

Choose the Narrow Gate

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[0 : 00] The reading today is from Matthew chapter 7 verses 13 to 29. It's on page 972 of the Church Bibles.

Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.

Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[1 : 08] Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons, and in your name perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you.

Away from me, you evil doers. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down, and the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

[2 : 25] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Great. Good morning, St. Silas. My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior pastor here.

It's great to see you. And thanks, Ruth, for reading, and for James and Greg and the band, and others who've helped us with our Remembrance Sunday so far. As we turn to continue in the series we've been in as a church family in Matthew's Gospel, it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open, or just pick up a Bible from in front of you if you've not done that yet.

And we're just looking at those words of Jesus on page 972 in the church Bibles. And if you find it helpful, you can find an outline inside the notice sheet, just so that you can follow as we look together at Jesus' words.

But let's pray. We've had a lot to think about this morning already on Remembrance Sunday, but let's ask for God's help that we would hear Jesus' voice clearly and respond rightly.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your saving King, the Lord Jesus, and his words to us. Would you help us to hear him and respond rightly?

[3 : 39] So may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. One of the most iconic films of perhaps recent decades, we might say, was the movie *Trainspotting*, about a group of friends in Edinburgh living, grappling with heroin addiction.

In the opening scene of the film, the two of the main characters, Renton and Spud, were running down Princess Street in Edinburgh, being chased by security guards, having committed a crime.

And while they were running, Renton, Ewan McGregor's voice came over, and he had this script that he said about the choice that his generation had been given by society.

And it said, choose life, choose life. But life meant materialistic possessions, financial stability, a traditional family, DIY on a Sunday, not knowing who you really are, growing old and then dying.

And disillusioned by that choice, Renton and his friends had chosen something else. So he said, I chose not to choose life, I chose something else. And they chose the escapism of heroin.

[4 : 57] Now the movie never glamorised that, and it faced up to some of the horrific brokenness and chaos of drug-addicted lives. But the words at the beginning of that movie became iconic.

And I remember them being on posters everywhere. University student walls. People had posters of those words everywhere. Choose your future, choose life.

Well, this morning we come to the culmination of Jesus' words, his Sermon on the Mount. And he says that we're all faced with that kind of choice.

But when he urges us to choose life, it's not the life of material comfort or moral conformity. It's not the life of escapism, as some of us might opt for drugs or leisure, to inoculate ourselves from life.

Rather, what Jesus urges us to choose is life with him. Life as he defined it. Life on his terms, in his kingdom. And it's the life that he made you and me for.

[6 : 05] In Matthew chapter 3, Jesus announced his arrival as God's chosen king. And he began calling people to turn to him. For he was the way into the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of heaven, as he calls it. And since then, he's set before us what he calls us to if we choose to follow him. A life so bright and so distinctive that the world is drawn in to know him.

A life looking to the future. A life of integrity and fidelity and purity. A life that we live day by day in the presence of God as our heavenly father.

And now, having set that out before us, Jesus preaches for decision. He urges us to choose life. So our first point this morning, choose the narrow gate.

He says, picture yourself on a walk where you've arrived at a fork in the road. A T-junction, if you like. Have a look with me again at verse 13. Enter through the narrow gate.

[7 : 13] For wide is the gate. And broad is the road that leads to destruction. And many enter through it. But small is the gate. And narrow the road that leads to life.

And only a few find it. So sometimes in life, we get too many choices. It's one of the things that takes up a lot of time in our lives.

It's over choice today. You know, you want to buy breakfast cereal. You go to the supermarket. It's overwhelming. You know, washing powder. How do you choose? It's overwhelming.

Jesus says, though, that when it comes to the fundamental direction of the whole of your life, there is no over choice. There are actually only two ways you can choose.

Picture those two options as starting out with two different gates. And one of them is narrow. In other words, there's something inherently restrictive about it.

[8 : 11] That's the way of Jesus. It involves accepting that fundamentally, he is in charge. Taking him at his word. And that closes off a lot of options in your life.

Options about what we would think about right and wrong as we've been shaped by our culture around us. Get closed off as we take him at his word. Our attitudes are to be shaped by him.

How we spend our time. How we treat other people. Picture it as a narrow path, Jesus says. Where his words hem us in. And they constrain us.

The other way to live in comparison is wide and broad. You can live your life away from Jesus. And feel uninhibited. Unrestricted.

It might feel so broad that you don't even notice the ends of the road on either side. Because it's so wide in your choice. A wide, wide highway.

[9 : 12] And that doesn't mean that you won't have standards. You find people walking on that highway, that wide road, who have extremely high standards for themselves and for other people. They look down on other people on the highway for not following their moral rules.

They insist on being upstanding and respectable. Being on the broad highway doesn't mean you won't be religious. You find people on that highway who will be in church every week.

In chapter 6, we heard about them. They were giving their money. They were praying. They were even fasting. As they head along the wide highway. Others walking on that highway have decided to live a life of hedonistic pleasure.

They're not going to have anything to do with religion or moral rules. They're going to live for themselves. And make the most of the pleasure they can get. Live for the moment.

But however we would choose to live our life away from Jesus, we hear him this morning calling us, urging us, come, follow me, enter through the narrow gate.

[10 : 18] And the testimony of countless people who've entered through that gate is that once you're on it, the path doesn't seem quite so narrow. It often doesn't feel that way.

It looked that way to me before I went down that narrow gate 20 years ago. But once you're on the path, it's as though it opens out for you. And you find that living with the restrictions of following Jesus' way, actually you find him to be a gentle king and a good shepherd.

And being hemmed in by him, you find true freedom. But he would have us see that the gate is fundamentally a narrow one. The words small for the gate and narrow for the road suggest there's difficulty as well on the way that we'll meet trouble in our lives and opposition to following him.

And it will be hard to stay on the narrow way. It's hard to persevere. And it's as though we can see the broad road all the time. And we feel drawn to the pleasures that maybe we could enjoy if only we left the narrow path and went to the broad road.

If only we'd change direction. And let's notice as well, perhaps most of all, that to stay on the narrow way can be a lonely road. In verse 13, he says, Of the wide gate, many enter through it.

[11 : 36] In verse 14, he says, Of the small gate, only a few find it. And don't we feel that? Don't we feel that in Glasgow today?

Maybe you feel it at school, in your high school. Maybe you're the only Christian you know at school. Maybe you feel it in your family, in your workplace, that nobody else seems to follow the narrow way.

That to be a Christian today in Glasgow, you're swimming against the tide. But Jesus says, You can't find truth by majority vote. You find truth when you go to him.

Even if everyone else in Glasgow gives up on him, you want to stick with him. Just as Peter said in John chapter 6, when people left Jesus because his teaching was so challenging, and he turns to his disciples and he says, Are you going to go as well?

And Peter says, Lord, to whom shall we go? Oh, you have the words of eternal life. Following him can be a lonely road. Seeing the crowds, ignoring him, can be disconcerting.

[12 : 41] But you don't find the truth by following the crowd, Jesus says. So why would we choose the narrow gate? Well, we might think that Jesus has already given us compelling reasons in the series we've been in, in his sermon on the mount, to choose the narrow path, as he talked about having this deep, great purpose for your life, to seek his kingdom.

Or he's talked about knowing God as your provider, and him caring for you, and how much you're worth to him. But Jesus says here, Don't choose the path because of how wide or broad it is, or how narrow it is.

Don't choose the path because of how many people are on it, or how few are on it. No, choose the path because of where it leads. And he says, The broad highway leads to destruction, and the narrow way leads to life.

And folks, it's a terrible thought. All those people turning from Jesus to go a different way, thinking that there's safety in numbers, are heading for destruction, Jesus says.

Where they'll have all eternity to contemplate the difference it made, that they wouldn't choose the narrow gate. Some years ago, my dad was living, I'm from the north of England, and my dad was living in the north of England, but doing a lot of work in London with a friend of his called Leslie.

[14 : 04] And his friend Leslie, he lived in Nottingham. And one day, they were heading out of London, having had a day of meetings, and they were on different trains. Leslie's set off an hour earlier than my dad's train out of King's Cross.

And both trains were very busy, because it was the end of the business day. And in a sense, both trains looked very similar as people got on them at King's Cross and headed up the East Coast line from London.

But Leslie's train derailed at Hatfield on a faulty track, and the roof was ripped off his carriage, and he was killed. He never made it home that day.

And as I heard the news, I felt this combination of things. I felt relieved that my dad hadn't been on that train. And then I felt this great sense of regret. If only Leslie had known that his train was going to derail.

If only he'd known that it wasn't going to get to Nottingham. He would never have got on that train. None of them would have got on it. And Jesus wants us to think about the direction of our lives like that.

[15 : 07] He says there is a place of destruction where all the goodness of God has gone, where there's no love and there's no hope. And he says you must enter by the small and the narrow road that leads to life.

He's the life giver, and he offers us forever life. Life that shines with the light of the goodness and glory of the presence of God. Life that lasts forever.

He's giving it to us as a gift. And he says that we can enjoy that life to the full with him forever. A life of joy and peace and pleasure. Enjoying the generosity of God the Father as our Father.

Where our hearts will find treasure that can never spoil. And Jesus says the decision is yours to make. Choose the narrow gate. But not everyone will tell us that the choice is as simple as that.

So in the next section, Jesus tells us about two trees. The two trees describe two kinds of teachers about God. And our second point is choose true prophets over false ones.

[16 : 14] So have a look at verse 15. He says, Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

Now prophecy in the Bible can mean foretelling, predicting the future from God. Or it can mean, perhaps more commonly, forth telling. Just declaring, declaring forth the truth about God.

And we can see in the context here of what Jesus is describing, it's that latter kind of prophet. He's talking about religious teachers and leaders. And he says, Some of them look just like you.

They're in sheep's clothing. Maybe they come from within your church, but they're actually wolves. I don't know if you've ever seen the impact of a wolf on a herd of sheep.

It's a horrific thing to see as the wolves mercilessly destroy the sheep and there's blood everywhere and limbs everywhere. This is what false teachers will do to us if we follow them, Jesus says.

[17 : 18] And they're very deceptive, false teachers. That's why he says, Watch out for them. If only it was easy to spot a false teacher. If only they introduced themselves to you like that.

If only they had a sinister look about them. If only their teaching was just way off the mark and we could spot it. But we might find that they use language of Jesus and grace and faith and life and hope and joy.

And all the while their teaching is just a few degrees off and it leads us off the narrow path. So how do you watch out for them? Well, we could look out for them teaching what goes against Jesus' words here in Matthew chapter 7.

Do they preach for people to enter by the narrow gate? Or do they affirm us in our desire to go on the broad road? Do they preach that the wide highway leads to destruction?

Or do they say, You don't have to feel so hemmed in by the words of scripture. It's not as clear as that. For lots of us, surely that's what might seduce us in our lives.

[18 : 27] That we want the narrow road to be just not quite as narrow. I think of a man I was chatting to a few years ago who was leading a church very near here in Glasgow.

Very near here. And he was talking about his congregation and he said, You know, a lot of the people who come to our church, they used to believe the Bible as God's word and over time they just wanted a bit more wriggle room.

That's how he put it. So seductive, isn't it? The promise of a wider highway that still leads to life. Jesus says, Watch out.

Or we might be wary of teachers where all the emphasis of their ministry and their church and their teaching is on today. On living your best life now with no mention of the future.

When we've heard Jesus so clearly speaking again and again about the future. At the same time, Jesus also says, To spot false teachers by their fruit.

[19 : 34] Look at their fruit. In the same way you would spot an unhealthy tree. Verse 20, By their fruit you will recognize them. The fruit not just of their teaching, I take it, but of their lives that they're living.

If they're a rotten tree, it will show up somewhere as you watch them. In the pattern of their life, you could ask of a teacher, Is there a pattern of growing humility in prayerfulness in love for Jesus, in hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Are they open to challenge? Are there things in their life that suggest they might have drifted from the narrow road? Things to do with money, things to do with sex, things to do with power.

Jesus says, Keep watch. Then he says, There are two claims, two kinds of claims to follow him. So our third point, choose obedience over mere words.

And these are daunting words because Jesus describes two kinds of people in verse 21. He says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

[20 : 50] So he says that both kinds of people here are religious. They are reverent. They call Jesus Lord. And they're orthodox in some way.

Do we see that? Calling Jesus Lord is good doctrine. Jesus is Lord. I remember someone saying here once to me, I'll partner with anybody as a Christian who says that Jesus is Lord.

But Jesus says here that not everyone who says Jesus is Lord belongs to him. And these people are enthusiastic. They're not, this isn't just dry orthodoxy.

They are passionate. They say, Lord, Lord. It's an expression of enthusiasm. It's even accompanied here, in this case, by ministry with powerful signs and wonders from their words.

doing the kind of great works Jesus sent his apostles to do. Casting out demons. Performing miracles. And then verse 23 is devastating.

[21 : 51] Jesus says, Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers. Why?

They were never authentic followers of Jesus. And you can tell that not from their words, but from their lives, their obedience. True disciples of Jesus shouldn't hear this and have sleepless nights.

We're not to lack assurance. For Jesus said, All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. If you come to him he will never drive you away.

But as we hear this warning, he's calling us to examine ourselves. If you feel concerned by what Jesus says here, that could already be a really good sign that we trust him.

We take him at his word. So we feel concerned to examine ourselves. And the test Jesus would have us take for our assurance or, conversely, to wake us up into action is to think about our own lives and whether we obey Jesus.

[23 : 04] we don't get to heaven by our good works but you don't get to heaven without good works in that good works, obedience of Jesus, areas of your life where you live differently because of his words, here is the sure evidence in your life that Jesus looks to to confirm in your life that you do trust him, that we've entered through the narrow gate.

Not that we're perfect but that we could point to areas of our life where we can see Jesus' words have hemmed me in there. I'm on the narrow path. It's a relatively easy thing to talk the talk, to say we're a Christian but under the surface to continue life on the wide highway and Jesus would have us ask, am I listening to him with obedient trust?

And it's a similar point to the one Jesus uses to conclude his whole sermon as he moves into our fourth point, choose obedience over just listening. Choose obedience over just listening.

Jesus invites us here to picture two very different outcomes for life as two builders of two houses we're each building a house as we live life if you like.

Verse 24 he says, therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house on the rock and then the storm comes the rain came down the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house and it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock.

[24 : 51] But then Jesus tells us about the second house and the striking thing is that before the storm the two houses look so similar we admire the house on sand.

It's got nicely finished brickwork all around it and double glazed sash windows a wood burner in the living room and one of those kitchens where the whole family can gather around.

But looking a bit more closely at the home report the surveyor says the builder took a shortcut and there's no foundation on this house and for a time the house looks absolutely fine and we think do we even need a foundation?

This seems to work and then in verse 27 we read the rain came down the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash a calamitous fall.

Now here many of us will have heard this parable and thought of the storms of this life the difficulties that might come our way but Jesus has been teaching us here to look to the future and the day that we'll all stand before him and all of sinful humanity will face the storm of God's just judgment and the place that Jesus called hell will be a place of destruction as he's just said a few verses earlier a place of ruin a place where there is no love and no goodness and there will be people all around us whose lives in this world seem so respectable they seem to have got everything together to be winners at the game of life you know good set of friends decent guy friendly but judgment day will come and suddenly what will be revealed is that they never built their foundation on the rock and conversely Jesus assures us that when we build our lives on his word we have nothing to fear from that coming storm he says that with him we can enjoy complete security so that we look forward to the day of his return we even yearn for it for we know that our house will stand firm the crucial difference being not what we hear both builders hear the word only one puts it into practice in other words it is a relatively easy thing to turn up for church it's easy to stay around for coffee it's even easy to speak with admiration about the sermons we hear you hear people at Christian conferences who say wasn't that a marvelous morning haven't we had a marvelous morning were you in the talk wonderful it was didn't you just love the way he put that the speaker haven't we been blessed do you remember when he said that he put that so well and it might seem to someone listening as though we just go for the show and Jesus would have us ask what difference will it make to your life what you've heard what difference is it going to make to show that we trust him and maybe it's a week to take stock of what we've heard from recent weeks from Jesus and ask what steps have I taken to put what I've been hearing into practice has it made any difference being here maybe we felt convicted when we heard Jesus speak about the problem of looking at women lustfully well what steps have I taken to change or about our anger murder in a can or maybe we felt challenged when he said to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven and seek his kingdom in this world with our resources and trust that our heavenly father will provide well again has it made any difference since we heard that message or his teaching for us on how to pray and his invitation to be more persistent in prayer and he taught us in chapter 6 about when we should pray what we pray for it's when you put his words into practice that the foundations that you're laying are on something solid on steadfast rock and you can be assured nothing to fear from the coming storm so we come to the end of the sermon on the mount and we find Jesus urging us to choose him just consider the audacity of his claims that he is the one to call lord that's the name for god but in verse 21 he's the one you call lord he is the one with the keys to heaven so that in verse 23 he can say to people

[29 : 46] I never knew you away from me and that crucial difference between the two houses of our lives is about what we do with his words he talks about these words of mine in verse 24 and consider the reaction to him from the crowd in verse 28 looking on as he taught his disciples verse 28 the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority those who heard Jesus were dumbfounded they were astonished and so should we be as we hear these words but Jesus has been preaching for decision the writer Don Carson says this he says nothing could be more calamitous than to meditate long and hard on the sermon on the mount and then resolve to try and improve a little nothing could be more calamitous that's the religious mindset we hear his words we think well maybe I should just try a bit harder and then God will pick me for his team that will be good enough if instead when we hear Jesus' words we feel crushed we feel broken we feel unworthy then we're in the right place because he started his sermon like that he foretold that this sermon would leave us feeling crushed feeling broken in spirit he said blessed are the poor in spirit he said good for you if you mourn if you're striving for a pure heart if you're hungry and thirsty to be righteous what he doesn't want is for us to be unmoved to feel self-sufficient to feel we've done enough to be on God's team the sermon drives us to Jesus and then he picks us up and he drives us to his sermon folks our time is gone and Jesus' magnificent sermon is done he urges us to choose life he wants us to choose him he leaves the decision though to us let's pray together

Lord Jesus we praise you that you have made a way to heaven for us we praise you that you endure the destruction of Calvary that you might invite us to enter through a gate following you that leads to life life in all its fullness we thank you for the gift of your word that we might build our foundation on the rock by your spirit we pray that you would strengthen us and help us forgive us for the times when we have not listened and move us and enable us to choose to enter the narrow gate and continue by that narrow road that we might be led to life with our foundations firm and our house built on the rock we pray these things for our good and for your name's sake

Amen Thank you