

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

ENTER THE NARROW GATE!

Read Matthew 7:13-29

Too often we Christians live in the land of greys, a land devoid of moral absolutes, a land that has so dulled the cutting edge of our faith that we have accepted lethargy and disobedience as our daily fare, and almost believe our own rationalizations. At the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Jesus Manifesto, we find a wake-up call, a call to listen and obey, a call to follow.

Jesus, the ultimate teacher, conveys the urgency of his call in a series of word pairs that draw the issues sharply:

v13	Narrow Gate	Wide Gate	v14	Narrow Path	Broad Way
vv13-14	Life	Destruction	vv13-14	Few	Many
v15	Sheep	Wolves	v15	True Prophets	False Prophets
vv16-20	Good Fruit	Bad Fruit	vv16-20	Good Tree	Bad Tree
v16	Grapes	Thornbushes	v16	Figs	Thistles
vv21-23	Doers of will	Not Doers of will	vv24-27	Wise Man	Foolish Man
vv24-27	Rock	Sand	vv24-27	Did not fall	Great Fall

This passage examines deceit and discernment, first at the level of the masses ("broad is the way"), then at the level of the congregation ("false prophets" who are "wolves in sheep's clothing"), and finally at the personal level where we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we can hear without obeying.

The Small Gate and the Narrow Way (7:13-14)

Sometimes Christian salvation is portrayed in such generous terms that all people will be saved -- even the devil. This kind of teaching is called universalism. In the New Age Movement and some of its Eastern Religion roots we hear the view that there are many roads to God, and that the World's Great Teachers - Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed -- all brought great truths, many of which are similar. There are many roads that lead to God, this teaching suggests. And eventually everyone finds God. Except, perhaps, for the evil few such as Hitler and the like.

But what Jesus teaches is much different -- radically different. In verses 13-14 we see:

A Command -- the first command: Enter through the narrow gate.

An Explanation:

- For the gate is wide and the way broad that leads to destruction
- And many enter through it.
- But the gate is small, and the path narrow (difficult is the way) that leads to life
- And only a few find it.

Think about the last phrase: "Only a few... find it."

One path leads to destruction, the other to life. What does "destruction" mean? The Greek word is *apōleia* denotes "'annihilation' both complete and in process, 'ruin.'" What path are you on? There are no middle grounds. You are either on the path of life or on the path of destruction. We are commanded to enter the narrow gate or face destruction. What about our friends? Our relatives? Our associates at

work or school? What is their end without Christ? Part of the essential message of Jesus is a clear view to our responsibility to:

"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16; see also Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8)

Watch out for false prophets (7:15-20)

The second command in this passage is to "watch out for" false prophets. The Greek word is *prosechō*, "be in a state of alert, be concerned about, care for, take care," here "beware of" something.

What do they look like? How can you tell if someone is a false prophet? First, Jesus says that they look like everyone else. They come in "sheep's clothing," that is, they look like other members of the flock. But they are also "prophets," that is, they are active in the church, they have opinion and are vocal. In outward appearance, they are not particularly bad people. But Jesus says that their inward character is as ravenous wolves. They destroy the unity of the flock and pull away the sheep who are at the edges to fulfil their own personal agendas.

So how do you tell them from the other sheep? By their fruit, that is, by their words and deeds. There is no one formula for false prophets, but you will find bad fruit if you look for it.

Now Jesus shifts analogies from sheep/wolf to good tree/bad tree, good fruit/bad fruit. It is impossible, he says, for a bad tree to bear good fruit. A bad tree, no matter how hard it tries to work itself up to good fruit, will still bear fruit after its own character. It may be a beautifully formed tree with wonderful branches and cool shade. But when fruit-tasting time comes, its true nature is revealed. "By their fruit you shall know them," Jesus says.

Obedient followers versus mere professors (7:21-23)

It is hard to have the Lord say to someone, **"I never knew you,"**. How could he not know someone? We see a similar phrase in Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins:

"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'" (Matthew 25:10-12)

In both our passage and the Parable of the Ten Virgins, there were people who considered themselves as part of the in-crowd. They used God's name ("Lord, Lord"), they had gotten a supply of oil so they could be in the wedding procession, they had done miracles by God's power, they had driven out demons. But the final answer was, "I never knew you." In both cases you see those who are self-deceived. They perceive themselves as true followers, but they are not really.

Being around spiritual things can be deceptive. We can feel that we are spiritual because we are around the spiritual. We can feel like we are being obedient because we know what is the right thing to do.

In the Sermon on the Mount, it was not a question of confessing Christ as Lord or of doing good works. The question was one of obedience.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (7:21)

Do I do what Christ shows me to do, or do I just think about it?

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders (7:24-27)

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders. It doesn't stand by itself but is an illustration of Jesus' hard saying about self-deception. The point of the parable is that the wise person not only hears Jesus' words, but also puts them into practice.

In Jesus' day, most buildings were built of stones or mud bricks. In his day and ours, contractors can be sloppy and try to take shortcuts. It is much faster to slap up a house than to build it the right way. But only the right way lasts through the storms.

In the parable, the wise man built his house upon the rock, while the foolish man built his house upon the sand. "The rain came down," Jesus, said, "the streams rose, and the winds blew, and beat against that house...." The well-founded house stood, while the house without foundations fell with a great fall.

I am sure that Jesus' hearers wondered in their hearts: Which kind of house am I building? Do I have an adequate foundation? And I ask you: Which kind of house are you building? Have you sunk your foundations into Jesus, the true Rock? Are you both hearing his words and putting them into practice in your life? If so, when the storms of life come -- and they will -- you will continue to stand. If not, you will fall apart.

As one who had authority (7:28-29)

And so, Jesus finished his teaching. The crowds were amazed. They had heard various teachers quoting other great men to bolster their cases. But Jesus spoke with authority, his own authority and that of his Father. And they were amazed.

Many followed Jesus because of hearing his awesome teaching. Others just thought about it and agreed with it inwardly and were satisfied with that.

As for me, I want to follow. Will you join me in this journey?

