

The Way to Life

Please open your Bible to the book of Matthew 7, or turn to page ____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. We're coming to the end of this teaching section known as the sermon on the mount.

One of the things that has stuck out to me most this time through the Sermon on the Mount is that is wisdom literature – like the book of Proverbs, it is full of images and short parables and absolute statements. And in this sermon, Jesus invites us to follow the way of wisdom and seek first God's kingdom.

One of the other marks of wisdom literature is that it often presents a contrast between two approaches, two paths that a person can take – the way of wisdom and the way of foolishness. And Jesus has been vividly painting this picture of these two ways to live. On the one hand, there is the way of the king, the way to life, the flourishing life, the life of peace and wholeness and righteousness, the way of love and humility and generosity.

On the other hand, there's the way of the world, the way of external righteousness, the way of anger and lust in your heart, the way of retaliation and loving only those who love you back, the way of laying up treasures on earth, the way of praying to be seen by others, the way of worry and anxiety, the way of judging others

And in this last section, we'll see again, this worldly way is the way of empty professions and declarations, the way of hearing without doing. This way is easy to follow and there are many who will try to lead you down that path. But it is the way to death and destruction.

Last week, Pastor Mike unpacked for us the beginning of the concluding section here in talking about the decision we need to make about the broad and narrow way. Now, I divide up the passages ahead of time, and sometimes when we come to them later, I realize that I didn't do a great job at marking out the dividing points. So I gave Mike verses 7-14. And that's not entirely crazy. The ESV marks a subsection before verse 12 and after verse 14. So you can put those together.

But as I dug into it this week, I think the better division for this concluding section is from verses 13 to the end. You have verses 13-14 for one section; 15-23 as a second section, and then verses 24-27 as the final section with a closing comment on the crowd's reaction in verses 28-29. Those three sections all deal with this contrast between two ways we can go. So this morning, I'm going to overlap a bit with what Mike preached on last week.

As Mike mentioned, Jesus has given a lot of content in this sermon, and now He's calling us to make a choice. There are a series of contrasts here – two gates, two paths, two confessions, and two builders. So as we read, listen for how Jesus is pressing us to make a decision – which way are you headed? Which way will you go?

Read **Matthew 7:13-29**

You know, there are many key times in life when we need to make a decision that will have enormous consequences...

- choosing a college or career path
- where you'll live
- who you'll marry

And those kind of decisions can be difficult. And sometimes, even small decisions are hard. It can be hard to decide what to have for dinner. It can be hard to determine what you want to watch on TV. It can be difficult to know we really want or what we really do not want. Or we can get analysis paralysis. Sometimes, we avoid tough decisions because we don't want the pressure of deciding.

But here in the sermon on the mount, Jesus doesn't allow us that option. As I mentioned a moment ago, Jesus is calling us to a decision point at the end of this sermon. What are we going to do with His words?

Will we listen and follow Him? Or will we go our own way?

And the main idea for this section is pretty simple:
Jesus calls us to the way of true life in Him

Jesus is not content for us to hear His teaching and then walk away without knowing that we've made a decision. We have a decision to make – whether we're going to follow Him and the narrow way, the way of fruitfulness and flourishing and wisdom, or we're going to go the broad way, the way of the false prophets and empty declarations and external righteousness and in so doing end up heading for our own destruction.

So in this section, Jesus is calling us to enter the only true way to life.

I want us to see Four Principles from these verses. They aren't necessarily in order as we look at this passage, I'm pulling from what I believe the main idea is here and trying to draw out what Jesus teaching us.

The way to life is costly

The first principle that I want us to see is that the way to the true, flourishing life is costly. It's going to require sacrifice. Notice Jesus says in verses 13 and 14...

Matthew 7:13-14

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. **14** For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

The contrast Jesus draws here highlights the two ways a person can go. And He says "Enter by the narrow gate." Go the way that is harder to find if you want to go the way to life.

But the other way is broad and easy to find. It's the way that follows the culture and your natural inclinations. You don't have to think about it if you want to go that way. It's the default path.

It's summertime now, the time when my family likes to go to the pool and enjoy time swimming. We've been able to go to Tropicana Cove, the big public pool over by Columbian Park a few times, and one of my favorite things to do there is to float along the lazy river. Anyone else like doing that?

I like it because you don't have to do anything. Just lift your feet up off the floor and the current will carry you along. And you don't have to work at it – you just go with the flow.

And you can circle and circle around the lazy river for hours if you want. That's the wide way with many people on it.

But, if you want to get out and maybe go down one of the big slides in the middle of the lazy river or you want to stop and get out, you have to make a choice to do something. You have to stop and put your feet on the bottom and move toward exit or find the entrance to the stairs for the slide, that's the narrow way. You may even have to stand up or go against the current to get there.

You see my point; that's the narrow way. You have to look for it; it doesn't come naturally. You won't drift there by accident.

As Mike put it last week, Jesus presents us with a decision to make. Will you follow the broad way of the world or will you pursue the way of Jesus and the Kingdom of God?

Many times, this contrast between these two paths is talked about in terms of clearly worldly sins – the broad way is the way of immorality and partying and doing whatever you want. And that's true – those are all aspects of the broad way Jesus is talking about here.

But I think Jesus also has in mind the broad way of religious hypocrisy. Throughout this whole sermon, Jesus has been speaking about the difference between pursuing an external righteousness, one that only appears to be holy and pure on the outside, with a greater righteousness, one that comes through living with integrity and wholeness, where your motives and inner desires match your actions on the outside.

The Pharisees were great at appearing holy, but Jesus has said that we need a righteousness that surpasses theirs – one that isn't merely external.

You know, one of the difficult realities of the Christian life is that it's easier to appear holy than to actually be holy. Don't you find that to be true? It's easier to say the right things or even do the right things than to really love people and be humble in your heart. That's the difference between the broad way and the narrow way.

When Jesus says that the narrow way is hard, he isn't saying that when you come to follow Jesus that your life will now be miserable. He's not saying, following me means that you won't ever be able to have any more fun. Now it's just reading your Bible and having awkward conversations about the gospel. No more enjoying life, just drudgery and hardship and keeping a bunch of rules until heaven, and then everything will be great. That's what a lot of people think following Jesus means.

But that's not at all what it means to follow Jesus. When Jesus says that the narrow way is hard, he's saying it's going to cost you something. You'll have to make a decision. You can't just go with the flow of the culture or just work at appearing to be holy and good on the outside. You need to do the work of following Jesus.

You have probably heard this cultural quote...

"The best things in life are free." – some idiot

I get what they mean, they're talking about things like love and friendship and kindness. But even that's not true! The best things in life come at great cost. Love and friendship and kindness require sacrifice. They're hard and costly. But they're worth the cost.

We know this from experience in our lives. Think about some of those things in life that are costly but worth it. Some of you have kids, and you know what I'm talking about. Kids come at a cost, and not just financial.

There is a financial cost, of course, to raising kids. And there is a physical cost that women pay to carry and nurture babies. There is the cost of freedom and personal autonomy – parents are no longer free to just do whatever they want, they have to think about their kids. And maybe greatest of all, there is an emotional cost to pay because it's like your heart is being carried around outside of you in your children so that when they are hurt or embarrassed or sad, you feel that too. There is a cost to raising children.

But man, is it worth it! Children are a blessing from the Lord, the Scripture says. The sacrifice of raising kids is more than made up for by the joy they bring to your life and the growth they cause in your own soul.

And outside of parenting, we know this to be true in so many ways. Do you want to have close friendships? You'll need to give up your time and energy to be around others. You'll need to be vulnerable and honest with them. You'll need to love and forgive, even when they hurt you or you don't feel like serving.

The best things in life require sacrifice. And that's true when it comes to following Jesus. Listen to what Jesus says...

Matthew 13:44

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

You see, this is commonly misunderstood. And I know the point that Jesus is making here can be hard to get. But he's not talking about earning your way into God's kingdom. The only hope that any of us have of entering God's kingdom is by receiving the free gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus.

But that gift that is free will cost you everything. You have to turn from living for yourself. That's called repentance. You have to give up control and striving to be the king over your own life. You need to sell all that you have to go and buy that field. It's a free gift, but it will cost you everything. The way to true life is costly.

Your way will eventually be revealed

Secondly, we see in these verses that your way will be revealed. We're all on a path headed somewhere. And maybe not right away and maybe it won't be seen from a distance, but when examined closely and over time, the path you are on will be revealed. Whether you're on the narrow way or the broad way, whether you're a healthy tree or a diseased tree, whether your house is being built on the sand or the rock – that will be seen in the long run. But it won't necessarily be seen right away.

So at first, it may be tempting to just float along and go the broad and easy way. That's because one of the dangers that we face in this life is not just that the way to destruction is wide and easily found, but that there are those who will try to lead you astray to walk down that path.

Jesus calls them false prophets in verse 15...

Matthew 7:15

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

These false prophets look innocent and harmless like sheep on the outside but inwardly, they are ravenous wolves. Again, we see this contrast between the true life of wholeness and that which is false and only pretends on the outside.

And Jesus wants us to beware, to watch out, for those kinds of people. Don't fall into their traps. And notice the false prophets find you, "they come to you" Jesus says. You won't necessarily have to go looking for them, they'll always be around. Paul told the pastors at the church in Ephesus that after he leaves there will be fierce wolves who will come *from among them* and through their twisted words will try to draw disciples away.

You don't have to go looking for people who will try to lead you astray. They are trying to find you. And if you're not discerning, they will devour you and lead you to your own destruction. They will sometimes literally knock on your door in pairs if you know what I mean. Or they will send ads to you on your social media feed. Or they will try to influence you in a thousand small messages each and every day.

So what does Jesus want us to do? He tells us to beware. That's the command in verse fifteen. Beware. Don't be surprised. Be watchful. And in both verse 16 and in verse 20, Jesus says that you will recognize these false prophets by their fruit.

Jesus tells them that grapes don't come from thornbushes or figs from thistles. And He gives this picture of two trees – a healthy tree which bears good fruit and a diseased tree which bears bad fruit. The point is that the fruit reveals the health of the tree.

And what does Jesus mean by fruit here? Well, in the context of the sermon, I think he's talking about two things – the words that people say and the actions that they do.

You will know false prophets from true ones if they speak words that are true and humble and loving. Do their words and actions line up with what Jesus has been teaching? Does their teaching and character follow the will of the Father?

Think about the high standard Jesus has been calling us to: Do they refrain from murder but respond in anger? Are they given to lust? Do they seek revenge against their enemies? Is their religious activity done for the approval of others? Jesus has been holding up the true spirit of God's law which is all about our hearts. So beware of those who seek only external righteousness and law-keeping before others.

One characteristic of a false prophet is that they make professions and even do works apparently in the Lord's name, but they do not do the will of the Father, which has to do with wholeness and humility and love and doing justice.

That's what Jesus is getting at in verses 21-23. Look there again...

Matthew 7:21-23

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. **22** 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?' **23** And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

So the context here is the false prophets from verse 15. It's the same idea. This isn't directly addressing the Christian with a sensitive conscience who reads these words and is then terrified that you never knew the Lord. That's not the point Jesus is making.

He is speaking a warning to those who would follow false teachers, even if they seem to do works like prophesy and exorcisms and other mighty works. Don't be fooled by them or follow their way. Jesus is saying, I want you to know that just because someone claims to represent me does not mean that they were following my way.

Notice he calls them 'workers of lawlessness' at the end of verse 23. They may keep the law externally, but their hearts are far from me, so they are really living in disobedience to my law.

And who enters the kingdom of heaven on that day of judgment?

The one who does the will of my Father. That's what Jesus says in verse 21.

Now, we may read that and think – is Jesus telling us that we have to do good works to gain eternal life? Is he saying that this is something we earn by keeping the law?

No, that's not what is being taught. Remember his point here is not about whether you can earn salvation or not, but about whether your professions with your mouth match what is really going on in your heart.

Leon Morris writes in his commentary on this verse...

"The contrast is not between merit and grace, but between profession and way of life."¹

Jesus is saying, "As you pursue living for me, beware that there are going to be those who seek to lead you astray. And even if they claim to follow me and from a distance appear to do mighty things, their professions are empty."

So look at their fruit, Jesus says. Look at their words, their doctrine, and consider their character. Their false teaching comes from false motives and it will lead to destruction. In the end, it's not **their** professions about me that matter, but **my** profession about them. They profess to know me, but their words are empty. But on the day of judgment it will be my profession of them that really counts.

I think one of the applications for us today is to consider the voices that we follow. Who is it that you listen to? What teachers or preachers do you take in? Whose voice has influence on you?

And as you think about that, think especially about two things. First, consider their words. What do they teach? What are they saying? That's what the word doctrine means – 'the teaching.' Do they have sound doctrine that aligns with the Bible?

And in order to answer that question, you need to consider this: Can you recognize false teaching? Do you know your Bible? Can you sense when things are off?

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 179.

I think many times, people have sort of one gear for deciding if things are true or not – did they mention the Bible? Brothers and sisters, false teachers may use the Bible to teach false things. They may twist and distort what the text is saying to suit their agenda.

That's where good theology comes in. Theology is a way of systematically organizing the Bible's teaching, in large part so that things that are wrong can be exposed.

One of the questions that I have found helpful, and your pastors have used when we discuss doctrine and theology is this: Is this teaching or rule or statement above or below the line of Scripture? Does it go beyond what the Scriptures say and seek to add to it? Or does it fall below and fail to uphold the line that Scripture teaches? Legalism or license?

Another question is this – Is this teaching radically new or dramatically different? Are you the first or the only one seeing this thing? Have all the Christians who have gone before, filled by the Holy Spirit, missed it, but then you figured it out? That should give you pause. It's possible, of course, for many people to be wrong. And for errors to last for years, even centuries – we see that happening in the Old Testament. But watch out for beliefs or teachings that have only come about in recent times or in your lifetime.

And that leads to a third question: Does this teaching reinforce what you already want to believe? Does it center you or your culture (America)? Is that particular view of the end times centered on the United States? Well, that should cause you to at least consider that you might be wrong. The fruit of that theology might come from an unhealthy approach to the Bible with you at the center, so it is likely bad fruit.

Look at their doctrine. And then secondly, look at the fruit of their character. This is especially hard when you are following voices that you only access online or by the radio or TV. I'm not saying it's bad to learn from teachers in those ways, but you have to ask, do you really know their character?

That's one reason that it's especially important to be connected to a local church, one where you can see the character of your pastors and leaders. Now, that's not going to

happen perfectly. And this is intimidating to say, but you should be able to look at the lives of your pastors and deacons and be able to trust the fruit of their character.

-Pastor Mike and the men's group respect for him

There are a few reasons that's intimidating, not least of which is that I know the weaknesses that I have. Another reason it can be scary is what Jesus is teaching us here – your way will eventually be revealed. Sooner or later, the fruit of our lives will be seen.

This is why it's a bad idea to name buildings in honor of people who are still alive. Sometimes their fruit is revealed, and they were caught up in scandal or secret sin, and it didn't get exposed until people looked closely or time caught up with them.

You see fruit when you look closely at a tree. And fruit doesn't come immediately, but eventually the fruit will show the health of the tree. The way you're going will eventually be revealed.

Another way that Jesus shows us this principle is in verses 24-27 with this analogy of the two builders.

Matthew 7:24-25

24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. **25** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. **26** And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. **27** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

You may have seen pictures of a house being blown into the sea. They happen all the time. This one is from earlier this year...

(show picture / video)



The image is a vivid one. What kind of foundation are you building on in your life? And it's interesting that the contrast isn't just the difference between those who hear from Jesus and those who don't. That's not how the two groups are divided. It's not – who goes to church and who doesn't.

The division is between those who put these things into practice and those who do not. It's between those who apply the teaching of Jesus and those who simply hear Him and continue on as they were before.

The one who remains unchanged – that person reveals that the appearance of a stable house on the outside is only hiding an unstable foundation in their heart. Once again, Jesus is calling us to live with integrity and wholeness.

Jesus is warning us to build our character because our foundation will eventually be revealed. The winds and the storms of life will show the strength of your character. Your integrity, your inner life, the things that are really going on in your heart – they will come to the surface when life gets hard.

-had sports camp this week; one way to really get to know a person is to play sports with them. And you'll see how they respond to adversity and hardship

Your way of life will be seen when examined closely and over time. Fruit has to be examined up close. Fruit comes over time, not right away. And likewise, the wisdom of how you build your life is seen when the rains and floods come.

So Jesus tells us that the way to life is costly. And that your way of life will eventually be revealed. And then finally, He teaches...

There is no third way

That's the third principle we see in these verses. There is no third way. It's a binary choice. There's one way that is broad and another that is narrow. You are either a healthy tree or a diseased tree. There are those who enter the kingdom of heaven and those who do not. There is a house that stands up in the storm and the one that falls.

And this is a pattern that we find all throughout Scriptures. We've said it before that in speaking this sermon on the mountainside, Jesus is inviting us to see Him as a new kind of Moses, giving a new Law to God's people. He goes up on the mountain just as Moses went up on the mountain to receive the Law, including the 10 Commandments, from God in order to deliver it to the people.

And at the end of the Law, in the final chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, we are told that there are two paths before God's people – the path of life and the path of death. They are to choose life, that they might live.

And in the next generation, Joshua says to the people, "Choose this day whom you will serve." And "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Psalm 1 presents this contrast between the righteous as a flourishing tree, planted by streams of water, and the wicked who are like chaff which is blown away by the wind. Even in the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, we read of the mark of the beast, but remember that there is also a mark of the Spirit by which God's people are sealed as belonging to God. Again and again, there is this contrast between good and evil, between life and death.

The point is that there are two ways, and there is no third way. You are either with Christ or against Him. The key is what you do with Jesus Himself and His words.

Notice that Jesus unashamedly puts Himself as the decisive factor...

Verse 21 – Not everyone who says to **ME**, "Lord, Lord"

Verse 24 – "whoever does **MY** words is like a wise man who built his house on the rock"

And then look at the conclusion Matthew gives us after this sermon in verses 28-29

Matthew 7:28-29

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, **29** for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Jesus taught as one who didn't just make suggestions or recommendations about what the Bible means. He taught as though His own words carried the authority of God. When He speaks these words, He commands that people obey. That is the only way. It is the only way of wisdom, the only way to true flourishing and blessedness, and the only way to true life.

And in these final verses, Jesus leaves us without a doubt about the choice we have to make in response to His teaching. There are a lot of messages out there about how to live a happy life. There are a lot of false prophets who will tell you there's a third option. You can get by with just adding a little Jesus to your life. You can have your fun and Jesus too! You can keep your feet in both worlds. But Jesus cuts through all of it.

You don't need better habits on the road to destruction; you need a different road. You don't need to rearrange the furniture in the house you've built on sand; you need a different foundation.

So the words of Jesus make us consider the path that we're on. We must wrestle with some real questions about ourselves and the direction that we're heading. So let me ask you today: Are you a sinner? Have you contributed to the wreckage of the world? Are you a gossip? A liar? Do you disrespect your parents? Are you arrogant? Do you justify yourself, never admitting fault? Do you go places online or consume media that you know you shouldn't?

Are you hiding from others? Do you have things you just hope that nobody will ever find out about you? Are you rude? Are you angry with your kids constantly? Are you easily offended and frustrated? Do people walk on eggshells around you? Are you disrespectful to your husband? Are you a lover of money? Are you stingy? Do you love to spend money on yourself, but rarely give to God or those in need?

Do you hate authority and refuse to submit to anyone? Are you slow to show grace? Do you harbor grudges easily, measuring out forgiveness in a thimble and then demanding grace by the gallon?

Have I missed anyone yet?

What I want you to see is that the problem with us isn't just one big thing, it's everything. In our sin and rebellion against God, we are warped, curved in on ourselves, and spiritually dead. Our problem isn't one that can be fixed with a few cosmetic tweaks here and there. There isn't a third way.

And so the answer to all of our problems isn't to make another pledge that today things will be different. That you're going to grit your teeth today and do better. And the answer isn't to do what we all love to do and just try to hide our sin better.

The answer is that you need Christ. You need to be washed clean from your sin. You need a different road, not a different pace on the same road.

You need the way of King Jesus. You need to confess before a holy God that you have sinned against Him, to receive his mercy, and to walk by faith after the Lord.

When we come to terms with the reality of who we are, there is good news for our souls. What is that good news? It's that the One who taught with authority really is God in the flesh. He really did live in perfect obedience to the Father and fulfilled the Law. He really did die in the place of sinners and rise again from the grave. He really ascended to the right hand of the Father and sent the Spirit to awaken our souls to the truth of this gospel. And this Jesus invites us to the only way to true, eternal life.

So there is a choice before each one of us today. It's a choice far more important than what college you go to, where you're going to live, or even who you'll marry. It's the decision you need to make about what way you will go. Will you follow Jesus, trusting in Him alone to save you and seeking to do the will of the Father? Or will you go your own way, the broad way and hope for the best?

And that's not just a question for those who are not yet Christians. Even we who believe, must continually exercise faith and trust as we daily seek to walk in obedience to the words of Christ. We must be doers of the word and so build our houses on the rock and not the sinking sands of apathy or indifference.

In this sermon on the mount, Jesus has invited us to the only way to true life. Won't you follow Him today?

Let's pray...

As the band comes for a final song, let me ask you – how will you respond today? What faith step is Jesus calling you to?

- maybe that's putting your faith in Jesus for the first time
- following His command in baptism
- confessing your sin and getting help to walk in holiness
- determining that you're going to grow in bearing good fruit and knowing the Bible and doctrine better
- identifying some area in which the teaching of Jesus has brought conviction and choosing the narrow way of costly obedience