

The Way of Life

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 23, 2018.

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matthew 7:13-23).

Robert Frost wrote,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Frost's poem tells of two roads, both worthy of travel and equally enticing. One road more travelled, the other less, but Frost continued way on to way, when in the serendipity of life, his choice "made all the difference." In many ways, this is the way that many consider their life. As if serendipitous choices end in life defining results. While it is true that what feels like

serendipity falls according to the providence of God, it is equally true that we do not walk unconsciously.

Our passage today likewise tells of two diverging roads, not in a yellow wood but in the span of eternity. Not in a road less travelled but in a wide way that leads to destruction and a narrow way that leads to life. There is a gravity to Jesus' words, sobering us to the reality of our eternal destiny, in which Christ—Christ makes all the difference. Rather than a road less travelled, we are to enter by the narrow way.

Enter by the Narrow Way

The gates (or paths, or ways) of Jesus' analogy are distinctly different with remarkably different destinations. The wide way is easy while the narrow way is hard. The wide way accommodates many while the narrow way holds few. The wide way leads to destruction while the narrow way leads to life. It is this last distinction that is of course most sobering. Who wishes to walk the way of destruction? Yet, Jesus tells us that most do. Furthermore, Jesus' simple analogy describes not many but two ways only.

Given the severity of the final destination, let's consider three defining characteristics of the wide way. First, the wide way is easy. In Psalm 73, the psalmist confesses, "For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. . . . Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches" (Ps. 73:3-5, 12). In despair, the psalmist concludes, "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence" (Ps. 73:13). The psalmist voices what we are often too afraid to say: it seems as if living for Christ yields more hardship, while the wicked flourish. If you look around and think that the worldly are prospering in this world, it's because they often are. The wide way is easy.

Second, the wide way is popular. If eternity were a democracy, the wide way would win the popular vote. Why not? It offers all this life has to offer. Even Jesus was offered "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matt. 4:8). The wide way is popular.

Third, the wide way is death. The Proverbs remind us, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12). While the worldly may be having the time of their life, it is not eternal life, for "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Paul said, about these travelers of the wide way, "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (Phil 3:19). With minds set on earthly things, there will be worldwide shrieks of terror, when the wide way reaches its destination "the lake that burns with fire and sulfur," which John refers to as "the second death" (Rev. 21:8). The wide way is death.

In contrast, given the severity but the delight of the final destination, let's consider three defining characteristics of the narrow way. First, the narrow way is hard. If the Sermon on the Mount is essentially a discourse on living as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven as an exile in this earthly kingdom, then living in Christ here on earth is hard! It is hard, because it is not home. Jesus

teaches us, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt. 5:3, 11). He even encourages us to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43). There is nothing easy about that! The narrow way is hard.

Second, the narrow way is unpopular. If the wide way is popular, then the narrow way is unpopular, for “those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:14). The narrow way is not by popular vote or a popularity contest. Paul understood this clearly when he asked, “am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). Serving Christ was not popular in the first century nor is it now. The narrow way is unpopular.

Third, the narrow way is life. While the narrow way is indeed hard and unpopular, it is the way to eternal life. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). He not only teaches us about the narrow way, He is the narrow way! “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NASB). The narrow way is Christ, and we enter it only by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone. So, the hard and narrow way to life looks strikingly different than what the world defines as life. Life for the Christian is a confession that “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). The narrow way is life.

The irony of the narrow way is though it be hard and narrow, our yoke in Christ is easy and our burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30). Of course, there are those who will seek to confuse the two, rearranging the easy way of Christ’s burden with the wide way of easy living. This is a consistent play from Lucifer’s playbook, distorting the truth with a lie to appeal to our sinful flesh. He does not work alone in this web of deception but recruits false teachers, disguised in “sheep’s clothing but inwardly ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Calling the narrow way wide, and the wide way narrow, they lead many toward destruction. Therefore, in the way of life, we must beware of false teachers.

Beware of False Teachers

The thing about false teachers is that we don’t recognize them at first. Peter explains that they arise within the church, working in secret. But, we are not without counsel. Jesus, Paul, and Peter all give warning of false teachers in the church. How do we identify these false teachers, these wolves in sheep’s clothing?

Consider these identifying characteristics. First, false teachers say what our sinful flesh wants to hear, not what our eternal soul needs. There is a reason the way to destruction is wide: It is easy. The sinful flesh knows what it wants and rejoices when it gets it, feasting on its own gratification. As Paul warned Timothy, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Itching ears welcome fulfilling passions leading to deception. Peter warned that false

teachers will appeal to our sensuality and greed promoting them as if they are part of the way of truth (2 Peter 2:1-3). If what you are being taught appeals to your sinful flesh rather than your eternal soul, beware. It's false teaching.

A second identifying characteristic is, false teachers bear bad fruit. Jesus said candidly, "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). We may not recognize them at first, but eventually they will reveal themselves. If you want grapes, you do not go to a thornbush, and you do not harvest figs from thistles (Matt. 7:16). Similarly, healthy trees bear good fruit, while diseased trees bear bad (Matt. 7:17-18). Just as you look to the healthy tree for good fruit, you look to the life of a teacher for evidence of his salvation. Does he obey God's Word, or does he manipulate it to gratify his desires? Does he love Christ's church or is he a source of contention and strife? Does he seek God's glory or his own? Jesus said, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). If the teacher's life does not reflect a crucified life for Christ, beware of false teaching.

Third, false teachers successfully lead others astray. We presume wrongly that just because false teachers teach falsehood they are unsuccessful. Just as the way to destruction is wide, so also false teachers lead many astray. If you are not witnessing this in the pagan pluralism of our day, you are not paying attention! So convincing are these false teachers that their followers will call to Jesus, "Lord, Lord," but not be on the narrow way of the kingdom of heaven. So stealthy are these false teachers that they will lead the lost in religious acts of devotion with souls destined for destruction. They are like Judas among the twelve, who prophesied in the name of Jesus, cast out demons in His name, and did mighty works, all in the name of Christ. Yet, Judas was a child of the devil and did not savingly know the Lord Jesus Christ. His way was the easy, wide way to destruction. So, false teachers have in the past, do in the present, and will in the future successfully lead others astray. What then should we look for in the way of life? A desire to obey the will of God.

Obey the Will of God

Confronting those He did not savingly know, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Here we must pause and consider the weightiness of this statement, and ask: Who has perfectly done the will of his Father in heaven? If you are trusting in your obedience to merit entering this narrow way, you are not on the narrow but wide way.

There is only one who has perfectly done the will of His Father in heaven, and it is only in him that we enter the narrow way. He is the one who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). It is only by abiding in Him that we bear much fruit, because apart from Him we can do nothing. Here then is the road less traveled, for it is only in Christ that we walk it. It is only in Christ that we are not deceived by false teaching. It is only in Christ that we do the Father's will.

The Way of Life

With apologies to Robert Frost,

Two ways alone diverge in this life,
And thankful I could not travel each
And be one traveler, long in strife
And thinking about eternal life
I saw grace alone, eternal peace.

Upon the narrow and long, hard way,
I doubted I had the better claim,
Because the widened way boasted ease
And passionate pleasures, if you please,
Yet pleasure and joy are not the same.

And the way of life does ever lay
Upon Christ's living and righteousness
And in His dying redemption paid
That I in walking the narrow way
Might know the end in glory brightness.

I shall tell you this before I die:
This way of eternal consequence
Two ways diverge in this life, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
By grace through faith makes all the difference.