

Matt. 7:13-14

Intro: This is the beginning of the section I have entitled “the strict criteria of salvation.” In this part of the sermon, Jesus was summarizing and applying the importance of obeying all that He had been teaching. It is a strong warning of the seriousness and importance of all that He had been saying, because there were eternal blessings and/or consequences depending on His hearers’ reaction and application of what they had heard.

In reading this larger section, we need to see it in the larger context of the New Testament which clearly denies that our good works contribute to our salvation in any way. And yet, in this section, Jesus undoubtedly upholds the extremely high standards of God’s Kingdom ethics and demands that His people meet those standards. In light of the rest of the New Testament, this is not so that we would somehow become worthy of salvation. Rather, these good works are a product of genuine salvation, not its cause. As part of the freely given salvation, He empowers us to do good works by His New Birth and sanctification. And we have a part to play in this sanctification. This section is part of His motivation given to us in order that we would pursue this holiness. This new ethical lifestyle and attitude is a blessing of His Kingdom as well as evidence that we are indeed participants in His Kingdom.

I. Enter through the narrow gate (13a)

In this passage, Jesus does not directly define what it means to enter through the narrow gate. In the rest of the passage, He gives the reasons why we should, but never defines how to do it. In the parallel passage in Luke 13:24, it says that we should “make every effort” to enter, which is also implied in this context. But this still does not tell us how it is done. However, from the context of the larger Sermon on the mount, He expects the readers to understand what He meant.

Entering through the narrow gate is clearly a metaphor for having the lifestyle and attitude He taught earlier throughout the Sermon on the Mount. It is the things that lead to life and avoid death. It is those things that are pleasing to God and in conformity with His Kingdom.

This metaphor is defined as entering in through a gate or entrance. It is a transition between two states. The word “gate” is the same word often used for the gates of a city. As a person would pass a border, thus changing their experience from being outside to being inside the city, now with access to all the things which the city offered. So, entering through the narrow gate is to transition into the experience that is available only on the inside of this boundary. And this is also the same word used for the temple gate. So, there might be a connotation here of entering God’s presence (see Psa. 100:4). And, as shown in the rest of this passage, this metaphor ultimately symbolizes entering into true life and the eternal experience of God’s Kingdom.

And in this metaphor, the gate is described as “narrow.” This is part of a contrast with the different gate described as “wide” in the rest of the passage. In some way, this gate is constraining. It is not easy or automatic to enter through it. Not everyone can, or is willing to do what it takes to enter through this gate. That is why we need to be commanded, warned, and motivated to do so. It is harder to enter this gate, but Jesus assured us that it is worth the effort. As such, Jesus was saying His way is the opposite of some modern ideas of inclusion and tolerance. Of course, it is a Christian virtue to be welcoming and hospitable to all. But part of our giving love and grace to people is to clearly communicate and warn, like Jesus did, that not everything is acceptable to God. And not everything leads to life. There are some things that keep us from the life and blessing that God offers. And so, we must strive to enter by His way, even though it is narrow and exclusive.

II. Reason: Even though this way is harder, it leads to life, not destruction (13b-14)

The rest of this passage is the reason Jesus gave for entering the narrow gate. It may be harder than the alternative, but it is much better in the long run. His reason is similar to the current clichés of “No pain, no gain,” and “Anything worth having is worth working for.” It is the nature of life in this fallen, broken, upside-down world that good things are often difficult. And the difficulty is part of what makes them good. And with our fallen, sinful nature, it takes a miracle of grace to take us off the easy way of doing what we want, to the harder, but better way of doing what God wants.

A. Neg: The way to destruction is wide and easy, [and many find it] (13b-d)

This section is the negative warning: The “other way” is harmful and will not end well, even though it is easy and pleasant in the meantime.

1. The way is wide and easy (13b-c)

a Because the gate is wide (13b)

This is the same word for gate that was used in the previous proposition. It is still a transition point, a boundary that one passes for entrance into some state and/or experience. But from the context, here it obviously refers to a different gate – one that is wide. In the contrast with the narrow gate, this particular gate is easy and comfortable to access. Because of its ease, this is seen as the default entrance for all people, unless they strive to enter the other gate. And in that connection, it is noteworthy that this is the same word (“gate”) used in 16:18 to describe the gates of hades.

b And the way is spacious (13c)

And Jesus expanded His description of this option by describing not only the gate, but also the road. Presumably this is the road on either side of the metaphorical gate. And this road is spacious, which implies ample room and ease of travel. Because of its ease of travel, this reinforces the assumption that this is the default way and destination of humanity unless something intervenes. It is the easy way that we all naturally gravitate toward. And Jesus reinforced this later in the passage, when He said that only a few find the other, better way.

2. [that is – the way] the one leading into destruction (13d)

In this proposition, Jesus gave the punchline to the metaphor He had been using in the previous ones. This wide and easy way does not lead to an easy, pleasant destination. Rather, it leads to destruction. The ease of the travel is deceptive. Just because the way is easy does not mean that it is better. It is just the opposite. Sugar tastes good, but is bad for you in large quantities. And broccoli is good for you, but it tastes like despair and dirty socks. In the same way, Jesus warned that the easy and broad way – representing the lax lifestyle, which does not intentionally pursue godliness – will lead to destruction. That is where this particular way goes. That is the inevitable outcome of this lifestyle. It is not like a freeway with many offramps. It is more like a railroad track that goes only where it goes. And it goes to the eternal destruction which is the punishment for the wicked. That is why Jesus warned His people to enter through the narrow gate, because the other alternative is destruction, even though it may seem easier at the time.

B. Pos: Few find the way to life, because it is narrow and hard (14)

This section is the positive alternative to the “other way” described in 13b-d. Here Jesus showed that the narrow way He recommended is best, because it leads to life. It will be worth the pain and inconvenience in the end, though its difficulty means that relatively few will travel this path.

1. The way to life is narrow and hard (14a-b)

a How narrow is the gate! (14a)

This proposition contains an exclamatory expression “how!” to emphasize the degree of narrowness. Jesus did not just say “the gate is narrow” but He said, “How narrow is the gate!” as if He were feigning surprise at how narrow it actually is. And the words “narrow” and “gate” are the same words He used in 13a.

b And the way leading into life is constricted/difficult (14b)

Not only did Jesus say that the gate is narrow, but He also said that the way is difficult and constricted. This is the opposite of the broad way that leads to destruction (see 13b-d). It is a similar metaphor to a narrow two-lane mountain road, where one needs to drive extra carefully to avoid the cliff on one side and the oncoming traffic on the other side. There is less room for wandering or inattentive travel on this kind of way. This also has the connotation of being like a narrow hallway with many people trying to move at the same time. There is little room to move and it is constraining and uncomfortable.

This dramatic way of saying it highlighted the truth that His way is focused and purposeful. One needs to intentionally follow this way, because our fallen nature will never lead us through this gate automatically. It goes against our selfish inclinations for ease and comfort. It is often constraining and uncomfortable, and our sinful nature needs to be suppressed in favor of the higher calling and destiny. If anyone is tempted to despair at how difficult the Christian life can be, they should be reminded of the command of Jesus in verses 7-11 to ask and seek from God, which includes the promise that God will answer and we will find. If you need strength to walk the narrow way, ask God and seek Him, and you will find the strength. The faithful Christian life is not easy. But it is totally worth it, because Jesus said that this way leads to life, in contrast to the destruction which is the destiny of the other way. It is just the opposite of the previous option – where the way was easy, but painful in the end. This way is difficult, but joyous at the end. The elite athlete knows from experience that the long hours of difficult training are painful and inconvenient. But they do it for the hope of winning the prize. And when they win the gold medal, they realize that all of the difficult training was worth it to reach their goal. In the same way, the faithful follower of Christ will find many difficulties in this life. But we will gladly go through the constraining and painful experiences because of our assured hope of the eternal life which Jesus has promised.

2. And those finding it are few [in number] (14c)

However, Jesus also noted, as a sober warning, that because His way is narrow and difficult, only a relatively few people will find and follow this way. He honestly acknowledged that the faithful Christian life is not for those who can only follow the crowd. It will sometimes be unpopular. But His stress was on the difficulty of this path, which is the reason why only a relatively few people are willing to pay that price. Jesus was up front about the price to pay. And on another occasion (see Luke 14:27-33), He asked His disciples to count the cost of following Him. But at the same time, He was also up front about the eternal reward for following Him, and the eternal danger of any other path and lifestyle. The obvious encouragement is for His hearers to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to be among the few who find and travel the metaphorical road that leads to eternal life.