

**The Narrow Gate**  
Matthew 7:13-29  
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As we come to the end of this series on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents us a choice. Much like Moses stood before the children of Israel towards the end of his life and said, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Jesus presents us a series of images – two gates, two trees, two houses – each set of images a parable that reiterates this choice between living with God or not.

So, the Sermon on the Mount concludes with an invitation and a judgment. The invitation is a call to action, to discipleship -- and an urgent call at that. The judgment is upon those who do not choose to live with God -- their path will lead to death and destruction.

The call was urgent and the judgment imminent, because Jesus, and Matthew who records this sermon, believed that the world would soon come to an end, that the reign of God was at hand, and, so, the listeners must not tarry in choosing which side they were going to be on.

These words come from a time and a place and a culture that in many ways is very different from our own. These words are spoken to particular people in a particular historical situation. According to the preacher, Jesus, and the recorder of the sermon, Matthew, they demanded urgent action and ultimate commitment on the part of those who heard the words.

Yet here we are in 2011 reading and listening to these same words. Why do we even worry about these words? Why spend so much time trying to figure out what they mean and apply them to our lives? Are they also an urgent call for us?

Scholars of the historical Jesus are pretty confident that the Sermon on the Mount records authentic teaching of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Most of these sayings and parables are recorded also in Luke, the Gospel of Thomas, and other sources. So, we can be pretty confident of the historical authenticity of the sayings.

Now, scholars are less confident that Jesus preached this specific sermon as recorded by Matthew. Rather, the consensus seems to be that the Sermon on the Mount as Matthew records it is Matthew's own construction. One reason we think that is because Luke's version is different, and he doesn't put all these teachings in the same sermon. The clearest difference is that in Luke the sermon closest to this one is preached on a plain, not on a mountain, so Luke's version is usually called the Sermon on the Plain.

Matthew seems to have taken a handful of Jesus' sayings and teachings and put them together with some modification and adaptation. It may have been that one of Matthew's goals was to give us a sense of what Jesus typically preached.

Now much of the content of Jesus' sermon is drawn from his religious tradition. Many of the ideas, images, and concepts were familiar to his audience. They have parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the Jewish religious tradition, including the teachings of early rabbis.

These words, then, are situated in a particular first century Jewish cultural context and must be understood as such. However, they also express some universal human ideas. What we call "the Golden Rule," for instance, has parallels in pretty much every human culture.

The sermon also employs rhetorical devices and techniques that were standard and common in first century Jewish culture. These include "curses, blessings, beatitudes, woes, laments, jeremiads, hyperboles," etc. Some of these can be unfamiliar to us and can potentially lead to dangerous interpretations if we take them literally. So, a level of "cross-cultural pragmatics" is required in reading, interpreting, and applying these words.

In particular we should note the apocalyptic images of judgment and cursing used in today's passage. We would wildly misinterpret the Sermon, I believe, if we conclude that Jesus in these parables was trying to give literal descriptions of the future states of human souls. Nor was he trying to describe that there are, metaphysically, two different kinds of people – good and bad – who are predestined to specific ends.

As more than one commentator pointed out, these parables are used for exhortation, for warning, to illustrate the importance of the commitment Jesus is asking for. Anna Wierzbicka also clarified how these curses are simply rhetorical devices. She wrote, "There is no contradiction between a Jewish mother's use of curses and her love for her child." After all, we still do the same thing occasionally. How often have you told someone, in jest, "If you do that, I'm going to kill you." In our house Michael and I have a rule framed as a curse. If one of us intentionally tries to frighten the other one, which is easy to do in a big, old house with an attic and a basement, then the one so frightened gets to beat up the other one. Of course we don't mean this literally. . . . right, Michael?

Interpreting these particular rhetorical devices through the lens of our broader theological commitments, Wierzbicka quotes the 8<sup>th</sup> century bishop Isaac of Niniveh,

Among all [God's] actions there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love, and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and the end of [God's] dealings with us. . . . That we should imagine that anger, wrath, jealousy, or such like have anything to do with the divine Nature is something utterly abhorrent to us. . . . Nor again can we possibly say that [God] acts thus out of retribution, even though the Scriptures may on the outer surface posit this.

I think we can safely interpret the apocalyptic images of judgment in today's text to be examples of exhortation, not literal descriptions. They are actually evidence of Jesus' great care and concern that we be on the correct path. Jesus believes that certain choices we make will lead to a good and blessed life and other choices will lead to violence, death, and destruction. He is imploring us to choose wisely.

But I do not think that these questions of historical authenticity and rhetorical techniques ultimately answer questions like "Why do we even worry about these words?"

I think the only reason we spend seven weeks reading, listening to, studying, and

preaching the Sermon on the Mount is precisely because we do experience it as an urgent call to action.

Just as Jesus preached, we have an intuitive grasp that there are, in a metaphorical sense, two paths for us to follow. We can go along with the rest of humanity in the status quo. But when we look at the status quo – at its violence, its poverty, its injustice, its pollution, its greed – we see that along that path lies death and destruction. Reality is, indeed, broken.

Instead, we grasp that “everything must change.” That there must be a better way, an alternative reality. We understand that the path to this alternative future is not easy. That it is, in fact, narrow and difficult. That it may entail suffering and danger. But it is an epic adventure that will probably fill our lives with meaning and hope and joy and fellowship.

And what I read in the Sermon on the Mount is an epic adventure, an alternative reality, a new community that I find compelling and challenging and inspiring. Partly because its potential is evidenced in history. This sermon inspired Mahatma Gandhi. It inspired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It inspired Desmond Tutu. And living by the teachings of this Sermon, they changed the world.

I care about these words which Matthew records as a sermon of Jesus, because I experience them as an astonishing teaching that compels me to respond.

And what Jesus cares about is not who we are, as if some category-description of our identity mattered. He doesn't care about our ritual purity. He isn't really all that concerned with our obeying a set of rules because we feel obligated, or that it is our duty, or that we have to. He's not even, finally, concerned about our actions themselves, even though those do matter. What Jesus cares about is our intention, our motivation, our ultimate concern.

What Jesus has taught in the Sermon on the Mount is that if we want to live the good and beautiful life, then we will want to live with God. And to live with God is to learn to love and treat everyone, absolutely everyone, the way that God does. The narrow and difficult road that leads to life is, quite simply, that one – learning to love each other.