

“Two Ways”

Scripture Text: Matthew 7:13-20

March 5, 2023 – 6:00 pm Evening Service

Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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The Reading of the Word

Matt. 7:13 “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. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Matt. 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Introduction

In this section the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus shows four ways disciples can fall into worldliness. And he breaks each up into pairs. So four sets.

- 1) First: Two Ways. Jesus demonstrates it is easy to fall into the thinking that the easy road is the right road.
- 2) Second: Two Prophets. Jesus teaches that disciples must avoid being persuaded by false teaching.
- 3) Third: Two Disciples. Jesus shows that discipleship requires real life engagement.
- 4) Fourth: Two foundations. The disciple of Jesus must build his life on the foundation of Christ’s word.

Tonight, we will focus on the first two sets of the four: two ways and two prophets.

A Higher Righteousness

Our passage this evening begins with a command, an imperative, to “enter by the narrow gate.” [v.13] In this final section of the Sermon on the Mount, we find the conclusion of Jesus’ sermon reaching its fruition in a call to his disciples to a way of living that produces true righteousness.

As we know, Scripture is abundantly clear that the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven is not by our own efforts, but by God's gracious and effectual calling. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." [Ephesians 2:8-9]

So what we are seeing in this verse is not Jesus' establishing a new way to enter heaven by means of works – by the walking of a difficult path and by the finding of a narrow door. Jesus is not saying that the path to heaven is to suffer enough. Jesus isn't saying that taking the difficult path will gain you entrance into heaven. He is not instituting a new way of salvation.

Whenever Jesus speaks of entering the kingdom of heaven in terms of difficulty or ease, we are quickly clued into the fact that he is noting that there is actually really nothing difficult or easy about entering the kingdom of heaven.

In Luke 18, we see Jesus using this language, and it leads to the disciples concluding, "how then can we be saved." In other words, the disciples realize that if what Jesus is saying is true, then salvation is impossible. And it is true. Salvation is impossible. That is, with man it is impossible, but then Jesus says, "what is impossible with man, is possible with God. [Luke 18]

Given that reality, which is taught repeatedly throughout Scripture, what we see here is not a contradiction to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, but a continuation of what Jesus had been teaching all along throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus is continuing to reinforce what he has said all long. He is telling his disciples that as his children, they are to live differently than the world. It is an essential part of the Christian life that they take the hard and narrow road. That they are to enter by the narrow gate. That they live the true life of a Christian.

Jesus calls his own to an even higher standard than that of the Pharisees. Earlier in the Sermon, Jesus proclaims, "**For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**" [Matthew 5:20]

Even here at the end of his sermon, he continues with the same message. Their righteousness must be greater than the righteousness of the Pharisees because the righteousness of the Pharisees is no righteousness at all. Theirs is a moralistic, hypocritical, self-righteousness.

They are religious in name. They talk the talk, but do not walk the walk. They dress the part, but they are far from God.

Two Ways and Two Teachers

Distinctions

Providentially our High School Sunday School class has been studying the letter of 1 John and we have addressed the issue of false prophets. You could say that we are weeks ahead of you all in our study of false prophets, but I wouldn't want to embarrass you all. Joking aside, a few weeks ago, as we studied John's letters, I noticed that he gave the same warning that Jesus does regarding false prophets.

John writes,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, ***but test the spirits*** to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” [1 John 4:1 emphasis added]

Throughout his letter, John continually draws distinctions between the two ways. He makes it clear that all men are either *of* God, or *against* God. They are either for Christ, or against Christ. And along with that, it becomes evident that there is a clear distinction between truth and falsehood. Everything falls in one camp or the other.

John, like Jesus, eliminates any middle ground. There is no neutral zone. All people are in one of two camps. They are on one of two roads. The road to heaven or the road that leads to hell. They are either for or against. You are a child of God or a child of Satan.

Now, while the division of the *two ways* is clearly marked between the path of destruction and the path of life, even so, the division emphasized here in this passage is not so much between Atheists and Christians as we might naturally assume based on the various evangelistic messages preached from the passage of the narrow gate and the wide gate.

True Sheep and False Sheep

Rather, I believe the main focus here is the contrast between true believers and false believers.

We see evidence of this because in verse 15 Jesus clues us into the fact that there are false prophets who have infiltrated the community of God who disguise themselves in sheep's clothing, but who are nothing more than ravenous wolves, seeking to destroy the church and its people. They are not sheep, but they seek to deceive others into thinking that they are.

Jesus' focus is not so much between the world *out there*, but between the true sheep and those wolves *disguised as sheep*. While they appear to be similar externally, they could not be more opposite.

The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of truth and righteousness. Those who enter the narrow gate, walk the difficult path and listen to its prophets will attain eternal life.

The kingdom of Satan, however, resembles the kingdom of heaven only in so much as it externally seeks to resemble it. Otherwise, it is the kingdom of falsehood and of false teachers. Jesus explains that that kingdom's door is wide and easy, and leads to eternal death.

These two kingdoms rival each other, and have completely different purposes. Satan seeks to destroy the church from within. He seeks to infiltrate the church as a foreign agent in order to bring it down. Peter reminds us that our "adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." [1 Peter 5:8]

In Revelation, Satan is known as "the deceiver of the whole world." [Revelation 12:9] He has a mission and that is to deceive the whole world and devour all he can, pulling them down to Hades with him.

And these false prophets represent this way. They seek to devour; they seek to destroy the church. And they do so disguised as followers of Jesus. Just like Satan tried to use Scripture to tempt Jesus, false prophets also twist God's word and use it to gain credibility and access to the people of God. Their message is – our lives can be easy, comfortable, laid back. Prayer is not important. Righteousness will take place in heaven – no need to strive for it now. Forgiveness and grace are plentiful, so just relax and stop worrying about your sins.

This is precisely why Jesus warns his disciples to beware of false teachers, because Satan is crafty and skillful in his work. He knows how to twist the gifts of mercy and grace that Jesus extends to us, and uses them to create licentious behavior.

"Not in our back yard"

As we look at this passage, it is hard not to let our minds think, "we don't need to worry about false teaching. That is for other people and other churches that don't know better."

We make assumptions that we are not susceptible to the dangers of false teaching, and we think to ourselves, "that would never happen to us!"

Over these past four years, I have heard several organizations argue that it is often difficult to deal with different kinds of abuses due to the fact that no one thinks that these things are actually happening in their own backyard. Many organizations have to spend loads of time just convincing people of this fact over and over again in their trainings. And that is because people cannot see the problem.

And while many deny that it is a problem, these same organizations report that 90% of the problems they are dealing with are not strangers off the street, but the very people they

know and trust.¹ This is a serious figure, and it reveals a problem that needs to be taken seriously. We live a lot of our lives assuming we know what is going on around us and that everything is ok. And it applies here too. We assume that Jesus' teaching is for other churches, not ours. We assume that **we** are not being influenced by false teaching.

When we think of false teachers, our minds quickly jump to the Health and Wealth preachers like Joel Osteen or Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland. We know to stay away from them, but we don't realize that false prophets and false teaching can enter into our lives in all sorts of ways. And therefore, Jesus calls us to test the spirits, and to test our assumptions regarding false prophets.

And I believe in order to do that, we must test our preconceived ideas of what "the way" actually looks like and what Jesus has been teaching us.

Jesus Calls Us to Test Our Assumptions

The day I first arrived on campus at seminary I was given a tour. The tour took me to several of the faculty offices introducing me to several different teachers, and then we went into the library where several students were reading and working on papers. It was there that the young lady giving the tour quietly introduced to a guy in athletic shorts and shirt and said, "this is DVD." Trying to be friendly I responded, "Hey man, nice to meet you. What year are you?" After a few embarrassed laughs, I quickly realized that DVD, this guy in shorts and a t-shirt, was not a student. DVD was short for Dr. David Van Drunen. He was the Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics – one of my professors.

I had made an assumption based on context, age and mostly attire that this guy had to be a student at the seminary. Thankfully, DVD didn't hold that against me. He ended up being my favorite professor at seminary and a friend.

It is not difficult to recall moments where we have made assumptions and judgment calls based on a few clues. We size people up based on several different factors and make judgmental calls after only having a few moments with them.

We all do this, and what is interesting about this process is the level of confidence we often feel in our interpretation of the facts and the level of confidence we have in our judgments. We can be so confident that we can build all sorts of scenarios based on those judgments.

And this is pretty standard. Based on very limited information, employers have to make quick judgment calls on who to hire or not hire. People sometimes buy homes for hundreds of thousands of dollars after spending only minutes touring, and with only a basic knowledge of the condition of the home. Whether we realize it or not, we put a lot of trust

¹ Ministry Safe: <https://ministrysafe.com/the-risk/>

in our judgment calls, and those judgments are based heavily on underlying assumptions we make.

Of course, this can be helpful in *some* scenarios, but it can also cause problems when those judgments are incorrect. Especially when we are talking about matters of eternity and of God's divine plan.

And one of the areas that is commonly misunderstood is that the way to eternal life is lined with suffering. We often make assumptions that God's plan does not include our suffering.

Two Ways – the assumption that suffering is not part of the way

In John 9, Jesus' disciples encountered a man blind from birth. They asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." [John 9:1-3]

In this example in John 9, Jesus' disciples had made an instant judgment, an assumption, about a blind man they encountered. They were convinced that this man's blindness was necessarily due to one of two things: either his own sin, or the sin of his parents. Jesus corrects their assumptions and explains that it was not about sin, but about God's works being displayed in him.

Likewise, in the story of Job, Job's friends made their assumptions known, attempting to pinpoint the cause of Job's unbearable sufferings to some sort of secret sin or lack of unconfessed sin.

These two examples represent common human responses to hardship. In an attempt to comprehend what is happening in difficult times, a common response is to make the assumption that the difficulty is the result of sin. The idea is that something must be wrong, because otherwise God would have spared you from this suffering.

The way this plays out, is that a man wouldn't be born blind, if it weren't for some sin. And when it applies to Job, the rationale is that he could not have lost all his children in one day, if it weren't for some secret sin.

Unfortunately, these are somewhat typical responses to suffering and hardship. Granted, we don't always do this. We know when not to do it – we don't draw these conclusions and make these judgments when it comes to death or horrible diseases. But Christians make this assumption more than we would like to admit.

Christians presume to know how God works in all sorts of scenarios, and so we generally assume that pain and suffering is all about teaching us something, growing us, or as a consequence for sins committed.

And I think this way of thinking is not only unbiblical, but it is highly problematic and influences how we interpret Scripture. We misinterpret what God is doing and read our desires back into our understanding of Scripture. Like much of the world, we assume that if something doesn't feel right, then we must be doing something wrong. And this bleeds into our perspective of what Jesus has called us to.

But in v. 13 Jesus calls his disciples to, "Enter by the narrow gate"there are few who find it. He tells them this because no doubt they had preconceived notions and assumptions about what "the way" was supposed to look like.

And sure enough, later we read that Peter, so persuaded by his assumption of what the Kingdom of God was supposed to look like, pulled out his sword to keep Jesus from suffering harm. The very thing Jesus had told Peter and the disciples that he had come to do.

Christians can often be dismissive of this passage on the narrow gate and the wide gate, because we, like Peter, can be convinced that we know what things should look like in the kingdom of heaven.

But that is the thing. I don't think it is all that easy. Sure, there are matters that are easier to distinguish about the way. Things that are more black and white issues. We all know that without question murder, adultery, deceit, and theft are wrong. These are issues that are clearly delineated. But what about those that aren't?

There are *many* who are lured and fooled. Many are persuaded by the false way. For the false way is full of beauty, it is decorated in the finest things this world has to offer, and most definitely does not appear to be a way to destruction. The way that leads to destruction is not marked with large caution signs. It resembles all that we love and cherish. If it were hideous, no one would be tempted by it.

No, the false way is lined with good things of this world, things that God himself has given us to enjoy. But they are things that are elevated to ultimate things.

On the other hand, the *way to life* is difficult. It is narrow. It is not what we normally would think it to be. It is counterintuitive and counter cultural. The gate is narrow, and then on top of that, the path is a difficult one. It is not appealing. The narrow way resembles a road you wouldn't leave your car parked on overnight, and a street that you would lock your doors in as you drove through.

It is a way that is full of suffering and pain, and requires dying to self. It calls for the carrying of our cross. This requires us to love those who are frustrating to love. It calls us to be patient with those who constantly push your limits. It is the road less traveled and

perhaps least desired at face value. It is not the road the Pharisees took. It is not the road that the world takes.

So the first question is, are we seeing *the way* rightly? Or are we seeing it the way we want to see it?

Is our view of God accurate? Are our assumptions of God's purposes in our lives true?

For many have fallen into a perspective that God lives and exists to help us on our way. To aid us in our journey in this life. That he strives to make us better people and that he blesses us and takes care of us so we can have a good life here, and blessings in heaven.

But what we don't remember is that God created us so that we might serve him with our lives. And nowhere in Scripture are we taught that we will have a nice, comfortable life. Instead we read that anyone who follows Jesus, will suffer for his name's sake.... [Phil. 1:29]

Throughout the sermon on the mount, the Lord Jesus has been teaching his disciples that there are two types of people in this world. Those who follow his will and walk the way of the cross and suffering, and those who avoid the way of the cross and look out for themselves and their family. Those who would follow him are to leave everything and die to self.

This passage is only a continuation of the same teaching Jesus has been giving.

The Wide and Easy Road

The false teachers are proponents of the easy road. They will relax the standards of the law and will let you think that as long as you do the bare minimum, God will be pleased with you.

The false teachers, the Pharisees, don't follow the way of suffering and dying to self. Instead, they exalt themselves. They make sure everyone knows of their good works. They do things for the praise of man, for earthly rewards, and tell everyone what they are involved with at church.

The false teachers are unhealthy trees. They are not planted besides streams of water. They are not rooted in Jesus' ways. They are diseased and for that reason, they cannot produce good fruit. They can only bear bad fruit. Diseased fruit.

Their version of righteousness is actually easy righteousness. It is the type of righteousness that doesn't cost a thing. It is all about appearances. It is all about how people view you. It is about doing the bare minimum, and about saving face. These false prophets treat church like a social club, never taking seriously the call to repentance, or forgiveness.

They don't greet those who they dislike, they don't forgive those who have offended them, they make exceptions for the commandments, they pray for public consumption, they give to the needy before others, and they lay up treasures on earth.

Where do we fall? What road are we on?

Have we gone down the road of soft Christianity? The type of Christianity that asks nothing of you, demands nothing of you, and only offers you comfort? Has our understanding of Christianity become convenient?

Have we swallowed the teaching of the false prophets without knowing it, and have we determined that all Jesus wants of us is an external, superficial, easy Christianity? What does your faith look like? Are you resigned to continue to live as you are?

This message is for all disciples of Jesus. We are all bent toward wanting comfort. We all long to relax, to be free from sickness, hardship, and suffering. We don't want to face the reality that Jesus has called us to much more than we acknowledge, because it would require us to change.

As we look back over the Sermon on the Mount, it is obvious that Jesus' teaching is extreme. It requires our all. We must give him everything we have and are. A true disciple of Jesus must give up their very lives and be willing to die for God's will.

It is for that reason that Jesus explains that the first and greatest commandment is to love him. To love the Lord our God with ***all*** our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Jesus requires our all.

If I'm honest, I don't believe a message calling us to take the narrow path of suffering, rather than the path of ease and comfort is going to go over well. No one wants to suffer. We don't like the difficult way because it requires us to bow to God's plan. It requires us to live in faith, without knowledge of what all is happening. It also requires us to trust that God's way is the best way and that his will is supreme over my will.

If we are honest, none of us like this idea. We like to make our own decisions, we like to be in control of our own lives. We like to do what we want.

And Jesus knows this. He knows how tempting it is for us to follow the ways of the world. He knows that we are tempted to choose the easy way out. And so he reminds us that the easy path can look appealing and it might seem attractive, but the truth is, that it is full of death and damnation.

Puzzle Box

I have determined that one of the most aggravating things you can do in life is purchase and try to complete a puzzle over 1000 pieces. Putting these oddly shaped pieces in order and into some sort of coherent image, takes a lot of patience.

But the one thing that does relieve some of the frustration of painstakingly piecing these pieces together is using the top of the box to get a sense of what this puzzle is actually supposed to look like.

Well, I think that Jesus, in his mercy, knows that we are a controlling people. We like to know what is going on and have an idea of where he is going with things in our lives.

And while Jesus does not permit us to see everything. One thing he does do, is in this passage he gives us a glimpse of the image on the top of the puzzle box of humanity.

Jesus reveals the end – the final picture if you will – of what will come to pass to all who travel on these two ways.

This picture is particularly helpful because from a human perspective, it makes sense of what Jesus is calling us to do.

Jesus calls us to look at the false prophets. He **shows** us their end in v. 19. He gives us a peek into the divine big picture. Their lives are poisoned. Their fruit is diseased. Though their lives look good to us, their path ends in death. They will not most certainly not stand in the judgment, nor will they be part of the congregation of the righteous. They will be cut down and will be thrown into the fire.

In the same way, Jesus also shows us the divine big picture of those who suffer along the narrow way.

But he doesn't show us that in this passage as much as he shows us it through his life.

Jesus' life is in many ways the top of the puzzle box. It is the divine picture of all who would follow him. It is the way of suffering, but it is also the way of life eternal for all who trust and are united to him.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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