

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. Matthew 7:13-14

This past Monday Nancy and I drove to the Coombs Country Market, and on our way back home we pulled over by at the little picnic spot on Cameron Lake right before Cathedral Grove. As we stood on the shore, Nancy reminded me that we had stopped there at this time of year 10 years ago - on our way out of town, after our first visit with the fine folks at Arrowsmith Baptist Church in Port Alberni. It was sunny last Monday just like it was 10 years ago, which was dramatically different than our arrival, as we drove in late at night in the middle of a storm that dropped a few trees in the grove. The drive is far enough in good weather, but if you've never been here before - the darkness, the winding roads, the high winds and the pouring rain makes it feel like you are driving to the absolute end of the earth. Well, we found out that for the most part, that is not true. Once we found our way to the church, we came in the side door and as we made our way down the hallway, the friendly pastoral search committee greeted us. And as we stood there, tired and soaking wet, Ron Boehm said: “You look like you belong here!” In spite of driving through the dark, winding roads in high winds and pouring rain, we made it home.

This is the way of life - in that life is much like traveling on a road. There are times in our journey through life when we find ourselves traveling on dark, winding roads blown about by high winds, soaked to the bone by pouring rains – and other times we find ourselves traveling straight, sunny roads in the quiet of clear, blue skies. The roads of life can vary. There are long and short roads; smooth and rocky roads; curved and straight roads. Our journey through life can be on roads of happiness and sadness, blessings and curses, prosperity and poverty, expectation and disappointment, comfort and pain, joy and mourning, strength and weakness, peace and war, victory and defeat, life and death.

Life is like a road, in that in our journey through life we will encounter, just like any road - corners, detours and crossroads. It's at such times we are faced with deciding whether or not to turn the corner or take the detour or choose between which way on the crossroad. We face making those decisions and choices every moment of every day, in the normal routine of life - in regards to how to spend our time and what we do and when we do it and where we go and who we talk to. We also face making those decisions and choices in the big events of our lives - regarding where we live, what we do for a living, who we marry, who our friends are, how much to spend on a house and where we will go to church. But that being said - one of the most unnerving realities about making decisions and choices, in both the routines of life and big events of life, is that *there are no guarantees* that we will make the right decision.

In our journey through life, we do not really know where a road will lead us, until we take it. There is no guarantee that the decisions that we make, while we are on the road of life ,will end up being the right decisions. And there is no guarantee that when we do make the right choice, that it work out the way we expected. Because we are fallen sinners who live in a fallen, sinful world - choosing to love someone with all our hearts does not guarantee that our love will be returned - *any more* than putting a “Do Not Touch” sign next to wet concrete will guarantee no one will write their name in our driveways.

Perhaps the most arduous and perplexing road that we encounter in our journey through life is a *crossroad*. With four different directions to go – left, straight-ahead, right, or backwards - there is less of a guarantee that we will make the right choice. With twice as many possible outcomes, we feel out of control - and we see our incorrect choices and wrong decisions in our rear-view mirror. And the weight of making that choice at a crossroad is more than significant - because every decision and every choice we make, will have, to varying degrees, a lasting impact on our lives – in this life and in the life to come.

What this means is that the most important decision you and I will ever make on our journey here on earth - is whether or not we will choose to surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Jesus is the *only right choice* that we can make when we are faced with making any and all decisions at the crossroads of our lives. All throughout his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been describing to us the road that passes through the Kingdom of God. He has taught us that those who journey there will possess a Kingdom character that produces Kingdom conduct. Jesus also spoke to us of a number of real life heart issues that we all struggle with - and always his bottom line challenge in these things ended up being whether or not we are living in submission to his Lordship over our lives.

In our text for today, Jesus speaks blunt words of encouragement and warning regarding what kind of Kingdom character it takes, to produce the Kingdom conduct of making Kingdom choices and decisions – the foremost of which must always be choosing our most sovereign and loving God to be the greatest treasure of our hearts, by making the decision to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus into glory. That is the decision Jesus speaks of today – a decision that we all will face in life, a choice that will decide whether or not we will be fellow members of the Kingdom of God - and that decision will also determine whether or not we will spend eternity in the glory of heaven or in the agony of hell.

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In the words of these two verses Jesus is telling us that every person who is born into this world will be faced with making choices and decisions - as we encounter corners and detours and crossroads in our journey down the road of life. Some of those will be of the *mundane*. And some of those will be of the *supernatural* - and it's here, in making choices and decisions in the realm of the supernatural - where we live our spiritual lives - that the reality of *how much we truly do or truly don't treasure God is exposed*. And it's at this point in our journey, that our choices and decisions are literally a matter of life or death.

The bottom line here is that Jesus tells us that when we are faced with making a decision, a choice at the supernatural, spiritual crossroads of life – if we are truly serious about our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and truly committed in our walk with him to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him – we will decide, we will choose to “*enter by the narrow gate*” that leads to the “*hard*” road travelled by “*few*” - that leads to the glorious “*life*” we can know in the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

Those who are of the Kingdom of God will “*enter by the narrow gate.*” The “*gate*” is “*narrow*” that leads to new life and eternal life because the “*narrow gate*” is Jesus Himself! In the gospel of John, Jesus said: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. . . . I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. . . . I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:7, 9, 11). It's also in John where Jesus said: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Why is the gate called “*narrow*”? Because it is *exclusive* and *restrictive*.. It is not that the gate is poorly marked. Jesus constantly said that He was God's provision for the forgiveness of sins and the entrance into eternal life. The gate is “*narrow*” in that we can *only* approach God to be forgiven through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The gate is “*narrow*” in that we can only enter the Kingdom one person at a time. Each one of us must be saved by a personal act of faith. We are saved individually, not as families or in groups.

The entrance to the Kingdom is “*narrow.*” And because it is exclusive and restrictive “*the way is hard that leads to life.*” Remember the fast food chain whose slogan was: “Have it your way”? That may be a good thing when buying a hamburger, but it is heresy in terms of entering God's kingdom. God is not flexible on this point. This admonition by our Savior is highly significant for those of us who today live in a culture and society which is saturated with individualism, entitlement and choices beyond compare.

This “have it your way” attitude has affected and infected our faith in Jesus Christ - in that we now believe the “*Kingdom of God*” should be governed with the same democratic process as our nation. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. If that were the case, then the right way to heaven would be that of the majority. But Jesus has been pushing back on that kind of thinking with the reverse-thread theology of the Kingdom. He tells us to follow not the majority, but the “*few*” who will enter the Kingdom. From the very outset, Jesus made it clear that those who are citizens of his kingdom were cut from a different piece of cloth than those who of the world. There are only two gates, two roads, two destinies before each one of us - which is in direct contrast to the infinite number of alternatives and options we are faced with every day. In the face of this, Jesus declared: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). The entrance to the heart of God is not inclusive but exclusively restricted to followers of Jesus. Act 4:11-12 says: “*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*” Those words ring pretty hollow today in our North American culture of entitlement, tolerance and inclusivity.

We see this in that while “*the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life . . . the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction.*” The *wide* gate is open and easy to get through. It is smooth and inviting. You don’t need to offload any baggage; you can bring anything you want. It can accommodate anyone without having to make any real sacrifices. There are no restrictions or prohibitions. You don’t have to change. You can live your life by your own rules. It tolerates many and it is lustfully attractive. This is the easy way. People choose the broad road because it seems to be the way everyone is traveling. After all, how could so many people be wrong? On the other hand, the narrow way is a much harder and more difficult to travel. It is unpaved, covered with rocks and gravel and filled with potholes. It requires commitment, determination, discipline, control, and self-denial. It takes a pure heart, a strong will, much determination, and a great deal of self-sacrifice to travel this way. Jesus invites us to take the narrow gate and the hard road *but* that also means a higher level of effort and commitment on our part.

But while *uncomfortable* as we may be with making a much greater commitment to God through Jesus Christ, choosing the alternative is more so: “*The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction.*” It’s been said you can go to heaven God’s way - or you can go to hell any way you want. You can go to hell as an atheist or an agnostic or a Baptist or a Catholic, or Pentecostal or pastor or elder or deaconess or a worship host or a member or an attender of a church. A number of years ago I officiated a funeral service for a very well-known, high-ranking police officer who had a less than honorable reputation. In my discussions with him before he died, he was clear about his rejection of Jesus - and his heart was revealed at the end of his funeral service when the soloist sang the old Frank Sinatra song: “I Did It My Way.” I am pretty sure he is not having it his own way today. Proverbs 14:12 says: “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*” God will not be mocked. There is only one way, and that way is the hard way through the narrow gate with Jesus “*that leads to life*” everlasting with God.

But this is also a “*way*” of “*life*” that we are to live out in our mundane, normal, every-day, routine of life - *because in Christ there is no disconnect between what captures our heart and the things we do in life.* Our conscious existence on earth is comprised of the decisions and choices that we make. From drinking coffee in the morning to filling your fuel tank with gas, from buying a brown shirt instead of a green shirt at your favorite store to ordering a large order of French fries from McDonalds, from painting your bedroom wall the color blue to calling the dentist office to set up an appointment - we make a plethora of decisions and choices, based on who we are and what we believe - and we will bear all the consequences of those decisions and choices. This is true for both Christians and non-Christians because the decisions and choices we all make *are grounded in what we treasure in our hearts.* What this means is that our journey through life is a series of decisions and choices, which are all reflective of what we value most, which will ultimately shape the outcome of our lives. Harry Emerson Fosdick said: “He who chooses the beginning of a road chooses the place it leads to. It is the means that determine the end.” Whether aware of it or not - our future is being shaped by the decisions and choices we make today.

What this means for us who claim Christ, is that - *if God is the greatest treasure of our hearts*, every decision and every choice we make will have a lasting impact on our lives, *because* those decisions and choices will be reflect the heart of God. Because the most important decision we will ever make in life will be that of choosing to surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, every decision and every choice will have a lasting impact on our lives - in this life and in the life to come. *If Jesus Christ has captured our hearts* – then all the decisions and choices we make, at all the corners and detours and crossroads of our spiritual lives – *will be the same* for all the decisions and choices we make at all the corners and detours and crossroads in our mundane, normal every-day routine events in life – as we live out Jesus admonition to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus (Matt. 24:16).

Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount so we would wake up to the reality, that living out our faith in God and salvation through Jesus Christ and the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit *is much more* than just what we think, say and do. The Kingdom of God, Jesus has been telling us, functions inversely from the way we as fallen human beings tend to view our walk on earth with Jesus Christ. We see that in the Matthew 19:16-21, where we read of a wealthy young man who came up Jesus and asked him: *"Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"* And Jesus said: *"If you would enter life, keep the commandments."* To which the man asked, *"Which ones?"* And Jesus said: *"You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* The young man said: *"Hey, I've done all those things! Anything else?"* And Jesus, in knowing that the man treasured the things of the world more than he treasured God, said: *"Go and sell everything you have and give all the money to the poor" - "and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* And *"when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful."*

"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." In our journey through life *we will have to choose* which road we will travel on. This isn't a one-time decision. Every day, we have to choose a road, a path, a way. We do this consciously or out of habit without thinking. Regardless, we will choose. Sometimes, we choose the way of the crowd. Sometimes, we choose the road the way of a few that is narrow. The narrow road is not a one-time thing either. Choosing the narrow path is not something you do on Sundays but rather it's a way of life, a sacrificial commitment of joyous discipleship that is hard and narrow that leads to *"life"* in the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus talks about *"life"* he doesn't just mean "getting by" or "just making it." He's talking about an abundant spiritual life; a life full of the fullness of God that is continuously being poured into us and constantly overflowing out of us; a life where we are living out God's will and God's purpose and God's dream for us. This is a *"life"* of sacrificial commitment where the crucified and risen Jesus Christ uses us as his instruments of grace to build the kingdom of God - in who we are and where we live and what we do *because* he is the greatest treasure of our hearts. This is a *"life"* of living out redemptive love relationships with each other and with all others - casting aside the cloak of critical judgment and clothing one another and others with robes of grace, mercy and forgiveness; living out our lives as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who went to the cross to die in our place for our sins, so that by his death and resurrection we might be joyously forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God forever.

10 years ago, Nancy and I entered this building, tired and soaking wet. Ron Boehm looked at us and said: "You look like you belong here!" Well, 10 years later, in spite driving through darkness, winding roads, high winds and pouring rain – whether these be physical or spiritual or emotional – Nancy and I and our family knows that we belong here. Someday, in heaven, God will say, "You look like you belong here!" to those who, in their journey through life, when they encounter corners, detours and crossroads - choose the *"narrow"* gate and the *"hard"* way that is traveled by *"few"* - so they might know the abundant *"life"* we can know through Jesus Christ in this life - and the glorious eternal *"life"* with God in heaven after this life. Those of the Kingdom of God always choose the roads that lead to Jesus.

In 1916 Robert Frost wrote his famous poem "The Road Not Taken." In that poem he writes of a man who, in taking a walk in the woods, comes to a fork in the road. The man considers both roads and concludes that each one is equally well-traveled and appealing. After choosing one of the roads, the man tells himself that he will come back to this fork one day to try the other road. But then he realizes that it's unlikely that he will ever come back to this fork in the road - because the road he has chosen will simply lead to other forks in the road, that will lead to more choices and decisions. Frost ends the poem with the man looking back on his life years later, reflecting on the importance of the decision he made in the choosing the path he did – and in his closing words he justifies the choice he made by calling the road that he chose the road “less traveled by” - even though it looked the same as the other road.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

In our journey through life *we will have to choose and decide which roads* we will travel on. Every decision and every choice that we make will have a lasting impact on our lives - in this life and in the life to come. The most important decision we will ever make in life will be that of whether or not we will choose to surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

C.S. Lewis reflected on all of this when he wrote: “When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. God is going to invade, all right; but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else comes crashing in? This time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to *choose* your side. That will not be the time for choosing; It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side.”

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus has said: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 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. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*” Amen.

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