

The Life of Jesus

Sermon 14- Teaching on the mountain:

Which gate? Which road?

Passages: Acts 4:8-12

Matthew 7:13-14

Our passage today speaks about two gates.

First, there's the 'narrow gate'. What do we know about this gate? 3 things:

- First, Jesus says that it's "*narrow*". In verse 14, He also tells us that it's "*small*". Both words indicate that *this gate is a bit unusual*. Unlike most gates, the fact that it's *narrow* and *small* means that it's probably not an easy gate to get through. This gate forces you to conform to it. Indeed, people may even turn away from it—they'll take one look at it and won't bother.
- Second, Jesus tells us that *only a few find it*. Because this gate is so *small* and so *narrow*, it's not even easy to find. Unless you know it's there and what you're looking for it, you'll tend to overlook it or pass it by.
- Third, Jesus says that *this narrow gate leads to life*. If a sign was placed over this narrow gate, it would say; "*Here is the gateway to life.*" Even still, because the gate is such an odd shape, few people would take the sign seriously. They would say, "*Are you kidding? This gate leads to life? You must be joking!*"

Now, as I understand it, this is the key point that Jesus is making here.

After all, **Jesus is this narrow gate!** (He makes this perfectly clear when, in John 10, He declares, "***I am the gate.***") Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth; Jesus, the rabbi who gathers the poor and the downtrodden from fishing villages in Galilee; Jesus, the uneducated man with a rural accent; time and again, He will declare this truth that He is the only way to the Father; that He alone can lead us to life. The trouble is, **who would have ever thought that this man...this unattractive and humble man...could be the gate to life?**

"And few are those who find it!", says Jesus, speaking about Himself. Few people will stop and take a good look at this man. They will pass Him by. Why? Because they simply don't see (or they can't believe) that He could lead them anywhere significant.

When Jesus calls Himself “the gate” in John 10, He also adds these words: “*Whoever enters through me will be saved.*” What did He mean by this? How can a **gate** be connected with **salvation**?

I get the distinct impression that Jesus many have been taking his vocabulary directly from **Psalm 118**. In this *Psalm of Ascent* (sung as pilgrims ascended to the Temple from all over Israel), the pilgrims would sing this song about **the gates** leading into the Temple. As the pilgrims climbed the 7 steps up to the gates, they would each be singing:

¹⁹ *Open for me **the gates** of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.*

²⁰ ***This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.***

²¹ *I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.*

²² *The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;*

²³ *the LORD has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes.*

²⁴ *The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.*

Notice that the Psalm initially speaks of “gates” in the plural. But this quickly changes to the singular in verse 20—“***This is the gate of the Lord...***” One gate, not many. One gate which leads into the Temple—and it’s a gate that we cannot open ourselves! Rather, this gate is opened **for us by a Saviour!** Only through His mercy and kindness can we enter into His salvation. (v 21) “*I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.*” When you add these things together, you get the beautiful image of *salvation* as simply being in the Temple with the God who graciously lets us come in! He opens the gate for us!

But notice one more thing: In v 22, there’s a change in metaphors from *a gate* to *a stone*. The One who is *the gate* leading to our salvation is none other than the “***stone which the builders rejected***”—Jesus Christ. The mixing of metaphors may, at first be a bit confusing, but the fact is that both *the gate* and *the stone* were items that were passed over. In Psalm 118, we’re told that *the stone* was insignificant to the Temple builders. They didn’t think it was worthwhile, and so they rejected it! Similarly, in Matthew 7, Jesus tells us that *the narrow gate was so small that it was overlooked- people didn’t think could lead them anywhere!*

In the end, however, it is only **this stone** that can be the cornerstone of the Temple. And it is only **this gate** through which we can find salvation and enter the life of the Temple! Only through Jesus Christ and His cleansing blood can we gain access to the Living God and enjoy the blessings of life in His presence; His salvation!

With the Psalmist, we now can say ***“This is marvellous in our eyes!”*** In other words, it doesn't make any rational sense because, in the end, it's all by God's grace; not by human wisdom or power!

There's one more idea that stirs in my mind when I consider Jesus as **the gate**. In 572 BC, 14 years after Solomon's Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians (586 BC), the prophet Ezekiel spoke vividly about a *restored Temple*. Interestingly, in his vision of the Temple (which was in the shape of a massive cube) , there are **3 “gates”**: one facing East, one facing North and one facing South. Two significant points need to be made here:

- **1st** - All 3 gates got narrower as you moved into the Temple area.
- **2nd** - Because the entire Temple complex faced the East, it was the **Eastern Gate** which was the main gate. Indeed, it was through this Eastern gate that the morning sun shone directly into the temple. And it was through the Eastern gate that, according to Ezekiel, the glory of the Lord would, one day, return to the Temple.

Listen to Ezekiel 43:1-7

“Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, ² and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. ³ ... and I fell facedown. ⁴ The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. ⁵ Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. ⁶ ... (Then) I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. ⁷ He said: “Son of man, this is the place of my throne... This is where I will live among the Israelites forever.”

Could it be that, when Jesus calls Himself *“the narrow gate”*, he was referring to Ezekiel's vision of the **Eastern Gate** of the Temple? Could Jesus be saying that **He is the gate through which God's glory will finally return to His Temple?** Could He also be saying that it is *through Him* that God's glory will again radiate out from God's people?

You may see Him as a poor carpenter from the little town of Nazareth. You might see him as a rabbi to the downtrodden. **But**, for those with eyes to see, you know He's far more than that! He's the King of kings and Lord of lords! He is the glory of God, come to earth in human form!

As I've said many times before, **it all comes down to the quality of a person's eyesight!**

As you know, today is Palm Sunday. It's the day when we remember how Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem in a deliberately orchestrated and very public display of His Messiahship. He did this to show the world that He, alone, was the direct fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy. **But, tell me, how many people really understood?** How many people hurried to throw their cloaks on the ground and spread palm branches before the King of kings? In relative terms, only a few! Most people would have looked at Jesus riding into town on a donkey and said, "*Hey Marge, take a look at this lunatic! How funny! What a sight!*" And what do you think the religious leaders of Jerusalem thought as Jesus rode into town that day? No doubt, they saw Him as a trouble maker. Jesus was disrupting their comfortable religious lifestyle. And so, they shook their fists at him... and plotted a way to silence Him, permanently!

What I'm saying is that few people had the **eyes to see** beyond the external and physical things that may have bothered them about Jesus (his clothes, his accent, his friends, his background) **to see His glory!** Few would have had eyes healthy enough to see the invisible and eternal truths of who he really was! Few would have been able to see the Kingdom of Heaven in Him! In other words, **few people** were able to find *the narrow gate!* To their eyes, Jesus simply didn't look like He could lead us anywhere important! In their minds, He was a gate that led to a dead end.

Now, with all that mind, let's go back to today's text and consider what Jesus said about the **wide gate (verse 13)**.

First, it is a "wide" gate. That is, it's large—you can't miss it! It's easily seen. Perhaps it is big and brash and finely decorated. It draws people to it.

Second, Jesus tells us this wide gate leads to a *broad way*. Some translations call it is the "easy way." In other words, both the gate and the road behind it look so plausible... so possible...so religiously inviting! It's a gate that makes sense. And, with so many people going through this *wide gate* and down this *broad road*, it makes you believe that, surely, they must be right!

Third, in direct contradiction to what we may be thinking, Jesus tells us that

this wide gate actually leads to *destruction*. Destruction is the opposite of life. It's the state of decay. It means that the people on this road are gradually perishing. As they go further and further away from the narrow gate of Jesus, their downfall becomes both a present reality and a future state. They are self-destructing, even though they are probably oblivious to the fact!

Fourth, Jesus told us there are "many" who go through this gate. As opposed to the few who go through the narrow gate to life, many will go through this wide gate to their own demise. Why is that? Do they really want to go to self-destruct? Is that what people desire? Of course not. Everyone wants life. The real problem is that **they cannot see where this wide road is really leading them**. Their eyesight is so poor that they actually think it leads to life.

Indeed, if you imagine what the sign over the wide gate says, you shouldn't be surprised that it, just like the narrow gate, says "*The way to life!*" And here's the point. It is a lying sign. It is a sign that gives false directions. The question is, then, do we have the eyes needed to discern the truth from falsehood?

Before we go any further in thinking about this **wide gate**, let me remind you of the first-century context which prompted Jesus to speak about these two gates. If you remember, Jesus has taken a group of newly recruited disciples up on a mountain outside of Capernaum where He's been teaching them about the Kingdom of Heaven. After a few days of intensive instruction, it's time for them to leave and go back to their families and their jobs. It's at this point that Jesus speaks about the narrow and the wide gates.

Of course, now we understand that Jesus was talking about Himself when He said, "**Enter through the narrow gate...**". He was laying out an exclusive claim to be the Saviour of the world, a claim that He will repeat many times throughout His 3-year ministry. But, now, the question is, "If Jesus is the *narrow gate*, then who was He referring to when He spoke the *wide gate*...the one that leads to destruction? I think the answer is clear. Jesus is talking about the Scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the Law. **They are the ones who have erected their own gate...a very large and ornate gate... which, they say, will lead you into the Temple!** It's large because, if you pay enough money, you can get through. It's large because, if you are extravagant enough in your public display of piety, nationalism and self-promotion, then you will get through!! In fact, the religious leaders of Jerusalem confidently tell the people of Israel that this is the gate of the Lord; this is *the gate by which you will be saved*. If you try hard enough and do enough to prove that you are worthy of God's love... if you equate loving God with obeying the rules we've laid out for you, then **God will welcome you in!**

Do you see? The gate they have created is wide! In fact, it's a gate that makes sense to the fallen mind. With our poor eyesight, it seems the obvious way to pleasing God; a way that satisfies both our ego and our national pride.

Indeed, **all the religions of the world have erected the exact same gate**; try hard, be good, donate lots of money, and God will be obliged to let you in! You can see why everyone is going through this gate! I mean, you are virtually *saving yourself*! You control your own destiny!

What's even more obvious is that the people who are going through this *wide gate* sincerely believe that **they are on the road to life!** It feels good to be lauded and applauded in your town. And if you've done it by following the advice of the "holy men" who claim to know God, then you will be confident that you are on the road to life.

But, if Jesus is to be believed, the reality is that these people are *sincerely misled*. That's why, as Jesus prepares His new disciples to come down off the mountain, He warns them saying, "*There are two gates. Although I may, at first glance, look insignificant, I am the one and only gate that will lead to life. The other gate, the one that is promoted by the religious leaders of Jerusalem, the one that is large and ornate, may look spectacular, but trust me; it will only lead you to **destruction!***"

Let me tell you a horrific story set in the years leading up to World War 2 that may help to bring a bit more clarity to Jesus' words.

In 1933, the population of Germany was around 60 million. Almost all Germans professed to be Christian: roughly 20 million belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and roughly 40 million called themselves Protestant. In fact, of the 40 million Protestants, the vast majority were members of one denomination; *the German Evangelical Church*.

Now, here's my question: How did the members of *the German Evangelical Church* respond to the rise of the Nazi regime? In particular, what did they do when Hitler started to persecute the Jews? The answer? **They supported it!**

Historically, the German Evangelical Church viewed itself as one of the pillars of German culture and society. Not only did their theology intimately connect the church with the state, but, in the decade prior to the War, a movement emerged within the German Evangelical Church called the *Deutsche Christen*,

or "German Christian." It was ideologically **nationalistic**—that is, to be a Christian in Germany meant that you were a "**German** Christian", in that order.

To use Jesus' terminology, the German Evangelical Church had created *a wide gate*; a gate that led people down the *broad road* of national pride and racial hatred...all the while believing that this was the road to life! Even when news of Hitler's atrocities mounted, the German Evangelical Church kept telling itself that they were on the road to life. What they were really on, however, was the road to destruction, where human logic and the pride of evolutionary thinking had greater weight in people's thinking than the invisible Kingdom of Heaven.

Now, at this point, it would be easy to talk about the USA and all the God-talk that flowed when it led the invasion of Iraq. "*God bless America! God bless our troops! God bless our guns! May God lead us to victory over the "evil empire."*"

I think the point is simple: Whenever we take the uniqueness of Jesus and water it down with nationalistic rhetoric and patriotic slogans, we have turned His narrow gate into a wide gate; a gate through which all our own desires, schemes and plans are "Christianized" and blessed...as if God was only on our side. **This was the way of the Jerusalem's religious leaders.** They had stars in their eyes about the way God was going to bless their nation and make her prosper. It's no wonder why they got so upset when Jesus told them that the Temple would be torn down and that, in three days, He would rebuild it! He was challenging their worldview... and that's why He was crucified!

(In this context, our second reading from Acts 4 makes me smile! Jesus has been crucified. The religious leaders thought they got rid of Him. But when the Apostles Peter and John come to the Temple and heal a blind man in the Temple courtyard, the challenge of Jesus' exclusivity comes back to bite them! Peter stands up, and in a speech to the Jewish rulers and elders of Jerusalem, he quotes from none other than **Psalm 118!** "***The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone!***" He then goes on to declare: "***Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved!***"

Jesus is the cornerstone of the Temple. Jesus is the narrow gate which leads into the presence of God. In fact, Jesus is the new Temple of God, rebuilt in His resurrection. Unless you come to Him and commit yourself to Him ahead of all else; unless you recognise His unique call and come to Him, then you will walk

right past Him, in search of a wider gate and an easier road...a road that will lead you to your own destruction.

That's why, in the end, **it's all depends on your eyesight!** How well do you see Jesus? Can you see that He, alone, is our salvation? Can you see that ***"there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved"***? Can you see that, instead of having Jesus conform to our whims and desires, we must conform our lives to His desires? After all, He is the ***narrow gate***—our Lord and Saviour— and that means letting go of our narcissistic dreams and plans; letting Jesus cut them back and shape us as He sees fit, according to His dreams and plans!

"Enter through the narrow gate."

Let's pray.