

A Choice to Make

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[0:00] I wonder if you've ever found yourself following the sat-nav or Google Maps or something, and you get to a junction, and your sat-nav is telling you the place you want to go is one way, and the road signs are telling you the place you want to go is a different way.

Both are promising to get you to the same destination, but are pointing in completely different directions. It's probably a particular problem in Aberdeen, isn't it?

Where one or the other, instead of sending you to your destination, will send you through a poorly signed bus gate and give you a 60 pound fine. We're often left with choices, aren't we, of which way to go.

And it's particularly challenging to choose the right path when maybe the map sends you one way, and everyone else you think is going to the same place as you seems to be heading off in another direction.

What do you do? Which way do you go? Jesus presents two paths to us, doesn't he, in verse 13 and 14?

[1:11] And figuring out which one to follow isn't as straightforward as it might first seem, because on first reading, the choice seems really obvious, doesn't it? There's a narrow gate that leads to life and a wide one that leads to destruction.

There's a path with a signpost saying, this way to destruction, this way to life. Surely we're all going this way. But that's where the rest of this section hits so hard.

We have a choice to make. And at the outset of Jesus concluding worse this sermon, the answer might seem plainly obvious, but as Jesus keeps speaking, the importance and the seriousness of his instruction become increasingly clear.

So this morning, we're just going to trace each of those two paths that Jesus lays before his disciples through these verses we've just read, and see, I hope, through them, why Jesus' command at the beginning to enter by the narrow gate is one we need to let settle into the deepest depths of our hearts.

So we're going to begin by first of all looking at the wide or easy, seemingly at least, path that ultimately leads to destruction, the easy path to destruction.

[2:32] And we're going to spend most of our time here this morning because this is where the passage spends most of its time. I wonder what you thought when we first read this together, what the wide and narrow gates in verse 13 and 14 were referring to.

The first time I read those verses, I assumed the distinction was something like, you know, the narrow path is the path that identifies as a Christian. The wide path is the life that doesn't. Simple as that. The wide path is the way of the world. The narrow path is the way of the churchgoers. But as you read on, it becomes pretty clear that is not the distinction Jesus has in mind.

Just look at the very next thing he says after verse 14. Beware of false prophets. Watch out for false prophets. Who needs to watch out for false prophets? It's not the world, is it?

They don't need to worry about false prophets because they don't listen to any prophets. The people who listen to prophets are God's people. This is a warning to us. Thus, we see as we go on, the many, the many that enter through the broad gate at the end of verse 13.

[3:50] We meet them again in verse 22. Where the many will say, Lord, Lord, did we not do great things in your name?

The distinction Jesus is drawing out, the difference between the narrow and wide gate is not between those who believe in God and those who don't.

Jesus is drawing a line between people who all believe they are heaven bound. That is a fearful thing, is it not?

And we'll see as we go on just where Jesus draws that line. All these people think they are on their way to heaven. But to some, to many, Jesus will say, I never knew you.

Before we get there, before we come to those terrifying words at the end of this section, let us come back right up to verse 15 and start off where Jesus starts off with the warning against false prophets.

[5 : 04] Watch out for false prophets. Maybe just a word on who false prophets are. We often kind of think of prophets as sort of fortune tellers, don't we? And sometimes in the Old Testament, they did speak about what was going to happen in the future.

But primarily, prophets were just people who spoke God's word to his people. That's who prophets were. That's what they did. So in the Old Testament, before they had the word of God in their hands, God spoke directly through certain individuals.

That's who we now call prophets. But they were, at root, people who spoke God's words into the lives of his people. So although we might not have prophets in the Old Testament sense now, who received direct revelation from God, we nevertheless do, don't we?

We have people who carry out the exact same task of bringing God's words to his people. It's exactly what I'm doing right now. It's what you hear done every time you listen to someone who is teaching the Bible.

And the uncomfortable but undeniable reality that Jesus wants his disciples to be very aware of is that false prophets are a very real thing that we must be on our guard against.

[6 : 29] And to stress the need for vigilance, Jesus reminds us, doesn't he, that false prophets, if you look there at verse 15, become dressed in sheep's clothing.

That means they would seem to fit right in. They aren't going to wander around with a big sign above their head that says, I'm a false prophet. Don't listen to me. They will look legitimate.

They will sound probably legitimate. Definitely enticing. There will be something appealing about what we say. That's what we see throughout the Bible, throughout the history of the church.

That's why false prophets have such an appeal. It is, we saw something of that in the passage that Alistair read from us earlier from Ezekiel. People came to God's people proclaiming they were speaking God's words.

And what they preached was a message of peace. Where's the problem? It doesn't sound obviously wrong, does it?

[7 : 36] They claimed to be from God and they spoke a message that sounded like God's. What was the problem? The problem was that the people the prophets were preaching peace to were living in anything but peace.

They were living contrary to God in everything. But then these prophets came and said, don't worry about it.

Everything's going to be just fine. God is good. Don't stress. You just keep being you. That is a good message to hear, isn't it? That appeals to us.

People telling us we're on the right path. We're doing well. Someone telling you how great a job you're doing that you can rest and relax and enjoy life as you are. It sounds good. It sounds great. But contrast that with Jesus. Whose very first words of public preaching in Matthew are, repent.

[8 : 40] Turn around. False prophets tell you you're on the right path. Jesus says, on your own, we are on the wrong path. You need to stop what you're doing, beg for forgiveness, and start living life completely differently.

And then, as we've been seeing over the last number of weeks, he preaches this sermon, where he most certainly does not say, does he just, you just keep doing what you're doing. He says, your righteousness needs to increase exponentially.

You need to be radical in your willingness to cut sin out of your life. Which message is easier to hear? Which message is going to be more appealing to us?

If both are supposedly coming from God, why wouldn't we go with this nice wide path over here? But that this prophet is saying, is actually absolutely fine to go down, because you'll end up in the same place anyway.

False teachers might look like sheep. They might even sound like sheep, but they are anything but. It wouldn't be that bad, would it, if Jesus said that they come in sheep's clothing, but they're actually

goats.

[10:00] I'd be fine, wouldn't it? Just leave them to it. Never seen a goat do too much damage. But they're not goats in sheep's clothing. They are wolves.

Ferocious. Wolves. In sheep's clothing. And wolves are anything but harmless to sheep, are they? So separating the real prophets from the false prophets isn't a matter of convenience for us.

It is a matter of life and death. And I mean that as literally as possible. Identifying false teachers from gospel preachers is a matter of eternal life and eternal death.

So how do we separate the wheat from the chaff? The answer, Jesus says, verse 16, is in the fruits. 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 fruits.

[11:14] A good tree cannot bear good 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. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

If someone proclaims to speak God's words, Jesus says, look at the lives they are living to know if they should be listened to.

I think this is a really great marker, isn't it, that Jesus gives his people to identify false prophets because it's something every disciple can do. Sound doctrine is obviously very important.

But in order to sniff out some heresies, you need a pretty well-grounded theological education. Not so with noticing anger or pride or sexual immorality or malice or covetousness.

We can see that, can't we? We all know what they look like. We know if someone is kind or severe, generous or greedy, gentle or harsh, whether they're forgiving or they hold grudges.

[12:26] Whether they're patient or quick to anger, whether they are faithful or unfaithful. We can see those things. And so Jesus says, test those whose teaching you listen to.

Test us. Because your life depends on it. That's not to say you should expect perfect lives if you look under the surface.

I can guarantee you that is not what you will find. But you should expect to see fruit, good fruit. Fruits in keeping with repentance.

Our lives should bear good fruit. And when bad fruit appears, which it will, we should be quick to turn from it. If those who teach you, if we start consistently producing bad fruit and do not repent when we are corrected, stop listening to us.

Stop listening. And watch out for such fruits in any whose teaching you sit under.

[13:46] There's maybe a point worth mentioning here. The implication in Jesus' words, isn't it, is that we are close enough to our teachers to be able to see the fruit they produce.

We live in an age quite unlike any others, don't we? I can pick my phone out of my pocket and listen to pretty much any preacher or teacher from any corner of the planet.

That is an amazing feat of technology, and it can be of really great benefit to us. But be careful. Be careful.

Because Jesus quite clearly expects us to be able to assess the fruit of those who speak God's word into our lives. And if you cannot see the life that a certain preacher or teacher is living, you cannot be sure they are producing good fruit.

I don't say that to dissuade you from ever tuning in to other preachers and teachers. There can be great benefit from it. But it is incredibly important that the primary voice speaking God's word into your life should be coming from someone whose life you are confident is living out the gospel, not just preaching it.

[15:07] So stay close to your teachers and make sure they are good trees producing good fruits. It is a matter of life and death. Who you choose to listen to could be the difference between someone leading you down the wide path to disruption and the narrow path to life.

You are eternally better off with a painfully dull but faithful preacher, an engaging, exciting teacher who will tell you peace, peace when there is no peace.

From this warning about the false prophets and how to recognize them, Jesus goes straight on, straight on to talk about what's going to happen on the last day when people come before the judge of all the earth.

If you're looking at one of the church Bibles, just ignore the subheading there between verse 20 and 21, that they're not part of God's inspired word, they're just there to help us get around. So ignore that and see then that Jesus goes straight from talking about the false prophets to the people on the

last day who will be saying, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?

I think in these sort of last few verses, the target audience does widen, but the false prophets are still firmly in the center of the crosshairs. And the implication, isn't it, is that the false prophets do not believe they are false prophets.

[16:50] They will arrive before the judgment seat of Christ, fully expecting entry into the kingdom of heaven. but they will be refused.

They are terrifying words for the king of heaven and earth to say, I never knew you. Get a fuller account later on in Matthew's gospel, chapter 25.

To those Jesus does not know, he says, I never knew you. Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

People who believed they would enter the kingdom of heaven banished into the eternal fire. It's terrifying, fearful, awful.

But here's where these false prophets and the many who are with them go so wrong. This is where Jesus draws that line between all those who expected entry into the kingdom of heaven.

[18:08] There are those who are merely religious and those truly known by Christ. And the difference, just look there in verse 22.

what is it that the former appeal to? Those who are merely religious but are not known by Christ, what do they appeal to?

Whose works do they trust in? Did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform miracles?

Jesus, they're saying, look at what we did. Look at the great things we did for the church.

They would have looked to all the world like godly, devout Christians, but their hope, their trust was in their works and their giftings, not in the work of the one before whom they pleaded.

[19:16] need. Now, we are wading into deep waters here, but there is no mistaking what Jesus is saying. You can be gifted for service in his church and not be known by him.

That is a fearful warning, isn't it? we can mistake our God-given abilities for a regenerate heart, but the two are not synonymous.

I can preach to you in Christ's name. By God's grace, I might occasionally be able to do it well. That will not save me. it will count for nothing if I appeal to that on the last day.

You can serve the church all your life in many different ways. You can use your gifts to build up the body of Christ and reach out with the gospel. Great things to do, really great things to do, but they will not save you.

if that is where your hope and joy are, Jesus will say to you on that day, I never knew you.

[20:41] If your hope on the last day is in what you have done for God, you might be religious, but you do not belong to Jesus. that is the way of the broad gate.

That is the path that Jesus says many are on. And so I hope by now we're seeing it's not as simple as making sure we're on church on a Sunday.

The broad gate is not one traversed by the unreligious, it is taken by many who believe they will enter the kingdom of heaven. But are not known by Christ.

It is the most solemn of warnings. But praise God, it is not the only path laying before us in these verses, is it?

And hopefully now that we've spent some time thinking about the easy path that leads to destruction, we will hear Jesus all the more urgently as he says in verse 13, enter through the narrow gate, the hard path that leads to life.

[22:01] The narrow gate is the one that Jesus does, the narrow gate is the one that does not follow the crowd but follows Jesus.

And it is hardly surprising, is it, that this is a less well-trodden path? Because the proponents of both paths promise life. But only one delivers.

The false prophets stand before the wide gate saying, come through here, life will be good and easy, do as you please, and find life at the end.

It sounds great, but it leads to destruction. salvation. Well, Jesus, Jesus is at the entrance of the narrow gate with his cross on his shoulders, on his way to be crucified, and he says, take up your cross, come and follow me.

The path that looks like it leads to death is the one that leads to life, because we are not at peace if we live as we please.

[23 : 22] The ones who take the narrow path are those who are willing to die to self, to repent of what we have done, to hear Jesus' sermon of the last few chapters, and not only hold it as our standard, but strive with every effort to live out this life.

Not so that we can bring our works to Jesus and show them off, but so that we can bring more and more along this narrow path to life. It is a way that looks painful, it is hard, but life is what awaits you on the other side.

The narrow gate is the one which produces the good fruit we should look for in those we're listening to. It is one that meditates on the whole of God's words, listening not only to the words of peace and joy, of which there are many, but also to the words that challenge and confront us.

Choosing to obey even when we don't understand why. Those who enter, verse 21, are those who do the will of the Father, not the will of the self.

We sang just before the sermon from Psalm 1, which tells us those who meditate on God's law, the law of Christ, they are like trees planted by streams of water that yield fruit in their season and never wither, like a tree that bears good fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, and self-control.

[24 : 58] That is the fruit that will be produced by everyone who walks this narrow path. There is no promise of certain gifts. The things the false prophets and those with them appeal to in verse 22 sound really impressive, don't they?

There is no promise of those gifts, but that is not a problem. There is the promise of good fruit for those that hold Jesus' law in the highest regard and our own sin with the deepest disgust.

But we do not glory, do we, in the fruit we produce. we see it only as an outworking of the trust we place in Christ and in Him alone.

Let me assure you, Jesus does know you. If you know you have nothing to offer Him that can only point to His work on the cross.

knowing that He should accept us into His kingdom, not because of anything we've done, but because of what He has done for us.

[26 : 15] That is the narrow path that leads to life. So, follow Jesus, trust in His work, test the fruit of your teachers, and follow them, follow us, only so long as we are bearing good fruit and pointing you to follow Christ on His path to the cross.

Because that is the only path that will lead you to life. Let us pray as we close together. do remember.

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