

As I begin my message this morning, I want to invite you to open your Bibles with me to Matthew 7:13-23.

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

*15 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*

*21 Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ 23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”*

With precision and skill, Jesus has been preaching His sermon to a rapt audience; they have been hanging on every word. But Jesus’ *Sermon* begins to wind down, the intensity begins to ramp up. A teacher’s aim is to educate, a preacher’s aim is call people to decision, to action—good preaching always calls for a response.

In effect, Jesus gets to the end of His *Sermon*, turns to the crowd and says, “*So what’s it going to be? Life or death? Are you in or out?*”

One thing’s for certain, Jesus wouldn’t have made it in politics. He didn’t try to keep people happy; He didn’t play to the crowd. Instead, He drew a line in the sand and invited people to decide for themselves. Jesus eliminated the possibility of fence-sitting; He wasn’t messing around. And, so, while you may need time to think things through, to consider who Jesus said He was, or what it looks like to follow Him, sooner or later we’re all confronted with the line Jesus has drawn. “*So what’s it going to be? Life or death? Are you in or out?*”

At least you know where my sermon is going this morning. I’m going to follow the contours of our text, touching down on the three sections: two roads, false prophets, and false disciples. And before I’m done, I’m going to bring us back to Jesus’ question and invite you to respond.

Let’s begin where Jesus does, talking about the two roads.

**1. Two Roads (broad vs. narrow):** “*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*”

These two words, broad and narrow, evoke very different images and emotions. Jesus praises the “narrow way,” but ironically, most of us tend to gravitate to the way that is broad.

“Broad” is a pleasant word, a spacious word. When I hear this word I imagine the Canadian prairies: lots of space, room to breathe, room for everyone. When I hear the word broad, I think of ease and comfort—a luxury sedan with plush seats and more than enough room. Broad shoulders, broad-minded, and broad experience—these are perceived as good things.

“Narrow” is less pleasant word—it sounds and feels more restrictive. Claustrophobics don’t gravitate to the word “narrow”—it conjures images of a confined space, shoulder to shoulder, no room to move, or to breathe. When we speak of narrow hallways or narrow-minded people, we aren’t speaking positively. When I hear the word narrow, the luxury sedan is banished from my mind, and in its place I imagine a tiny Fiat with 5 people crammed into the back seat.

*Enter through the narrow gate.* This isn’t the only time that Jesus speaks of a gate, or of a road for that matter. In John 10:9, Jesus says, “*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*” The Bible makes it plain that there is no life apart from God. The Bible is equally clear that humanity’s choice to separate themselves from God has deadly consequences. But we are not without hope, life with God is available to us through Jesus—He is the gate; whoever enters through Him, will be saved.

In John 14:6, Jesus said, “*I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” Jesus is the “way,” the path, the road. And so, to quote John Wimber, “the way in is the way on.” The road that leads to God, to life, begins when we enter

through Jesus and continues as we walk with Jesus. In a very real sense, Jesus is the gate, the road, and the destination.

So what does this narrow gate and road represent? It represents a total commitment to following Jesus—as one author puts it, a “demanding discipleship”.<sup>1</sup> Remember, Jesus’ entire *Sermon* comes into play here. The aim of His *Sermon* isn’t ethical enlightenment, or the increase of knowledge—He’s been casting a vision of what life looks like under God’s leadership.

And if His *Sermon* is any indication, then this “demanding discipleship” encompasses every area of our lives. A disciple is called to surrender to Jesus the internal attitudes and motivations that drive their behaviour. A disciple is one who invites Jesus to correct and transform their anger, lust, pride, greed, and fear.

Demanding discipleship includes the way we relate to God, self, and others—even the way we relate to city in which we live. The disciple aligns themselves with Jesus’ vision for marriage, His vision for healthy sexuality, for truth-telling, for loving and forgiving enemies. Jesus’ demanding discipleship includes surrendering to Him our finances, our desires, and our pursuits.

Jesus doesn’t call it a narrow road for no reason. The discipleship defined by Jesus demands a cosmic shift in allegiance, focus, and direction.

I wonder if you are as disturbed by verse 14 as I am? I am disturbed by what Jesus said, and, who He said it to: “*small is the gate and*

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Story Of God Commentary: Sermon On The Mount*, 258.

*narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*” Any teacher worth their salt will adapt teaching to connect with their particular audience. Jesus wasn’t preaching to atheists, agnostics, or people who followed other gods; He was preaching to God-fearing Jews, to those who already considered themselves to be on the narrow road.

And what does He say to this crowd? “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, **and only a few find it.**” This is a sobering thought, one that should give us pause. *Which gate have we entered? Which road are we travelling?* If you look at your life and you cannot detect a cosmic shift in your allegiance, focus, and direction—all of which is centred around Jesus—then there may be a broad road under your feet. And this road is leading to your ruin.

Jesus transitions from speaking about the two roads, and begins to address false prophets or teachers.

**2. False Prophets:** vs. 15-20 says, “*15 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*”

If I was disturbed by vs. 13-14, I was surprised by vs. 15-20. Jesus says something here that I wasn’t expecting and the fact that I was

surprised by Jesus’ words is perhaps an indictment on me and the culture in which I live.

I’ve tended to think about false teacher singularly—they claim to speak for God but do not speak the words of God—*they speak falsely*. But vs. 15-20 reveal that my thinking on the matter has been incomplete. One way to measure a false teacher is by the words they speak, another way to measure them is by the life they live. Jesus said, “*by their fruit you will recognize them.*”

A prophet or teacher is appointed to do more than speak for God, they have been called to represent God in word, in deed, and in character. The false prophet, then, is the person who claims to speak for God but fails to live for God—in other words, *they’re not really disciples*.

This too is a sobering word, especially considering that I am a teacher. Am I more concerned with following Jesus or being followed by others? Have I prioritized a growth in spiritual gifts and skill over my growth in character? Am I more concerned with articulating God’s word or living in sync with God’s word? Scot McKnight writes, “The false prophet... is the leader who exercises the gifts of the Spirit with a flourish but who flounders at the personal level of following Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus says, “*Watch out for the false prophets... By their fruit you will recognize them.*” When a person claims to speak for God, we need to measure their words, but not just their words—we need to measure

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<sup>2</sup> McKnight, 269.

their lives as well. We are, every one of us, the false prophet every time we divorce what we believe from how we live.

Let's talk positively for a moment; what is the good fruit we are looking for? Again, let's not forget the table Jesus has set for us in His Sermon On The Mount—a disciple will increasingly bear the fruit of His presence in all areas of life. Disciples are marked with a poverty of spirit, recognizing that they need God, utterly and completely. Disciples are marked by a repentant spirit, grieving the fact that they have fallen short of God's glory and His intention for their lives. And equally, they rejoice with gratitude because of the forgiveness Jesus offers.

John 12:33-37 reminds us that the words we speak reveal the fruit that is in our hearts. John 15 reminds us that sacrificial, self-giving love is the fruit of discipleship. Galatians 5 describes the fruit of the Spirit's presence in our lives; He reproduces in disciples the character qualities of God: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We can measure these things, albeit imperfectly.

By Jesus' definition, the prophet or teacher who speaks of these things, without exhibiting these things, is false. Elsewhere Jesus compares false teachers to blind guides, hypocrites, and white-washed tombs that "*look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.*"<sup>3</sup> Be on your guard against such teachers, Jesus warns, or you may become like them.

But let us keep the following in mind—all of us are lacking in the integrity department; all of us can speak more truth than we live. The fruit of which Jesus speaks, given the context of Matthew 7, is the fruit of obedience, or followership. Here's the question: *is the person who claims to speak for God, orienting their life—however imperfectly—around Christ and His kingdom?*

Christianity is not the pursuit of perfection; it is a journey of forgiveness. As I have been meditating on Jesus' words, I have been repenting; it may be that God prompts you to do the same today. Wherever you perceive a gap between what you believe and how you are living, invite the Holy Spirit to cleanse you, to transform your heart, and to empower right behaviour.

Jesus speaks of two roads, false prophets, and finally of false disciples.

**3. False Disciples:** if the false prophet deceives others, then the false disciple is the one who deceives themselves.

vs. 21-23 says, "*21 Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*"

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:27; c.f. Mt. 23:13-38 for Jesus' extended indictment ("Seven Woes on the Teachers of the Law and Pharisees").

With these words, Jesus paints a picture that would have been very familiar to His original audience. Imagine a court room of sorts, with Jesus functioning as Judge, and people approaching His bench to make a case for how they lived.

He indicates that many will come with an impressive CV: “*Jesus, I preached in your name, I drove out demons in your name, in your name I did miracles.*” Perhaps we might bring other things to His attention: “I taught Sunday School, I was a small group leader, I told all my neighbours and friends about you, I gave money to missions, I...”

If the false prophet is the one who claims to speak for God but fails to live for God, then the false disciple is the one who works for God, but fails to really follow God. It’s clear that not everyone who claims to know God, really does. “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.*” So what does this mean?

Jesus was once asked “*What must we do to do the works God requires?*” Jesus answered, “*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.*”<sup>4</sup> In other words, to centre your life around Jesus. In John 17:3 Jesus said, “*Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*” Again, centering your life around Jesus is the beginning of eternal life.

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<sup>4</sup> John 6:28-29.

<sup>5</sup> *shāma*<sup>5</sup>—to hear, listen to, obey.

You may be asking, “But Mark, the scriptures you mentioned doesn’t say anything about centering our lives around Jesus—they speak about “believing in Jesus” and “knowing Jesus”. You’re quite right, but, we need to hear these words and understand them differently than we are accustomed to. Though we live in North America, most of us are thoroughly Greek in our understanding of faith and knowledge—a wedge has been driven between our knowing and doing, between belief and practice.

Let me give you a familiar example. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that **whoever believes in Him** shall not perish but have eternal life.” Let me ask you, *when Jesus spoke these words, did He have in mind a one-time verbal confession of faith, followed by a lifetime of non-discipleship?* Let me ask a second question: *is it possible to genuinely “believe” in Jesus, but not follow Him?*

In our English language, we have separate words for hearing, listening, and obeying; in the Hebrew language, one word expresses them all.<sup>5</sup> Those who listen to Jesus are those who obey Him. Those who believe in Jesus are those who follow Him. Those who do not follow Jesus, are those who will not listen, do not hear, and do not believe.

So, once again, *what does it mean to do the will of the Father?* This is a question that Jesus Himself is most equipped to answer—for He alone was perfect in His submission to the Father’s will. If you want

to know how to do the will of the Father, centre your living around Jesus and pattern your behaviour after His.

What is required is intentional surrender, serious obedience, and radical following—in other words, a demanding discipleship. God is worthy to be praised with song **and** followed with our lives.

It is not our “right” living that makes us acceptable to God; we are saved by grace through faith. BUT, the evidence of this grace at work within is an ongoing transformation and realignment of our character, desires, words, and deeds. It is the outward evidence of a changing inward nature.<sup>6</sup> Disciples begin to look, think, feel, and act like Jesus. When you think about it, is there really any other kind of disciple? This is our vision as a church, that we might be these kind of disciples—looking, thinking, feeling, and acting like Jesus.

**Conclusion:** As I bring my sermon to a close this morning, I want to invite you exercise your imagination with me for a few moments. I want you to imagine that all of us were so convicted by Jesus’ words this morning, that we all decided to engage in a kind of independent audit of our lives. Are you with me so far?

Here’s how we are going to do it. Following this morning’s service, all of us are going to be paired up with a personal Christian consultant—someone well-versed in the Scriptures, someone who is a long time, mature, follower of Jesus, someone who thinks and acts like Him—and once paired, we are going to give this consultant access to our lives for a 90 day period.

For the next 90 days, this consultant will move into our house to live with us. Wherever we go, they will go, observing what we say and do. When we go to school or work, they will tag along. When we’re on the phone, out with a friend, or attending a family gathering, they will be a silent participant in each conversation and relationship.

When we sit down on the couch to crack open a book, turn on the t.v., play video games, or web-surf on our iPad, they will be there to take it all in. They will chart where we go, what we do, how we spend our time, and our money.

I forgot to mention something—these consultants will come equipped with the latest technology, giving them the ability to hear our thoughts, discern the motives that drive our behaviour, and see the desires of our hearts. This is a crucial part of the audit. They will need to account for what’s happening on the inside—after all, Jesus is just as interested in the “why” behind the “what”. At the end of this 90 day audit, each of us will then receive a 30 page report complete with observations and conclusions.

Here’s what I’m wondering: after 90 days of observing me and you, would there be enough evidence to convict us of being disciples of Jesus Christ? Are we disciples of Jesus, or are we just dabbling? Does Jesus play a part in our schedules, rituals, and routines, or is He the **centre** around which everything revolves?

Jesus isn’t demanding perfection, but He wants us to know that His way is more narrow than we like to think. Good preaching always calls for a response. As we come to the end of Jesus’ *Sermon*, in

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<sup>6</sup> Jamie Arpin-Ricci, *The Cost of Community: Jesus, St. Francis and Life in the Kingdom*, 202.

effect, He turns to the crowd and says, “*So what’s it going to be? Are you in or out?*”

We may want to soften Jesus’ words here, to water them down, or broaden them a little. *Surely there has to be more than two options Jesus; surely we can come up with a compromise, a hybrid of sorts, one that will make everyone happy.*

Jesus will not be pressed into our mould. He gave us His all, and He asks for our all in return. Discipleship is not easy, or pain-free. It involves hearing, listening, obeying, and following. Jamie Ricci writes, “it will cost us everything, it will be disruptive, risky and messy, **[but]** above all, we will be truly blessed.”<sup>7</sup>

There are many different ways to live, but not all “living” can truly be described as “life”. Those who enter through the narrow gate, walking the road of demanding discipleship are those who, even now, participate in God’s life, His abundant, satisfying, and eternal life.

The narrow gate is before you, and so too the narrow road. “*What’s it going to be? Are you in or out?*” This is the line Jesus draws in the sand—*how now will you live?*

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<sup>7</sup> Arpin-Ricci, 201.