

A Matter of Life and Death

The Gospels

Matthew 7:13-27

Introduction

John Calvin was a man who influenced the Christian faith in a very profound way. In fact, by the time he was twenty-seven years of age in 1536, he had written the first of a series entitled, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This would form the foundation for reformed theology, of which we experience some of the benefits even today. In fact, in these institutes, he laid down the principles for democratic government.

It was interesting to discover, in reading John Calvin's biography, that he had an older brother by the name of Charles. Charles was everything John was not. He made no contribution to society. In fact, he lived a habitual life of immorality. He was a profligate who gave everything away that he ever had and died, his biographer wrote, "A miserable wretch."

What was the difference between John and Charles? Was it genetic? No, they had the same parents. Was it environment? No, they grew up in the same home. Was it education? No, they attended the same school. The difference was in the choices they made – choices that would determine their character and mark their destiny.

Jesus Christ will conclude His Sermon on the Mount that we have been studying for several months, with this very thought. It took Jesus a lot less time, by the way, than it took us! Turn in your Bible to Matthew chapter 7, where He will conclude.

A Decision Concerning Two Gates

In Matthew 7, Jesus will lay before His hearers a choice – the choice of either life or death.

This is like Joshua, who said to the Israelites,
. . . choose for yourselves today whom you will serve . . . as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:15)

Jesus will stand and voice like Moses, who said to the nation Israel,

. . . I have set before you life and death [good and evil] . . . so choose life . . . (Deuteronomy 30:19)

A letter written to a Melbourne, Australia, daily newspaper expressed one individual's choice. Read the words of this man that were published, and especially note his last sentence.

After hearing an evangelist preach on the radio, viewing him on television, and reading reports and letters concerning his mission, I am sick of the type of religion that insists my soul and everyone else's needs saving. I have never felt that I was lost nor do I feel like I wallow in sin, although repetitive preaching insists that I do. Give me a practical religion that teaches gentleness and tolerance, that acknowledges no barrier of doctrine, that teaches children of goodness and not sin. If, in order to save my soul, I must accept such a philosophy as I have recently heard, I prefer to remain damned forever.

Now look with me in your Bible at the concluding verdict of Jesus Christ that brings each of us to this choice – life or death.

We will begin with Matthew 7:13-14.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.

For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Verse 13 begins with the word "enter," which is an imperative. The tense indicates that we *must* make this choice, and make it *now!* Jesus says, "Enter it" – a declaration of great force.

This scene is one Jesus' audience would understand. He was talking about a narrow gate and a broad and wide gate. The cities, in that day, were walled. The walls were so thick, in fact, that chariots

could be driven on top of them. In these walls, of course, would be gates – broad, wide gates.

In Jerusalem, we know that there were twelve of these gates. They were so broad; so wide that there was two-way traffic.

At night, the broad gates would be closed for protection against enemies. To the side of each of the gates would be a small door that the guards could open so the citizens of the city could enter without opening the gates to the multitudes.

Jesus Christ says, “The way into My kingdom is like this small door. There is no room for two-way traffic; there is no room for masses of people. The way is small; restrictive. Take *that* door and enter in *that* gate.”

Now when Jesus Christ used the word “narrow,” what did He mean? I do not particularly like the word “narrow” because it conjures up in my mind, a picture of grim-faced, straight-laced people who have declared war on laughter. What was Jesus referring to? He was not necessarily referring to that kind of individual.

In the use of the word “narrow,” Jesus was referring to the fact that the gate has only one point of entry; that is, only one formula – it is *that* narrow. A person can only get in one way. It is doctrinal narrowness.

Jesus Himself gave the password. He said,
. . . ***“I am the way . . .”*** (John 14:6a)

In the original, this could be translated,

. . . ***“I am the [only] way, and the [only] truth, and the [only] life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. (John 14:6)***

That is narrow, is it not? *That* is narrow truth.

There have always been two systems of religion in the world: God’s system, which is the narrow way of divine accomplishment, and man’s system, which is human accomplishment. God’s system is the way of faith; man’s system is the way of works. God’s is grace; man’s is fleshly.

God declares, “My way is narrow.”

There is only one way, many roads do not lead to God, only one.

When I graduated from high school, a day I wondered if my parents would ever see, I went through the line and never really got the diploma. I was one of the unfortunate few who had not yet really graduated. They let me be part of the ceremony, but

when I got my booklet, it was empty. The reason was that I had flunked algebra. I would like to blame it on my teacher, who was the world’s most grouchy person, but the problem was probably me. As a result, I had to go to summer school the summer after my senior year in order to pick up the algebra. I passed with a “D-”. Since then, I have always disliked math.

Math is extremely narrow! Now you are catching on! Eight plus five will *always* be thirteen – *never* fourteen!

Let me give another example. Marriage is narrow. It is one of the narrowest institutions around. If you are married, you know what it was like. Guys, when you proposed to your wife, you took her to one of the most expensive restaurants – I hope you have done this since, by the way. You are sitting there picking at your food, while she is gobbling hers. Finally, you get up the courage to speak, and say, “Honey [or whatever name you used], I hope you enjoyed your fifty-five dollar entrée. I have something I want to say. I would like to marry you . . . and one other woman.”

If you said this, chocolate mousse will run down your face – I guarantee!

No, we hear, “Do you, Charles, take this woman, Susie, to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, forsaking all others for her *alone*?”

That is narrow. However, it is the only way it works.

The truth of salvation is narrow, as well, for Jesus Christ said,

“I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved . . .” (John 10:9)

Now look again at the broad way, in Matthew 7:13,

- . . . ***for the gate is wide . . .*** – implying it is inviting;
- ***and . . . is broad that leads to destruction*** – implying it is deceiving – we do not know it leads to destruction unless we are in God’s Word;
- ***and there are many who enter through it*** – implying it is popular – nearly everyone is on this path.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has always been true that it is very easy to go to hell. We do not have to do

anything. We do not have to get drunk to go to hell. We do not have to commit murder or adultery. We do not have to steal. We are, in effect, already going there. John 3:18 tells us,

He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already.

We can just go with the flow. We were born, in a sense, on the broad path.

A Warning About False Teachers

Now why is the broad way so easy to find? Jesus goes on to give a warning to us as to the reason why. Look at Matthew 7:15.

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

These are the guys, and there are many of them, who are waving the flag and saying, "Come this way. Come over here."

The word "ravenous" could be translated "vicious, rapacious".

I used to picture this, when I read this verse, as a wolf putting on sheepskin; wool and trying to infiltrate the flock and look like one of the sheep. However, this is not the right picture at all.

In Jesus Christ's day, the shepherd wore sheep's clothing; that is, the fleece was against his body and the skin was exposed to the elements. Jesus is describing in this verse, that the false teacher is not trying to look like one of the sheep, but is trying to look like one of the shepherds. In so doing, he can lead the sheep astray.

Paul mentioned this to the Ephesian elders, as he wrote in Acts 20:29-31,

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

. . . speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

These false teachers come in looking like a shepherd, so as to lead the flock away. Their purpose is to exploit the flock, not to edify the flock.

Three types of false teachers

The Bible basically refers to three kinds of false teachers. Let me give them.

1. Number one, there are heretics.

The Bible refers to heretics or those who openly deny the truths of scripture. They are open about their denial of the truth.

2. Number two, there are apostate teachers.

These once supposedly followed the way of Christ and taught others, but now are teaching others to deny and reject the truth they once said they held. They are also open and honest about this.

3. Number three, there are deceivers.

Jesus is talking about this type of false teacher in Matthew 7:15. This is the person who is neither a liberal nor part of a cult. This person comes across as orthodox and seems just right. This type of false teacher looks like a shepherd.

Why false teachers are difficult to spot

Let me give three reasons that false teachers are so difficult to spot.

1. First, false teachers look credible.

Jesus implies and I have already mentioned this, but false teachers look like a shepherd. In other words, they have all the credentials; they have everything necessary, externally, to pass as a shepherd.

2. Secondly, false teachers use correct vocabulary.

Look at Matthew 7:21a.

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom . . ."

In the next verse, in fact, three times the phrase appears,

. . . in Your name . . .

False teachers have the theological vocabulary; they have the right terms. The problem is that they have redefined the terms. This will not be obvious, however, until they are boxed into a corner.

Have you run into this? When you talk about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, they say, "Oh, I believe that."

However, this person is not talking about the physical resurrection; the literal, bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, in order to expose a false teacher, you have to ask, "Do you believe in the literal, bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ?"

The false teacher will talk about the spiritual resurrection of Jesus Christ. And when they talk about the infallibility of scripture, they do not mean the Bible is God's word entirely, they mean this includes God's word; some of it is God's word. They have all the correct terminology, but their meaning is not obvious unless they are pinned down.

I was talking to one man recently, about his relationship with Christ. He said, "Oh yeah, I've got a relationship with Him. I get up about every day and talk to the man upstairs."

This man's vocabulary let me know that he did not really know Jesus Christ.

The false teacher is so deceptive because he talks about the Lord Jesus Christ using the correct vocabulary.

3. Thirdly, false teachers are difficult to spot because they are involved in God-honoring activity.

Look at Matthew 7:22.

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?"

These false teachers performed wonderful works of power in Jesus' name. They had a following. These were undeniable acts of miracles displaying supernatural power. All along, however, they were living a lie.

Mel White, who was involved in the People's Temple Christian Church, led by Jim Jones, wrote a book entitled *Deceived*. He wrote these words,

Jim Jones knew how to inspire hope. He was committed to people in need. He counseled prisoners and juvenile delinquents. He started a job placement center. He opened rest homes and homes for the retarded. He had a health clinic. He organized a vocational training center. He provided free legal aid. He founded a community center. He preached about God. He claimed to cast out demons, do miracles, and heal. But, if you remember, he led nearly a thousand people in mass suicide, to

their death, and they believed they were following God.

Three questions reveal the fruit of false teachers

This leads to the question of how to tell if someone is a false teacher; a false prophet. They look right. They sound right. They are involved in the right kinds of ministries, or at least it seems so. How do we discover they are false?

Jesus gives the answer in the next verse. Look at Matthew 7:16a.

You will know them by their fruits. . . .

What will we know them by?

. . . their fruits. . . .

Jesus continues in Matthew 7:16b,

. . . Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?

Let me stop at this point to say that in Palestine in that day, there was a bush called a buckthorn. It bore little black berries that looked like fruit from a distance. There was also a thistle bush that bore a flower that could resemble a fig from a distance. In other words, Jesus is saying, "You know about these two kinds of bushes. False teachers are like them. From a distance, they look like everything is okay; like they really have the right thing. Closer inspection, however, reveals they are false and their fruit is poisonous."

This leads to the question of what Jesus is referring to when He says, "fruits".

Is Jesus referring to works? If He were referring to works, then the Pharisees would have a medal of righteousness because they were "A+" students. Therefore, this is probably not what Jesus meant.

Let me give three questions that will answer the question of what Jesus is referring to by the word "fruits". When you are in the situation that you are questioning whether someone is a false teacher, run these questions through your mind.

1. Question number one, "What is their motive for teaching?"

The *Didache*, which is one of the earliest Christian writings, spoke of the problem of false teachers even in the first century. The term that was used to refer to these people was "Christemporos," which translated means, "Christ merchants". They were selling the gospel; they were packaging and

selling the power of God. When someone gave them something, they would give in return, something of God.

We certainly have this problem today. There are those who sell or merchandise the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, by the way, in its power and in its ministry, is absolutely free.

2. Question number two, “What is their material for teaching?”

Now the test of a true prophet was that they spoke accurately for God. People should have run from the People’s Temple Church the first time Jim Jones, as he did, threw his Bible on the ground and said, “The problem is, too many people are looking at that and not at me.”

The people should have headed for the hills after that, but they stayed on.

The message of the Bible, in its context and content, does not really have a whole lot to say about self-help or success or money or health. It contains a bloodline running from Genesis to Revelation that points to the sinfulness of people and then points them in the direction of Christ, who can save them from their sin. This message cannot be sold and cannot be bought. The power that comes to those who have entered the narrow gate cannot be sold either. They have direct access to God and as much of His power as any teacher or leader.

Let me add that those who follow false teaching have chosen to listen to a source other than Scripture.

I read a survey this week, and have read others with similar results, that revealed half of all Americans consider themselves to be Christians. This result would be wonderful, but I read another survey that concluded that every day, fifty million Americans consult their astrological readings. Now this is when eight plus five equals fourteen – something is wrong.

3. Question number three, “What is their manner of living?”

Jesus says false prophets will eventually be exposed for who they are.

Peter wrote these interesting words,

[False prophets] . . . speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality . . .

promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption . . . (II Peter 2:18-19)

False teachers do not always get noticed; they do not always make the newspapers. Many will not be revealed until the day of final judgment. However, Jesus Christ says that eventually, they will be exposed, perhaps on earth, but certainly at the judgment.

Perhaps you have read, as I have, the very convicting, challenging book, *Elmer Gantry*, written by an unbeliever, Sinclair Lewis. His chief character in the book, a guy by the name of Elmer Gantry, was guilty as a minister, of immorality, deception, and hypocrisy. He eventually discredited his accusers and faced his congregation. The last scene of the book is prophetic, although written by an unbeliever about a fictitious character. Let me read the words Lewis wrote,

Without planning it, Elmer knelt on the platform holding his hands out to them. And, with him, they all knelt and sobbed and prayed. While outside the locked glass door of the church, seeing the mob kneel within, hundreds knelt on the steps of the church and on the sidewalk and all down the block. “Oh my friends,” cried Elmer, “do you believe in my innocence and in the fiendishness of my accusers? Reassure me with a ‘Hallelujah.’” And the church thundered with a triumphant “Hallelujah.”

Jesus warns those who are never exposed on earth. Look at Matthew 7:23a.

And then I will declare to them, . . .

Jesus, I believe, has a little extra passion toward those who lead the flock astray.

James said,

Let not many of you become teachers, . . . knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. (James 3:1)

I think Jesus’ blood boils a little hotter for those who deny His power to people they supposedly lead. He says to them, in Matthew 7:23,

. . . I will declare to them, “I never knew you; . . .”

The original words could be translated, “I never, never, never knew you . . .”

Jesus continues,

“. . . depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

In other words, it is possible to achieve great things for God and not even belong to Him.

The fruit of false teachers then, is their motive for teaching, which may be impossible to detect. Their content in teaching is easy to detect and their manner of living may or may not be easy to detect.

Encouragement Concerning Two Foundations

Now Jesus summarizes His entire sermon, going back to the beginning of Matthew chapter 5, with these words in Matthew 7:24-25,

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.

And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.

I like to think of that rather famous city of Venice that rests on hundreds of thousands of wooden pylons. The city is, in a sense, a peer. The sidewalks, the bazaars, the shops, St. Mark's Cathedral are all resting on wooden beams that are driven thirty-seven feet through water, muck and mud to finally reach the bedrock below. They are strong and are even now, being replaced with cement pylons.

David wrote:

*To You, O Lord, I call; my rock . . .
(Psalm 28:1)*

*. . . lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
(Psalm 61:2)*

*He only is my rock and my salvation . . .
(Psalm 62:2)*

*. . . You are my Father, my God, and the rock . . .
(Psalm 89:26)*

Who is this? Paul clarifies in I Corinthians 10:4, as he says of those who led Israel and followed the spiritual Rock,

. . . for they were drinking from a spiritual rock . . . and the rock was Christ.

Jesus says, in effect, "If you build your life on Me, when the winds and the rains come, you will stand."

However, He goes on to say, in Matthew 7:26-27,

Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand.

The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.

The word for "flood," in these verses, is a reference to the Palestinian flash flood. The dry riverbed, which was an attractive place, was easy to find and to build upon. However, the rains would come and rush down the canyon walls, rushing through in one mighty wave of water that washed everything away in its path to destruction.

Dr. Ivor Powell, whose books are in my library, tells of his years working in southern Africa as a pastor. He talks about the summertime, when the dry riverbeds make popular places for families to often come to spend the day playing and picnicking. There are no thorns or thistles and the riverbeds are perfectly comfortable. However, he was warned repeatedly to *never* set foot in a dry riverbed because the torrential rains would come quite suddenly and having picked up speed, would not be seen until the wave hit.

Dr. Powell said he followed this warning, but one day, he saw its fulfillment nearly come to pass. An African family was picnicking and playing in the sand. The children were busy running about and having fun. The father, however, listening intently, heard the roar. He got his family out as quickly as he could, and they made it. He, though, almost lost his life because as he took his last few steps up the embankment, the water came and nearly pulled him in.

Jesus Christ says, "If you build your house on the sand of self-fulfillment, self-sufficiency, self-salvation, everything may seem just right. You have a house too, just like those who built on the rock. However, the torrential wave of God's final judgment will come and wash everything you have away."

Charles Colson, one of the Watergate criminals, opened the book *Mere Christianity* in his jail cell. As a result of reading C. S. Lewis' powerful little book, Colson trusted Christ. Let me read his words of that time,

I knew the time had come for me: I could not sidestep the central question placed squarely before me. Was I to accept without reservations Jesus Christ as Lord of my life? It was like a gate before me. There

was no way to walk around it. I would step through, or I would remain outside.

Jesus Christ poses the same question to you and to me. Through which gate have you traveled? On which path are you walking?

Are you walking the broad, inviting path, filled with your own plans and ambitions, with little concern for your salvation? God warned through Jesus Christ that *the* judgment will come and you will hardly know it has come until it happens.

The hymn writer penned it so well, “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

I remember reading the story of Charlotte Elliott, before she placed her faith in Jesus Christ. She was troubled because of her sin and knew that should she die, she would be judged. A pastor who had dinner with her family, testified to her of Christ’s saving power. She was so convicted that for days, she could hardly eat or sleep. Finally, she walked through the narrow gate and received Christ as her Savior. She would later write her testimony of that decision in song – a song we have sung for many years. She wrote,

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

Bow your head and close your eyes and sing these words.

Some of you could have changed the words to, “I came, I came.”

Perhaps today, as we have simply expressed the words that Jesus Christ Himself said, the Holy Spirit made it clear to you that you have never entered through the narrow gate; you have never received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and you are living a self-deceived life. Would you today, open your heart to Him?

You can say any words to simply express to the Lord Jesus that you know you are a sinner, that you know He died for you, and you receive Him into your heart as your Savior. You are now, setting everything else aside; that is, your own hope of self-works or self-sufficiency. You now, receive Him alone. The gate is narrow. He alone will be your Savior – not He and you, but He Himself alone.

Our Father, we thank You for the cross of Your Son. It is, in many ways, a crossroad between the

narrow way and the broad way, between true fruit and false fruit, between a sandy foundation and a foundation of rock, between life and death.

Now, Father, I pray, by Thy Spirit, that You would move in the heart of anyone who has never received the Son of God as their Savior. For those of us that have, Father, we are so thrilled and thankful that we are not on the road that leads to destruction. Help us to continually build upon the foundation of the rock; that is Christ, and make our salvation known to the world. We thank You for Your love and we express our love to You. In Jesus name, amen.