

Two Paths, Two Ends (Part 1)

Jesus said the narrow way leads to life and the broad way leads to destruction.

13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. Matthew 7:13-14

Remarkably, many have ignored the context and made the assumption Jesus was speaking of the paths to heaven and hell. But that raises some very important questions. What is the meaning of "life" in v.14? Is it actually heaven? What is the meaning of "destruction" in v.13? Is it really hell?

Furthermore, if v.14 is truly speaking of salvation, why is it referred to as a way, or pathway? Would that not imply salvation is a process? Yet in John 3:18 Jesus said that individuals are either not condemned or condemned already. There is no pathway involved, no process. In John 3:36 John the Baptist said that individuals either have everlasting life or the wrath of God abides on them. Again, there is no pathway involved, no process. It's simply one or the other. Salvation is a point-in-time transaction, not a process, as in the metaphor.

Some may wonder, "What about John 14:6? Jesus said, I am the way." Indeed, but a careful examination of the passage and the context reveals Jesus was speaking to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion in the upper room, and He was not addressing matters of salvation but sanctification. In the midst of that endearing conversation, Jesus teaches His key followers about the way to fellowship with the Father, which is through Christ. This is the same subject John addresses at greater length in his first epistle.

To conclude that Jesus is speaking of heaven and hell in Matt. 7 seems to be making an assumption that is not grounded in the passage but rather on one's theological grid. It is of critical importance to interpret these verses in their natural context. We must first ask the question, "To whom is Jesus speaking?"

Of course, these verses are near the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which begins in chapter five. According to Matt. 5:1-2, Jesus is addressing His disciples, people who are already saved and want to know more about how to progress in discipleship. They want to learn about the kingdom lifestyle, and it is that of which Jesus speaks. A study of the Sermon on the Mount shows that Jesus is concentrating on matters of sanctification, namely, how we should live here and now if we would enter into a kingdom way of living. There does not seem to be anything in these chapters about salvation from eternal condemnation.

For example, the Beatitudes in Matt. 5:3-12 are the virtues of a kingdom-focused saint – poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, etc. To suggest this is the means of salvation for the lost is to suggest salvation is by works. Furthermore, in Matt. 5:13, Jesus says, “Ye are the salt of the earth ... ye are the light of the world.” Jesus is obviously speaking to believers. Unbelievers are never called “salt” or “light.” The entire Sermon is geared to believers and the need to live a kingdom lifestyle if they would inherit the coming kingdom. Look at the verse immediately preceding our text:

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.
Matthew 7:12

This is commonly known as the “golden rule.” Can a lost person become saved by keeping the golden rule? Absolutely not! But it is the way to sanctification, at least in part, for a saved person. So in the immediate context of verse 12 and the broader context of the Sermon on the Mount, vs. 13-14 seem to describe for saved people the two possible lifestyle choices they could pursue.

The word *way* in the Greek (per Vine) is used metaphorically in this context, to mean “a course of conduct” or “way of thinking.” Speaking to His saved audience, Jesus says, “I want you to enter the strait gate that leads to life. I want you to pursue this pathway in life, not the broad gate that leads to destruction.”

Thus, the overall interpretation of the passage becomes clear. The ways or pathways in these two verses are two possible lifestyles that could be chosen by saved people. One is beneficial and leads to life. The other is detrimental and leads to destruction. It is critical to define these words, *life* and *destruction*.

The way that leads to life is through the strait gate and down the narrow path. Notice the spelling of the word *strait*. It is not the same as the English word *straight*. There is a difference. The word in the text does not mean “unbending” or “without curves.” It is strait in the sense of “narrow.” Think of the Straits of Magellan, a narrow passageway for ships to travel through near the southern tip of South America, allowing a shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But it is fraught with dangers, for it is narrow, and ships can be crushed against the rocks.

The Greek word for *strait* in the text above carries the idea of being pressed for space. The gate is a very tight spot, a tight passageway. But that’s not all. The Greek word for *narrow* means “hemmed in.” The gate is “pressed” and the way is “hemmed in.” Very close forms of these two Greek words are found together in another passage in the New Testament:

*We are troubled on every side, yet not **distressed**. (Emphasis added)*
2 Cor. 4:8

Troubled is the word translated *narrow* in Matt. 7:13 and *distressed* is translated *strait*. Paul is using these terms in reference to his ministry. He had been hemmed in from every angle, no doubt by hardships and pressures and persecutions, yet he did not allow those circumstances to press him to the point of discouragement or being overwhelmed. He would not let the stresses that accompany life and ministry for Christ get him down.

We can now better understand how these words are used in Matt. 7. Using the picture of a strait gate and a narrow path, Jesus urges His disciples to choose to die to self and enter a way of living that is inherently full of hardship because of choices to serve Christ ("take up your cross and follow me") – a way of living that keeps one under pressure, hemmed in on all sides. Why should we deliberately choose this path, seeing it is difficult and doesn't come natural? We choose this path because Jesus admonishes us to and also knowing that suffering with Him qualifies us to reign with Him (Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12; Phil. 3:10-14).

Furthermore, the strait and narrow path leads to life! But the life Jesus promises in this context is not eternal life. It is not heaven. It is a glorious kingdom way of living, here and now, that results in reward at the Judgment Seat. It is abundant entrance into the kingdom of heaven (which is the millennial kingdom). Incidentally, choosing the pathway of life is not something that happens once. We must die daily. Those who do not, by default, choose the other way, the wide gate and the broad path. That way is much more popular, for it does not require pain; it is not agonizing. Many take that path, but it leads to destruction.

In [Part 2](#) we will explore the meaning of the word *destruction* and explore the other metaphor used by Jesus in concluding the Sermon on the Mount.