

Matthew 7:13-14
Luke 13:22-30
John 10:7-10

A YEAR TO REMEMBER
WEEK THIRTY-THREE

THE NUMBER-ONE CONSIDERATION

“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.”

There was a blacksmith show at the fair. The blacksmith had just finished making a horseshoe and had dropped it on the ground to cool when a few teenagers came strolling in to look around. Acting as if he had been in blacksmith shops all his life, one boy nonchalantly picked up the cooling horseshoe. He dropped it quickly. The blacksmith, watching out of the corner of his eye, commented, “Kind of hot, isn’t it son?” But the youth was undaunted. He replied, “It doesn’t take me long to look at a horseshoe.”

I think that’s a perfect picture of the way we often look at the Scriptures, and especially the way we treat this passage. This one has not had time to cool off yet after Jesus dropped it in front of us. Even if we pick it up, we have a tendency to put it down quickly.

“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.” Ouch!

I do not like thinking that a lot of my living is a wide and easy way. But it’s hard to shake the thought altogether. I look around and ask myself: How many of the people around me are living wide and easy lives? The backdrop of the passage forces the contrast. How many people are truly living for God’s Kingdom – with purity of heart, with full dedication because they love it, with purposeful dedication because it is their highest aim? Ouch! Still pretty hot, isn’t it?

Was Jesus being nasty or friendly when He said this thing to us? We almost invariably conclude that He was scolding us. The mind goes instantly to punishment. We feel abused, put down, threatened. Something in us wants to cry “Unfair!” We either want to conclude that Jesus was wrong, or we want to make it very clear that He was talking about all those other people, not about us. Straight and narrow, or wide and easy? Doesn’t take us long to look at that!

As best as I can tell, the passage in Greek is contrasting wide and broad with small and narrow. Translations are not wrong, but they have begun to interpret, as I suppose is inevitable. We assume that narrow is hard and that broad is easy. But this is a corruption. Broad ways are often the hardest in the long run. They sometimes lead to the hardest consequences. And narrow may be very pleasant in the long run – the easiest, softest way in reality. I am just interested in exploring how the passage has been made to accent our fear of God’s hard discipline, when that maybe is not implied at all.

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How do we get ourselves to remember that Jesus is on our side? Jesus has gone to a lot of trouble to come to us. He is expending incredible time and power to heal and teach and love. He is about to do a great deal more – because, and only because, He cares for us. When we pick up His teachings and they burn us at first, we need to remember that. Look at the twin passage in John 10:7-10. It makes it clear that Jesus is the door. The purpose is that we may have LIFE, and have it abundantly. That is the meaning and message. Somehow, with some of these teachings, we lose sight of Jesus’ real agenda.

A group of Ivy League college students was taking a field trip for its sociology class. Most of the students had never been face-to-face with life in the slums before. Seeing a little girl playing in the dirt, one of them asked, “Why doesn’t her mother clean her up?” The teacher replied, “That little girl’s mother loves her, but she doesn’t hate dirt. And she has no way to prevent the dirt even if she did. We, on the other hand, hate dirt but we don’t love the little girl, so we are content to leave her here. Meanwhile, we can hardly wait to get out of here and wash up. Until hate for the dirt and love for the child exist together in the same person, she is likely to remain here.”

Suddenly we begin to remember: until hatred of sin and love for the sinner come together in a people, there will be no help for the lost.

If Jesus tells us about a narrow door, it does not mean He hates us. It means we live in a place of alienation from God and each other, and it is not easy to get out. We keep wanting Jesus to be “nice.” By that we mean we want Jesus to approve of us as we are – to tell us that where we are is just fine. But somehow we do not look fine to Jesus. He sees all the fear, pain, resentment, anger, loneliness, and quarreling and says, “Poor things. Nobody ought to have to live in all this dirt.”

Enter by the narrow gate. Eventually, if we do not drop it too fast, it will occur to us that Jesus does not think we should stay where we are or have to live like we do. If we are going to “enter” some gate, we cannot stay where we are. First and foremost, this passage is an invitation – an invitation to move to a new place. And as usual, we are being invited into the Kingdom. Our normal reaction is, “It doesn’t seem fair or right that so many of us should be condemned.” Okay, call it whatever you like. But then ask yourself: How many people do you know who ought to stay just the way they are? How many people do you know who are happy, fulfilled illustrations of realized potential? You do not really like the world the way it is, either! So why get upset with Jesus that He notices it too?

Jesus sees the anxieties, the injustice, the fear and depression, the malice and divorce. And He says: You need to come out of here. This is no fit place for little girls or boys – for anyone made by God. But come out of here by the narrow gate (I am the gate), or you will only end up in another place just like this one.

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“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” Our perspective is that we already have life and somebody may try to take it away from us. Or that God might say we did not use it right and punish us, or take life away as a punishment. Somehow we get it all worked around to sound that way when we deal with this passage. We cannot hear Jesus at all from such a stance.

Jesus does not think we have Life yet! Like Geppetto, God is a great craftsman, and physically most of us move around quite well without the strings, although lots of us can still remember the strings, almost as if they were still there. But the Life-giving Spirit is far from finished with the new creation. The Spirit has only barely touched us, so to speak. And we must still choose whether to stay here as we are or move into the Kingdom.

Jesus does not think we have Life yet. He is talking about something we have yet to find, trust, claim, walk into. And most of us, He says, will not do that. Most of us prefer to stay where we are, as we are. Most of us still want to find an easier, softer way – a gate that is wide and easy. Most people are not interested in Life. They are interested in comfort and security. They think success means safety.

Jesus is simply telling it true – telling us the way it is – so we can see it clearly and make up our minds. The way is narrow. Most people will not follow Him into it. Most churches and communities will not even make a very good start.

We must reorder our schedules to have time for prayer. We do not do that. We try to crowd it in, or we keep it a week or two then go right back to our old ways – running our own lives. The way is narrow, focused. We do not all choose to go.

The road is narrow. We are asked to give ten percent. We give five, or two. This is symbolic. It's the way we always respond – changing the narrow way that works, back into a wide and easy way that does not – making sure that we are still in charge, still doing it our way. So most churches merely limp along, and the way we live is only barely different from how we lived before we met Jesus, our souls gasping for enough air to barely survive. I told you about spiritual blackouts. How do you feel about spiritual emphysema?

At other times, we go overboard. God asks us to love our neighbor; we try to love and save the whole world, and wear ourselves into uselessness trying to prove how special we are. All it proves is that we still think we are in charge. The gate is narrow. We are not supposed to go to the right or to the left of it. No fancy footwork. No grandstand plays. Just humbly follow Jesus through the gate that leads us into the Kingdom.

We are to see ourselves as part of Christ's body – the church. As such, we will want to discover our spiritual gifts and use them to build up "the body." But instead we start to see our little efforts as unimportant, or we get sidetracked back into building some other kingdom.

The poet and musician Sidney Lanier was a flutist of extraordinary skill. He played in the Symphony Orchestra of Baltimore. One day, as the orchestra was rehearsing and the symphony was building to the grand crescendo with drums, clappers, horns, trumpets, and a full organ all blazing away, a whimsical thought occurred to the young Lanier. To himself he said, "Nobody could possibly hear my little flute in the midst of this thundering roar." At this impish thought, still holding the flute to his lips, he ceased to play his part. Instantly, the conductor rapped his baton angrily, stopped the orchestra, pointed directly at Lanier and demanded, "Where is the flute?"

Why do we think the Holy Spirit is hard of hearing? Where is your flute? Where is your time, your money, your caring, your love? *So what* if it does not seem like very much to you! It is because it is *yours* that the Holy Spirit wants it. It is also because you really *are* part of the music. Naturally, we cannot hear very well from where we are. Who do we think we are, God? But out front, where God listens, it makes a difference. Where is your flute?

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I do not know if any of these thoughts lead you where I hope they do. I really have only one thing on my mind today. It is to ask you this: What is the number-one consideration in your life?

That is not exactly correct. Rather, I want to suggest that you try an experiment with me, for at least a week. During this coming week, will you make it your number-one consideration to ask: What would be best for my soul? What would be most helpful for my spiritual condition? (If there is somebody here who cannot yet deal with such language, ask instead: What would be best for my character development?)

Let us be as clear as possible. The experiment requires that each time we become conscious of any choice – each time we find ourselves making any decision of any kind, large or small – the number-one consideration is: What would be most beneficial for my soul? Naturally, the experiment requires that you proceed to act and choose according to whatever matches this number-one consideration.

Just to get on the same wavelength, be reminded of some contrasts. The question is not: What would be good for somebody else? That is a very interesting question. So interesting, in fact, that we ask it all the time. You are begged to discard it during this experiment. Ask only regarding your own spiritual condition.

I have it in mind, for instance, that very often I view choices and make decisions according to what will further my position here. The big three considerations are money, reputation, and other people's approval. It occurs to me that I often do what I do and decide what I decide because of the impact I think it will have on my finances. If I see an item in the store that attracts me, I sometimes ask myself if I can afford it, if it would favorably affect somebody I care about, or if it would do something to enhance my work or reputation. None

of these will do, you see. During this experiment, I may only ask what will be good for my spiritual condition. I must shop or not shop, buy or not buy, on that basis alone.

If somebody asks me for a favor this week, I must consult the number-one consideration before I can reply. If I do this favor, will it improve my spiritual condition? If not, I must refuse the favor.

Money, reputation, other people's approval – these are the big three. Sometimes they are subtle and ingrained, so watch them carefully. In my profession, for instance, it enhances my reputation if people think I am humble. It does not always help if I actually *am* humble, but it is important for people to *think* I am humble. There are lots of ways to act humble that are irrelevant, or even detrimental, to my soul. You all get caught in many similar binds too. I am just saying that this is a serious experiment. No matter how much fun you start to have, take it seriously.

In normal decision-making, money, reputation, and other people's approval are the big three considerations. The little three are: Will it make me comfortable? Will it entertain me? Will it gratify some desire? Of course, for some, the big three are the little three for others, and vice versa. But the easiest way to keep it all clear is to just throw everything else out and keep only the number-one consideration: Is it good for my own soul? What will be best for my own spiritual condition?

Jesus was always looking at what would be good for us spiritually. We *want* Him to pay attention to what will be good for us in our earthly circumstances. That is why it's so hard to comprehend what He says. "*Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.*" A sane and practical request to our ears – a matter of justice, fair play, and practical reality. But Jesus says, "*Who made me a judge or divider over you? Beware of covetousness*" (Luke 12:13-15) How can we understand such double-talk, such evasions? It's easy once we finally realize that Jesus really cares about our souls – what we are becoming on the inside. What we think is important is only "the props" for the real drama: the growth of souls (what used to be called "character").

Start looking for what will be best for your spiritual growth. That is the number-one consideration. Nothing else matters. Nothing else counts. Try to make it for just one week. Let us discover for real and for certain, at least once in our lives, whether, after such an experiment, we are happier or sadder or what.

THE NUMBER-ONE CONSIDERATION

The gate is narrow. To us it looks small. How do we know from this side that it opens up into a Kingdom so vast? The gate is Christ. The gate is an invitation into a new kind of LIFE. Are you going to be one of the few who find it? Nothing bad happens to you if you do not go through the narrow gate. Read the passage again. Nothing bad happens to us if we do not go through the narrow gate – except we get to stay where we are and like we are.