selfish ambition for these things are not fit for the kingdom of God. But, it may also require us to leave behind things that are not inherently bad in and of themselves but that still hinder our pursuit of Christ, for this is the gate for those who choose to deny themselves in order to follow him.

Jesus acknowledges the reality that we face a stiff headwind in choosing him. We are pressed on all sides by the "crowd," the masses who unwittingly pass through the wide gate and will carry us along with them if we are not paying attention. And, then there are the false prophets, both outside the church and within it, who disguise their true loyalties and intentions and thereby lead people astray. It is a disturbing reality, but a reality nonetheless, and while we are forbidden to judge, we are to stay alert to the presence of those who teach falsehood and leave pain and destruction in their wake. Evil must be resisted and confronted wherever it is found.

Having said that, I find it helpful to be reminded that throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has had a consistent focus on our hearts. So, instead of using these very familiar metaphors as lenses through which to view others, as in "*they* are the ones who are deceived, *they* have entered the wide gate and are traveling the easy road," perhaps there is an invitation to hear Jesus' words as a means for examining our own individual lives again. What might that look like?

First, rather than hearing his admonition to enter through the narrow gate as a one-time decision, might we understand instead it as a moment-by-moment experience, the kind described in 12-step programs where each day and in multiple situations throughout each day one must make the decision again and again to remain clean or sober? In a similar way, what makes the road to pursuing the kingdom way of life hard is that we are confronted by many, many gates and at each one we must choose again to enter through the narrow one. In this sense, the life that Jesus talks about is not some grand prize hidden behind Door Number Two. Instead, the kingdom life is making the hard choices, over and over, again and again to choose the loving response, the loving action despite the difficulty.

Similarly, what if we understood the false prophets Jesus speaks of not as others who disguise themselves in order to deceive us, but they are instead the many ways we disguise our own selfish motives as noble purposes and thereby deceive ourselves? What if we choose not to take a long and careful look at the fruits of others' actions, but instead seek the truth about ourselves by examining the effects of our own actions? Jesus was speaking to a primarily agrarian culture, so his statement, "You will know them by their fruits," would have resonated clearly. Perhaps the contemporary version would be, "You will know yourself by your bank statement and your calendar."

Other questions of self-examination might include asking what decisions have we made that we continue to fall back on as the easy path of least resistance, rather than face the hard work of confronting the core fears and anxieties that drive us? What inconsistencies are laid bare by comparing things we believe to be true about ourselves with the facts about how we actually live? Are our mission statements, whether in the church or on the job, in reality nothing more than "sheep's clothing" thrown on the backs of "ravenous wolves" disguising selfish motives that have us more concerned about ourselves than others? Yes, we need to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, discerning good from evil and right from wrong, but the first place we need to look is in the mirror.

So, here you have it. This is what is required of the one who would embrace Jesus and his kingdom. To enter this way means to follow in his footsteps. It is an invitation to live as he lived, to become increasingly what he was, to be like him. There is a cost, to be sure. Jesus has not minced words about that. Some will focus on what must be left behind; they will be convinced that there is too much loss and suffering and sacrifice, and they will choose the broad way. But, men and women, don't be deceived! The truth is this: all that we lose in choosing to follow Christ turns out to be nothing and instead we gain everything—everything of true

worth, of true value, of eternal significance is to be found on the narrow way. And, remember, we don't go this way alone. Look at Jesus. He is ahead of us on the road. Follow him and know that your destiny is to be with him. Amen.