

Two Roads, Two Destinations, Two Peoples

Matthew 7:13-14

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Our text is Matthew 7, verses 13 and 14. To this point, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has spoken of *two kinds of righteousness, two sorts of devotion, two kinds of treasure, two different masters, and two types of seekers*. He continues the duality here, with this short bit of instruction about the narrow and wide gates. Only here the key of the whole discourse shifts.

This is not just more teaching, it's a summons to decision. From here to the end of the Sermon, Jesus is pressing for us to embrace his radical call to discipleship. To enter the Kingdom of God. And if we walk away from the summons of the Sermon on the Mount unscathed, there is something deeply troubling in our souls. So Jesus makes the choice stark, that we might count the cost and follow in his way. We shall make three points. The roads, the destinies, and the peoples.

I. The Roads

First, then, the roads. Verse 13 begins: Enter through the narrow gate. It's an imperative, a command, a call. Jesus is saying: follow me, it's time to choose my way, my instruction. My inbreaking kingdom. And the choice he presents here is absolute. There are only two roads, there are only two destinies. There are only two possible options. Choices, by their very nature, preclude all other choices. If you choose a spouse, you forsake all other possible spouses. If you choose to follow Jesus, you cut off all other religious options.

Something in our natures kicks against this. Humans like multiple choices, we like to keep our options open. We like to mix and match, we like to try things out, and defer hard choices (trial periods, experiments). Jesus forbids that here. He calls for decision, and he calls for it now. Even more constricting, he does not leave us with two legitimate choices. He makes it clear. Disciples have one lawful choice. Enter by the narrow gate. Jesus does not have dabblers, he does not have dilettantes, he has disciples, followers. For them, truth is not determined by democracy, nor by everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. It is determined by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, by the one who says, in advance of our choosing: enter by the narrow gate.

Nevertheless, we are free moral agents, and there are two roads before us, so Jesus begins to describe them. The first is described as wide and broad. Wide is the gate and broad is the road (or easy is the way) that leads to destruction. This way is easy, it is spacious, it is roomy. You don't have to search to find it. You're born on the route. It's the default road everybody is driving on. It's the way of alleged diversity and easy tolerance and sweet permissiveness.

You can do what is natural here and follow your own heart. Chill. You can express your inner self however you like. There are no boundaries of thought or conduct required to get on it. Certainly no tradition that needs to be embraced. No repentance, no mortification, no need for self-denial and taking up your cross, no self-examination, no persecution. There are no nails being driven into your hands. There's no swimming against the stream required. Dead things go with the flow. Only vigorously living things can swim against the current. That's not required here. Nothing needs to be left behind.

There are lots of church-going people on this road. You can hate your enemies on this road, you don't have to love them. You don't have to pray for them and bless them, cursing them is fine. You can sue them, rather than work toward reconciliation. You can be judgmental and arrogant, rather than poor and spirit. You can shoot people who threaten your property, rather joyfully accepting its seizure as the early church did. *You can worship and pant after the levers of American political power and people will think you're just a patriot.* No need for the agonizing way of the cross, for its humiliation and weakness, and its call to non-retaliatory love. The SOM? It's really – though we won't say it out loud – it's really optional. The broad highway has some wonderful Christian lanes on it.

The other road is small and narrow. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life. This road has clearly defined boundaries. It is sharply marked out, and one needs to look for it, for it can be easily missed. The beatitudes, one preacher said, are the side-posts for this gate. *(And, well, how many American Christians have you met who are passionate about embodying the beatitudes? Not as many who are passionate about the next election...)* And they (beatitudes) will restrict the pilgrim's way of entrance, and their subsequent travel on it. This is a narrow onramp leading to a hard road. It cramps your style. It's precarious. If one is rich, getting on this road is like passing through the eye of a needle.

The word for "hard" — the way is hard that leads to life — the word is related to the word for tribulation. This is the path of most resistance. The path of tribulation, and opposition, and slander and persecution. It is the apostolic path of siding with, and being designated by, the name Paul calls himself and his colleagues — namely, the scum of the earth, the refuse of all things.

For, through MANY tribulations, we must enter the Kingdom of God. Here divine truth limits what we can believe, and divine goodness limits how we can behave. Here, every loyalty, every love, must be relativized, and, if necessary, be parted

with. Friends, family, lands, possessions, even our own lives, all must be laid on the altar. Whoever does not renounce all that he has, cannot be my disciple, says the One who is this gate, this door, who is this way. Whose is the only name under heaven by which we must be saved.

Here's Bonhoeffer on this road:

To be called to do the extraordinary, but not to see and to know that one is doing it—that is a narrow road. To give witness to and to confess the truth of Jesus, but to love the enemy of this truth, who is his enemy and our enemy, with the unconditional love of Jesus Christ—that is a narrow road. To believe in Jesus' promise that those who follow shall possess the earth, but to encounter the enemy unarmed, to prefer suffering injustice to doing ill—that is a narrow road. To perceive other people as being weak and wrong, but never to judge them; to proclaim the good news to them, but never to throw pearls before swine—that is a narrow road. It is an unbearable road. The danger of falling off threatens every minute.

None of this is to deny Jesus' statement that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. The cost in view is one we should gladly bear, like the man who sold everything he had to obtain the pearl of great price. But it is to say that the road of this yoke-bearing is narrow, it is full of obstacles, and that it costs everything to choose to enter it and remain on it. And yet, we will pay any toll to get on this road.

So, there are but two roads, two ways. Human life, and human beings, for all their complexity and ambiguity, are on one road or the other. There are no other options.

II. The Destinations

Our second point is the two destinations. Wide is the gate, and broad is the road, that leads to destruction. This easy, carefree, roomy road ends in horror. God is properly, basically, intrinsically, Creator, not destroyer. This road is the road of the one who comes to kill and to destroy. Its end is not liberation, but the full and final destruction of all love, beauty, truth, joy, and hope. Its promises are delusions. It is a suicide road. It is the road to hell, a topic on which Jesus, more than any other figure, speaks. So much for the idea that all roads lead to God. Apparently, nobody told Jesus about this.

The other road, small and narrow, leads to life, to eternal fullness of fellowship with the God who is life. I am the gate, Jesus said, whoever enters by me, shall be saved. As there are but two ways, so there are but two destinations. In the language of Psalm 1: the way of the righteous leads to flourishing, the way of the wicked leads to being driven like chaff before the wind.

It's not Jesus' immediate concern here, but it's important to see that this narrow, hard way does not create narrow (provincial) hard people, or a narrow, stunted embrace of life. The way is hard that leads to LIFE. To LIFE – and life abundant and full. Think of the Psalmist in Psalm 119, who says that, through the Torah, God has broadened his understanding. I walk about in freedom, for I seek your precepts. I have seen a limit to all perfection for your commandment is exceedingly broad. Choosing and cleaving to the Word does not narrow or cramp one's life. The text of Scripture is the constitution of human liberty. The narrow way, paradoxically, mysteriously, brings us into a spacious place. And here, there is another nuance to the spaciousness we enter into.

Notice: The Holy Scriptures, the exclusive book of pilgrims on the narrow way, enlarges your mind. It makes you a richer, wider, deeper, more comprehensive and penetrating thinker. It gives you the ability to survey large tracts of human existence. The idea of this broadness is wonderfully expressed in 1 Kings 4, when speaking about the gift of Solomon's wisdom, we are told: And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, AND BREADTH OF MIND, like the sand on the seashore. Narrowness of soul, littleness of mind, one-dimensional childish thinking, is not a thing which should be produced in the narrow way of God.

On the contrary, in that way, that path, God gives us panoramic vistas of thought, broadness, largeness, catholicity (if you will) of heart and mind. By the narrow way, we come into the spacious and open place of freedom, into the glorious liberty of the children of God, for it is the way – confining indeed it is – but it is constriction that leads to LIFE.

III. The Peoples

Our third point, then, is the two peoples. The travelers on these two roads. On the wide and broad road which leads to destruction, there are many – many enter through it. It is the default road, as we said, and people, by and large, confirm it as their personal choice. It is a busy highway, thronged with multitudes of people. Tragically, this road is jammed with people. Many are they who enter on it.

Of the small gate, the narrow road that leads to life, Jesus says, starkly, only a few find it. It is, we said, hard to find, and, in contrast to the many on the other road, only a few find the road to life. It is comparatively deserted compared to the broad road. Few find the way to life. There it is – in black and white. Many are lost, few are saved. Jesus says the same thing elsewhere: Many are called, he says, but FEW are chosen.

Many hear the word, few are those elect who respond to it. The same thought is present in the parable of the sower, the great parable of the kingdom, the parable

of parables. The vast majority of seed, of the preached Word, falls on ground which does not lead to life. Only one of the four classes of hearers respond to the Word and persevere.

On this road is Jesus' LITTLE FLOCK, his despised minority, to which his Father has given the kingdom. Like: Fear not, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Even MANY who appear to be on this narrow road, baptized, professing Christians, are not, in fact, on it. (1 Peter 4) Thus, Jesus says, that on the last day, MANY, notice that MANY, will say to me Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons, and do mighty works in your name? To which, Jesus shall say: depart from me, you workers of lawlessness, I never knew you. If the fruit of the SOM is used to determine genuine Christians, then large chunks of Christendom must be judged as fraudulent.

Of course this teaching, which cannot be glossed over, raises the question about how many, then, will be saved. After all, there are texts which speak of the vast expansion of the kingdom. And the Book of Revelation speaks of a great redeemed multitude from every tribe, and tongue, and language, and nation.

Now, the easiest way of reconciling these two sets of texts, is to say that a few entering the way to life, over a long period of time, would produce a great multitude of redeemed. There is no necessary conflict between a great multitude of redeemed, still being few compared to the many on the road to destruction. That is, of course, a bleak vision. And I think we are better off saying there are two strands of teaching, which stand in some tension.

There are texts like this one – and the others I mentioned, and there are more that could be cited – and then there are more optimistic texts, concerning the conversion of the nations, and the progress of the gospel. But what is important *here* is that the witness of *this* text, and those like it, be fully heard. Few are those which find the way to life --- and any interpretation which turns “few” into “the vast majority” is corrupt.

When Jesus was teaching on his way to Jerusalem, he was asked: Lord, will those who are saved be few? The very fact that Jesus' teaching raises THAT question should tell us something. It's the same question our text here raises. And there Jesus says: Strive to enter by the narrow door, for many, there's the many again, many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able. That's not an unequivocal “yes, only few will be saved.” But it's certainly very far from an assertion that the many, the vast majority, will be saved.

And this brings us back to the point, the challenge of this text. While it bears down on the question of how many will be saved, this text is not given for us to speculate about the relative proportions of the saved and lost. That is not Jesus' primary intention here. When asked: Are they few that shall be saved? He gives

a command, not an unequivocal answer: Strive to enter by the narrow gate. He does that for the same reason he begins our text here with an urgent summons: Enter through the narrow gate.

The choice must be faced. Jesus allows no escape. And this text is intended to jar us, to disturb us out of our complacency. If many can be lost and few can be saved, and clearly this text asserts that – if many who think they are saved will be lost ---then, rather than arguing about proportions, what we are to do is to consider deeply the genuineness of our commitment to him. The two roads, and the two destinies, and the two peoples, are Jesus' way of bringing home the urgency of the only good choice.

And thus we are called to walk the same road that he walked ahead of us, and which he now walks beside us, the narrow road with the small gate, which only few find, for it is the way of Jesus, the way of him who is our life. He has set before us death and life. Choose life. ENTER by the narrow gate. *Amen.*

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