

Come, Follow Me!

Matthew 7:13-23

So we've been working our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been setting before us life in the Kingdom of God. And throughout the whole Sermon Jesus has been laying before us several stark contrasts:

There is haughty self-righteousness or humble confession.

There's flimsy superficial righteousness or deep heart righteousness.

There's treasure on earth or treasure in heaven.

There's worry and hurry, or there's peace and security.

There's the way of judgemental criticism or the way of mercy.

There's a life of proud self-reliance, or a life of prayer-filled dependence.

There's the Kingdom of the Father and the Son, or there's the kingdom of the world and self.

The whole of the Sermon on the Mount has been pressing us to choose between what we said at the very beginning are two different stories of blessing, and the very different ways of life that flow out from that. And now the issue comes to a head: as Jesus comes to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, he calls us to decision. There are two ways he says (in verses 13&14) , there are two trees (from verses 15 to 23), and then finally two foundations. He asks us: what road will you take, what fruit will you bear, where will you build your life.

Next week we will consider Jesus' final parable of the wise and the foolish builder, and we'll address the true and the false prophets as we

go today. But I want to particularly drill down on the first of these three final images, as Jesus calls us to choose between the wide and broad way of the world, or the narrow and small way of Jesus.

Jesus says:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.”

Let us consider 5 things:

1. The **difficulty** of the Way
2. The **product** of the Way
3. The **adventure** of the Way
4. The **destination** of the Way
5. **Entering** the Way

The Difficulty of the Way

The first thing to say about the way Jesus is calling us to walk, is that it is difficult. And having slowly worked our way through what Jesus has said in the Sermon on the Mount so far, I shouldn't have to convince you of that.

A life of deep integrity is much more challenging than keeping up appearances. To actively seek reconciliation, and to freely offer forgiveness is surely harder than keeping a grudge and harbouring bitterness in our heart. It's easier to blend in than to stand out as a follower of Jesus. Worry and self-reliance come so naturally to us, whereas prayer and God-dependance really do often feel like a wrestle. If Jesus' words in this Sermon were turned into a self-help book it would probably be titled: "Making your life a mess: how to make your life harder by loving God and your neighbour."

Jesus is picking up here on what we can all vouch for in our own lives. Don Carson says it this way:

*We do not drift toward Holiness. Apart from **grace-driven effort**, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.*

Left to ourselves we amble along the wide and the broad road because it is the path of least resistance. And we comfort ourselves with the fact that at least pretty much everyone else is wandering with us!

But Jesus calls us to walk the straight and narrow. Not in the way that has come to be understood as a strict road of self-improvement, rather because it is the *difficult way of self-sacrifice*.

The Product of the Way

But the way is not only difficult, it also produces *good fruit*. Which leads us to point two: the *product* of the way. And it's worth drilling into the image Jesus uses here a little further. I think it's helpful to consider the wide way like a multi-lane highway, like a tunnel or a bypass. Whereas the narrow way is more like path winding through the bush. With this in mind I think we can see how the image of the two ways taps into what Jesus has been saying all through his Sermon.

I read an essay last year by an American author called Wendell Berry. And he made a really interesting observation about the difference between paths and roads.

[A path, he says,] is a form of contact with a known landscape. It is *not destructive*. It is the perfect adaptation, through experience and familiarity, of movement to place; it obeys the natural contours; such obstacles as it meets *it goes around*.

[He goes on:] A road on the other hand, even the most primitive road, embodies a *resistance against* the landscape. Its reason is not simply the necessity of movement but haste. Its wish is to *avoid contact* with the landscape; it seeks as far as possible to go over the country rather than through it; ... its tendency is to translate place into space in order to traverse it with the least effort. It is destructive, seeking to remove or destroy all obstacles in its way. (Wendell Berry, A Native Hill)

Both the path and the road have the same basic goal of taking us from A to B. But they approach that task in fundamentally different ways. The path promotes, preserves, and protects the surrounding environment.

The road on the other hand promotes, preserves and protects our own *comfort* and *security*, even if that means some collateral damage.

Can you see how this connects with what Jesus has been saying in the Sermon on the Mount? We're all on a way, we're all travelling through life from A to B. But Jesus is saying you can take one of two completely different approaches. You can either attend to the people and situations around you, preserving and promoting and protecting their wellbeing. Or you can simply live for your own comfort and security and remove any obstacle in the way of that goal. Jesus is saying, "it's my way or the highway."

And it would be fair to say that in infrastructure, and in life, our modern world has opted to treat life as an exercise in road building.

We have secured so much of our modern comfort and ease at the expense of the natural world, and the exploitation of people we will never meet on the other side of the world.

We are reading every day at the moment of how men and boys have trampled over women in order to take the fast lane to their own pleasure.

It is a celebrated response to the shock and fear of an unwanted child, or the suffering and grief of old age, to take the life of an unborn child or to hurry on the coming of death.

And in the church we all too often see religious leaders approaching ministry this way as well. Several years ago a well known pastor of a large American church described the growth of his church like a bus speeding along to success, leaving a pile of bodies in its wake. He went on to say that "by God's grace it will be a mountain by the time we are done." There was a church and a minister on the broad road.

And I think is what Jesus is getting at as he speaks about false prophets and false disciples in second half of today's passage. There are leaders who appear to be orthodox in their message: *They call Jesus Lord. And their ministry appears powerful and effective: "We prophesy, and cast out demons, and do miracles in your name!"*

But you get the sense that these are the same false disciples Jesus speaks about later in Matthew 25. They are so caught up in their own ministry that they leave the hungry unfed, the naked unclothed, and they give nothing to the thirsty to drink. They look like sheep, impressive sheep even, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves. They produce bad fruit, leaving in their wake in a trail of destruction.

Jesus just told us in chapter 6 that each day is filled with trouble. And so how is it possible to live an untroubled life, or lead an untroubled church in a trouble-filled world? *Well you turn people into things, in order to traverse life as easily as possible, seeking to remove or destroy all obstacles in your way.*

But Jesus presents us with an entirely *different* way. For Jesus, the only way to live your life, is as if you are tracing out a track: relentlessly committed to the promotion and the preservation and protection of the people around us. On the way of Jesus, the only thing that we are ever allowed to sacrifice is ourselves; *giving up* our own comfort and security for the sake of others.

This is what the whole Sermon on the Mount has been calling us to do: to creatively *attend to* the people and situations around us: "Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for *them*" (Matthew 7:12, MSG); in every single circumstance we are to seek God's Kingdom and His righteousness, for ourselves and everyone around us.

Can you imagine what it would be like if we lived this out? Imagine if we were fiercely protective of the truth, and fiercely protective of vulnerable people. Imagine if we were committed to caring for the world God has made, and committed to upholding the way God made marriage. Imagine if we cared for the life of children and the lives of their mothers. Imagine if in all our political engagement our course was directed less by the concerns of Liberal and Labour, and more by the commands of our Lord. Imagine if we loved our neighbours by generously supplying their physical needs, and if we loved our neighbours by boldly sharing the hope we have in the gospel. Imagine if we were willing to have no idea about the latest show people are talking about because we binge on the life-giving word of God rather than the cheap fast-food of Hollywood. Imagine if we gave up the chance of a promotion because we were more committed to truth and love than our careers. Imagine if we were willing to give up our place with the "in crowd" at school because we cared more about the kid who is teased and ignored. Imagine if we didn't shout down or shut off those who disagreed with us but listened to them and tried to understand them and persuade them. Imagine if we invited chaos into our homes by being hospitable rather than protecting our own quiet solitude.

The Sermon on the Mount has already told us what that would be like: we would be very *peculiar*. We would shine like light in the darkness, breaking out and in to the world around us. And Jesus tells us that if we lived like this we will be sure to suffer on account of allegiance to him. But also, he tells us that some will see the way we live and they will glorify our Father in Heaven. And we know this is true, because the world has been changed by witness like this before.

There is an anonymous letter written in the 2nd century, maybe 150 years after the life of Jesus, called the letter to Diognetus. In the letter, a Christian is writing to a friend who has become interested in the faith. And in one section he writes about how Christians partake in the many aspects of normal life wherever they live. Outwardly, they might not look any different to their pagan neighbours, but he goes on to say:

they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking **method of life**. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners....They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They're in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

This is the way of Jesus. It is not the way of destructive self-reliance. It is the way of live-giving self-sacrifice. And even in the face of darkness, and hatred, and even death, it produces the fruit of light and life and love.

The Adventure of the Way (Life to the full!)

Which leads us very briefly to the third point: this way of life is really the most exciting and daring way we could possibly travel through this world. I reckon most people think of the “getting back on the straight and narrow” as *giving up* on adventure and settling down. But to follow the way of Jesus is an *adventure*.

At one particularly challenging moment of the hero’s quest in *The Lord of the Rings*, Samwise Gamgee turns to his friend Frodo and says:

“It's like the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn't want to know the end because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing this shadow, even darkness must pass. A new day will come, and when the sun shines, it'll shine out the clearer. I know now folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something. That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.”

It’s not merely the presence of darkness and danger that makes an adventure. It’s the choice of the hero to *not turn back*, but to press on for better or for worse.

This is the Christian life. To face the darkness and to not turn back to selfishness and self-righteousness, but to keep going, to keep shining, to keep walking the way of light and life and love. Because there *is* a good worth fighting for. As Jesus has told us again and again, there is a caring Father and a coming Kingdom, and so we press on.

The ever-quotable G.K. Chesterton once reflected that:

the more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.

And so Jesus restricts our anger so that reconciliation can grow. There are limits placed on our lust, so that love and intimacy can flourish. We hold back revenge and criticism, to make room for peace and mercy. We forego performance so that we can genuinely serve. We die to ourselves in order to live. We give up our life so that we can find it. We rest in God's Fatherly kindness, so that his goodness can run wild in us and through us. The way of Jesus is an adventure!

The Destination of the Way (Life!)

And like every great adventure, the light will finally pierce the darkness. And so, fourthly: the **destination** of the way. And this is probably the clearest point that Jesus is making in these verses isn't it: **verses 13-14**.

The wide and destructive road leads into destruction.

The narrow and life-giving path leads into life.

And this is the great tragedy of the way so many people around us live their lives. In a terrible exchange, so many seek to make their lives *now* as easy and comfortable as possible, all the while neglecting their eternal future. What's even sadder is that I reckon so many of our friends and neighbours and families don't even realise it. They're just doing what everyone around them is doing, ambling along towards the judgement of God.

Wendell Berry, he's the road and path guy from before, has a poem that surely must have been inspired at least in part by the words of Jesus in this passage. He describes a mass of people all pursuing what he calls the *objective* – and having cleared every obstacle in the way of their own progress, he says:

*Every place had been displaced, every love
unloved, every vow unsworn, every word unmeant,
to make way for the passage of the crowd
of the individuated, the autonomous, the self-actuated, the
homeless
with their many eyes opened only toward the objective
which they did not yet perceive in the far distance,
having never known where they were going,
having never known where they came from.*

(Wendell Berry, *Sabbath Poems XX.*)

It's haunting isn't it? Not knowing where they were going, not knowing where they came from. But what hope does Jesus hold out to us here! For the way of Jesus is the way *home*. At the end of the road is feasting joy and the Father's embrace. And even as the darkness presses in around us, like Sam and Frodo we keep our eyes fixed on the day when the darkness will pass and the new day will dawn.

If you've ever experienced that moment on a bushwalk or a hike when the scrub around you gives way and the path opens out onto a glorious view of the ocean, stretching out endlessly before you – it takes your breath away. So it will be when Christ returns. The narrow way will open out and we will behold the glory of God stretching out endlessly before us. And he will not just take our breath away, but he will wipe every tear away, and there will be no more sickness or mourning or crying or pain. Brothers and sisters, we know *where* we are going: so *keep* going!

Entering the Way

And finally, we don't just know where we are going, but we also know where we have come from. For it is a strange feature of this passage that Jesus imagines the two different gates coming at the *beginning* of the two different ways. Every other religion, every other approach to life, says that we must walk the long road of obedience in order to *enter* some paradise at the end. Every other religious figure stands at the beginning of the way and points: "go that way".

But not Jesus. For Jesus, the way you walk is determined by the gate you enter. And Jesus alone stands at the crossroads and he says "Come, Follow Me!"

Follow **me!** We enter onto the rugged road of discipleship by coming through the gate of grace, with nothing but our faith, placed in Christ alone. In John's gospel Jesus says, "I **am** the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." When the disciples want to know how to follow after Jesus to his Father's house Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father **except through me.**"

The Lord Jesus has walked this road before us; and he has walked this road *for* us. Jesus never wavered from the way of life, and it took him to his death. His road led him to a cross, so that we can enter the way that leads to the Father's house. Jesus trod the path of self-sacrifice and showed us it ends in resurrection. And Jesus walked the road alone and so we walk with him, and we walk together as disciples.

And so Matthew's gospel begins with the call: "follow me". And it ends with the comfort: "I am with you to the very end of the age." Jesus says in this passage, take small gate and difficult path. And just a few

chapters later Jesus will say: "come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you *rest*."

And so here is the paradox of the Christian life:

The small gate is open to all who put their trust in Jesus.

The narrow way is so broad it extends love even to our enemies.

And the rough and heavy road is restful and light because Jesus is with us, carrying our burdens every step of the way.

And it's when we give up on our selves and come to Jesus that we actually find our selves, and the grace we need to walk each day with him.

And so there may be some of you in this room this morning who are on the broad road. You're living for yourself, and by your own strength, and you are headed towards destruction. Do not wait any longer: come to Jesus, and he will give you *life*, life now and life forever.

Some of you are in high school, and your'e looking to your future wanting to live a life of meaning and purpose. Today, come to Jesus, and let him take you on the adventure of discipleship that really is the most exciting way to live.

Some of us may be looking wistfully over to those on broad way, thinking that they have it so easy. Today, come to Jesus, and let him show you the glorious and eternal future that lies ahead.

Some of you may be feeling crushed, hard up against obstacles on the way, as if just taking another step forward is strained. Today, come to Jesus, take on his easy yoke and let his grace carry you every step.

To all of us, Jesus says today: "Come, follow me!"

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who has given your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for our sin, and also an example of his godly life: give us grace that we may always thankfully receive the benefits of his grace and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life. May we enter through the small gate, and continue on the narrow way, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.