

“Choosing the Right Road”

Matthew 7:13,14

Pastor Dan Erickson

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Yogi Berra, the baseball catcher and sometimes philosopher, once said, “If you come to a fork in the road, take it.” In his own way, Yogi was right. We need to make choices in life. An unwillingness to make decisions can get us into big trouble.

Dr. Seuss tells us the story of the “Zoad,” a creature who seemed unable to make up his mind about anything. Finally, the Zoad got an idea that was “wonderfully bright.” “Safe,’ cried the Zoad, ‘I’ll play it safe, I’m no dunce. I’ll simply start out for both places at once.’ And that’s how the Zoad who would not take a chance, got no place at all, with a split in his pants.”

Yes, we have to make choices in life. Sometimes the decisions we make are of little consequence. If I had chosen to wear black socks instead of blue ones this morning, my life really would not be very different. However, other choices are much more significant. Who you choose to marry, what career you pursue, where you choose to live, those are decisions that often have a big impact on our life.

But do you know what? There is one decision we each have to make which is really more important than all the rest of the choices in life combined. Friends, our journey through the book of Matthew brings us today to just a couple of verses, chapter 7:13,14. Here we find Jesus spelling out very clearly the choice we face. There is a fork in the road, and we have to take it. And it is absolutely crucial that we choose the right road. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would help us understand what that means for each of us today.

Jesus says, “There are two roads you can take in life. You can follow me, seek to trust and honor me, or you can take the other road, maybe follow your own desires, or follow anyone else but me, anyone but Jesus.”

But you have to choose. Listen to His analogy: **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. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it**

are few. Jesus tells that in life, there are two gates or doors that open to two different roads. The one is a big gate that opens to a nice wide road. It is a very easy one to follow. It has a nice, gentle downhill slope. There is just one problem if you take it. It leads to “destruction.” By that Jesus means eternal destruction. In other words, eternal hell.

The other gate is a small one. It opens to a narrow road that is not easy to travel. It is the “hard” way: or another translation says, “difficult road.” But it is the road that leads to life, to eternal life, to heaven.

So, Jesus says, “Enter by the narrow gate.” Make the right choice. Choose the way that leads to life. This, of course, is the path of following Jesus, of trusting in Him, Savior and Lord, of being His disciple. He does not promise that our journey on this road will always be easy for fun. Yet, when we reach our destination, we will be 100% certain that we made the right choice.

Now, I suspect some of you find Jesus’ words pretty hard to swallow. Yet, please remember, this is Jesus’ teaching, not mine. This is not Baptist or Protestant doctrine. These are the words of the Lord Jesus, recorded accurately by the apostle Matthew, as he was inspired by the Holy Spirit. From these verses I want to focus on two reasons why it is so important that we choose the right road.

#1 – We must choose the right road because heaven or hell are realities. One road leads to life, the other to destruction. One road leads to heaven, the other to hell. There are, of course, people who claim that when we die it is all over. They say heaven and hell are just places invented by religious people. Marxists claim rich people came up with the idea of an afterlife to keep poor people content and in their place. I don’t think so.

Why do I believe in the reality of heaven and hell? Why should you believe that they are real? I don’t claim there is empirical or scientific evidence which heaven or hell exists. A few years ago, TBN carried a “News Report” that Norwegian

scientists, working in Siberia, had discovered hell. The story said they drilled through the earth's crust and when they put microphones down the hole, they could hear people screaming. Months later it was revealed that the whole story was a hoax, fabricated by two men in Finland.

Now there are folks who claim to have caught glimpses of heaven or hell through near death experiences. However, it is difficult to evaluate how credible these reports are. I also don't expect you to believe in heaven and hell because other people do.

Despite a decline in religious beliefs in our country, a recent Gallup poll found that 67% of Americans say they believe in heaven and 59% believe in hell. It is not really surprising that heaven is more popular. Though our society often falls into the trap of equating truth with majority opinions. There is no necessary correlation between what everyone thinks and what actually is. Reality cannot be changed by a majority vote. I am not asking you to believe in the afterlife because other people do.

Instead, I will simply say the best reason to believe that heaven and hell exist is because Jesus says so. Why should you believe what Jesus says? Because His life and teachings, the miracles He performed, His resurrection from the dead, all put together, demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that He is who He claims to be, the eternal Son of God. Thus, He is the ultimate expert on what happens to us after we die. To say there is no heaven or hell is to say that we know more about what happens after we die than Jesus does. I am not willing to make that claim. Are you?

We cannot get rid of either heaven or hell by believing they don't exist. C.S. Lewis was once told of a gravestone with the following inscription: "Here lies an atheist, all dressed up with no place to go." Lewis responded soberly, "I'm sure he wishes that were true now."

Folks, if I were to go blind, the sun would still shine even though I would not see it. Likewise, heaven and hell both exist, even if people don't believe in them. We can be very glad for that. We won't take time to discuss it, but I would maintain that without heaven and hell, there would be no solid basis for meaning or morality in life. And

since I am convinced we are much more than a bunch of molecules that happen to come together, Jesus' teaching about heaven and hell seems to clearly correspond with reality.

#2 - We must choose the right road because only those who trust in Jesus Christ can be certain of experiencing eternal life. A very popular idea, both in secular and religious circles, is that because God is a loving god, He will surely not allow anyone to experience the destruction of hell. Everyone will be saved, rescued, and will ultimately be in heaven.

This teaching is called "Universalism." It is embraced by many, but it is a view rejected by Jesus and all the New Testament writers. In fact, in our text Jesus indicates many people will not be in heaven. **Matthew 7:13b, 14 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.**

Over the years, there has been speculation about the number of people who will be saved, who will actually be in heaven. The Jehovah Witnesses insist there will be only 144,000 who will dwell in the heavenly city, though there is room for others on a rejuvenated earth.

Benjamin Warfield, a leading theologian of the early 20th century, thought the number of people that God would save would equal the number of angels that rebelled against the Lord, even before our earth was created. A common idea is that 1/3 of the angels fell, and thus 1/3 of humanity would be saved to take their place in heaven. That is all speculation. The Bible doesn't give us an exact number of people who will be in heaven. However, it does tell us two things.

Listen to **Revelation 7:9 After this I looked, and behold a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.**

Folks, the vision John saw certainly indicates that many, many people will spend eternity with the Lord in heaven. Yet, what also seems clear from what Jesus says in our text today, and I really don't know how one can get around this, most people likely will not.

There are about 2 billion people on the planet today who profess to be some type of Christian. Certainly not all of these folks are genuine believers, but a large percentage are. Still, even if every one of those 2 billion people have gone through the narrow gate that leads to life, the majority of the earth's population, about 5.5 billion people, are still on the road that leads to hell. Many, many people will be in heaven, but most will not.

Some of you are thinking, "But Pastor Dan, are you saying people who believe in another religion will not go to heaven?" Well, God alone determines whom He will save and whom He will not. That is not my call or yours. If He chooses to allow people from other religions into heaven, He can do that. However, the Bible tells us that Jesus Christ is the only Savior. It was not Muhammad, Buddha, or any of the Hindu gods, who died for our sins. The popular idea is that various religions, Islam, Judaism Christianity, Hinduism, etc., are just different roads, all leading to the top of the same mountain. They all lead to heaven.

Jesus says, "No." Only one of them leads to heaven. Other roads to take, other choices, doesn't make it so. I'm reminded of what happened at a psychiatric hospital in California a few years ago. One Sunday morning the patients were being guided to the Protestant and Roman Catholic chapels. One patient didn't enter either chapel but walked to the main gate. When a nurse asked where he was going, the patient replied, "I was told I could go to the church of my choice and the only one I like is in Philadelphia."

Friends, like those patients we have only two choices: we either trust and follow Jesus Christ or we don't. If we don't it doesn't really matter what other religion or philosophy we adopt, whether it's Zen-Buddhism or Atheistic Scientism. They are all part of the wide road that leads to destruction.

Again, I realize that some of you may disagree with what I have said, or maybe even feel offended. Maybe you are thinking, "How can someone who seems like a nice guy be so bigoted and narrow-minded?" I remind you that what I have said this morning is not just my opinion, nor is it just what this church teaches. It is what Jesus taught. It is what is affirmed throughout the rest of the Bible, and what almost the entire Christian church believed for the first 1900 years of its 2000-year history. Heaven and hell are a reality, and the only way of being certain one will be in heaven is to choose the right road, the narrow gate, and trust and follow Jesus Christ.

So, how do you need to respond to what Jesus has said? Let me first say two things to those of you who are truly Christian, who have gone through the narrow gate and are trusting and following Jesus.

First, we must never, ever find joy in the fact that others are on the wrong road. You must never hope people you don't like "rot in hell." Maybe you think, "Oh, Pastor Dan, I would never do that." Yet, I know that sometimes Christians feel kind of proud about being adopted in God's family. We look at people who struggle in life because of their sin, maybe a drug addict, or sex offender, and say, "Yep, he is getting what he deserves." And that is likely true, but we deserve no better.

It is always foolish, never appropriate, for us to be proud of the fact we are on the right road. **Ephesians 2:8,9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** Salvation is a gift of God. It is by grace. WE can do nothing to earn or merit it.

As Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-5 We are not just sick people who need help and healing, but dead people who need to be given life. "You were dead in your trespasses and sins." We were spiritually dead, spiritual zombies, who have been made alive by God's spirit.

As Charles Spurgeon said, you have probably heard this before, "The only thing which I contribute to my salvation is the sin from which I needed to be

saved.” Dear Christian, you have nothing to boast about!

Francis Schaeffer used to say that when we talk about the reality of hell, we need to do so with tears in our eyes. Maybe there are some people whose beliefs or lifestyles you find repulsive: atheists, drag queens, racists, those who abuse their spouse or children. Maybe there are other folks who simply irritate you. Yet, no matter what type of person someone is, the realization that he or she is going through the wide gate and is on the road that leads to destruction should cause tears to come to your eyes.

People on the wrong road are sinners in need of the forgiveness that only Jesus Christ gives. In that way, they are really no different than you or me or anyone else here. Never, ever be glad that someone is on the wrong road.

Second, we need to encourage others to choose the right road. Many of us live busy lives. Your job, family, friends, church, a hobby or two, pretty much consume all your time. Friends you need to remember that there is nothing more important you can do, no better use of your times, than to help people see Jesus more clearly, and turn to Him as Savior and Lord.

How can you do that? Well, you could stand outside of Walmart and yell to everyone you see, “Hey, you rotten sinner. If you don’t know Jesus, you are on the wrong road and heading for hell.” You could do that, but I doubt it would be very effective. And I doubt it is what the Lord wants you to do.

Oh, yes, there are times when we need to speak the truth pretty bluntly, but most of the time God calls us to build relationships with people and develop their trust, so they will listen when we tell them about the right road of following Jesus. That means you should strive to be an effective ambassador of Jesus, using your words and actions to represent Him and help people see what it really means to be a Christian. Do you have a friend or family member that is not on the right road, someone who is heading for destruction? Ask God to help you encourage that person to turn to the Lord. Pray the Lord would work in their mind and heart so they would be open to what you have to share.

If you would like some suggestions on how you might be more effective in talking about Jesus with someone, please contact one of our pastors or other leaders. We would love to chat with you about that. Helping people to choose the right road is what this church wants to be about.

Now, let me just say a few words to those of you who know you are on the wrong road or are afraid you might be. Friends, you need to make a U-turn. You need to get off of the wide road that leads to destruction and go through the narrow gate. It doesn’t matter how nice of a person you are or whether you consider yourself a religious person. If you are not trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you are on the wrong road.

It is your choice whether or not you turn around and get on the right road. Now, it’s true you will never make the right choice without God’s help. As Jesus says, John 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

But if God is working in your heart, if He is giving you a desire to get off the wrong road, you need to make that choice today.

Maybe you think, “Pastor Dan, it is too late for me. You don’t know some of the things I have done.” That’s right, I don’t. But I do know that Jesus died for sinners, for people like me, and people like you. And I know, as the old evangelist Billy Sunday (early 1900’s) said, “I would rather be 6 inches from hell going up than 6 miles away but going down.” And I know if the Lord is giving you a desire today to get on the right road, it is not too late.

So, I encourage you, as God enables, to make the right choice. Ask God to forgive your sin, turn to Jesus Christ, go through the narrow gate, be on the road that leads to eternal life. You will be glad, eternally glad you did.