

The Narrow Path

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a five-part series

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Matthew 7:13–14, 24–27 (NRSV)

¹³ “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

John 10:1–9 (NRSV)

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

*We shouldn't kid ourselves. Walking the narrow path of obedience
does not come with an Easy Button.*

We've all known friends and family who always seem to take the easy way, to drift along with the crowd, letting the rivers of life carry them along. Sadly, we also know that such drifters usually wake up one morning asking themselves how they got there. How did their life turn out to be such a mess? They realize only then that a life of easy choices is not the way to build a life any of us would seek.

This is Jesus' point in the above passage from Matthew. In this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is contrasting two ways – the narrow way and the broad way. The hard way and the easy way. The way that too few choose and the way of the easy button. These few sentences from Jesus the Wisdom Teacher are a warning, one not often heeded, speaking both to our choice to put our faith in Jesus *and* our decision to follow his way. Leon Morris writes:

“ . . . Matthew's Jesus is appealing *both* for an evangelical decision (the gate) *and* for an ethical endurance (the way). Taken together, then, the narrow gate and the tough way are simply the difficult choice for Jesus *and* the constantly challenging decisions for discipleship to him” (pp. 282–83).¹ It appears that in asking our questions we are trying to make Jesus more precise than he chose to be. We may profitably reflect that both the initial commitment to Christ and the subsequent journey of faith are important, and that we may see them both indicated here. But

¹ Quoted by Leon Morris, from F. Bruner's book, *The Christ Book, Matthew 1–12*.

we can scarcely say more. Perhaps we should notice that the word for *road* is that used for the Christians in Acts, namely “the Way” (Acts 9:2, etc.).²

And so, we are back to the two paths offered us in Proverbs: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly, God’s way and the world’s way.

Hard to hear and do

Gallup and other groups often poll Americans about their religious beliefs. One consistent finding is that well over half of all Americans, a lot of whom have to be Christian, believe that if we do enough good things in our lifetime, we can earn our way into heaven. But this is *not* the Christian proclamation. We must be very clear about this before we consider Jesus’ brief parable about building on rock.

Here goes: **there is nothing that you or I or anyone can do that will make God love us more or make God love us less.** We can’t pile up enough good deeds to earn our way into God’s presence nor can we commit enough horrible acts to place ourselves outside God’s redeeming love. God desires that we be in a loving relationship with him, and we are put into this right relationship with God through Jesus’ death on the cross, when he took upon himself the sins of us all. How could God demonstrate his love for you any more than to give up his own son for you . . . long before your birth!

Yes, we can please God and we can displease God, but doesn’t mean God loves us more when we do as he asks or loves us less when we don’t. I know that is how I felt about my sons; it certainly can’t be less so for God.

God asks that we trust him, that we place our faith in Jesus Christ and what he accomplished for us all. There are many ways to say what I just said; but that is basically it. It is by God’s grace³, his amazing grace, his grace alone, that we are made right with God.

When the apostle Paul crisscrossed the eastern Mediterranean proclaiming this message of God’s grace, the reaction of many went something like this: “Wow! You mean that I’m made right with God by faith, not by what I do . . . alright! I’ve got faith, now let’s go party!!”

You may think I’m exaggerating, but I’m not. Some people even suggested to Paul that since grace overcomes sin, then we should sin more so that there can be more grace (Romans 6:1). Hardly. Of course, obedience matters. Not because we can earn our way into God’s presence. Not because we like the comfort of having some rules to follow. Obedience matters because we seek to please the one who loves us, and we trust that he has shown us the way of abundant life.

Further, we desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ and trust that God knows, better than we, a way of life that reflects the kingdom of God. Like all apprentices, we desire to be like our master and teacher. We desire to be Christ-like. It is God who shows us how. It is God who shows us the way to a deeply joyful life. It is God who shows us the way to a life that can be the light to the world. Obedience is the path to that life.

The two ways

Today’s passage from Matthew’s gospel is the closing portion to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has had much to say about what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Now, in verses 13 & 14 of chapter, Jesus calls upon an old Jewish tradition that contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked, i.e., those who follow God’s instructions with those who do not. Jesus knows that the path of discipleship is not always an easy one. Taking up a cross never is. He knows that the world will be

² Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (pp. 175–176). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³To use a traditional definition, “grace” is “unmerited favor.” If you’ve earned or deserve it – it isn’t grace. 81% of Americans thinks the Bible says: “God helps those who help themselves.” It doesn’t. The whole point of grace is that God helps those who can’t help themselves – which is all humankind.

calling his disciples away from their master. We shouldn't read these verses as they too often are – as some ratio of the “saved” (the few) to the “unsaved” (the many). Jesus is not speaking to the crowds that have followed him around. He has retreated up the hillside and is speaking only to his disciples. Jesus knows how hard is the path that they have chosen; he hopes the disciples do and are ready for it.

Thus, Jesus is not talking about doctrinal correctness, he is talking about obedience, an obedience that flows out of our trust in God. It is the path of obedience that is narrow; too many pay lip service to Jesus' teachings.

Foundations of rock and sand

After setting out the “two ways” in v. 13 & 14, Jesus talks about those who will try to pull his disciples off the path of righteousness – those wolves in sheep's clothing. He goes on to remind them that empty words, even words like “Lord, Lord” don't cut it. It is about the doing. We are to understand God's will and do it . . . just do it!

Finally, Jesus turns to a parable about a wise man and a fool. Jesus and his disciples live in an arid region that didn't get a lot of rain. There were many large wadis (when I lived in Phoenix, we called them “washes”) that were dry most of the time, but would become rivers of dangerously fast-flowing water when torrential rains came. Compared with some of Jesus' parables, there is nothing unclear or ambiguous about this one. The wise man is the one who hears Jesus' words and “acts on them.” He has built his house in the wadi on a foundation of rock. His house stands when the storms come and the floods come roaring down the wadi. The fool is the man who hears Jesus' words and “does not act on them.” He has built a house in a wadi and placed it on a foundation of sand. Little wonder that the fool is washed away in the first storm. On what foundation will we build? A simple question.

But how?? How can we stay on the right path? How can we find abundance?

Here's how:

Build good moral habits, aka virtues.

That's it. If you are always trying to be kind or compassion or patient or joyful, it is going to be hard to sustain. But turn those efforts into habits and they become your effortless way of dealing with the world around you. Your heart becomes re-oriented to God's way rather than the way of folly.

The problem is that good moral habits don't come “naturally” to us. This would be a way of describing “original sin,” the flaw in our moral DNA that makes our hearts chase after what it doesn't even really want. And what do our hearts want? Augustine got it right when he wrote, “You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” The problem is that sin causes our heart to be disoriented, distorting our desires and wants. Our hearts become like a broken compass, leading us in the wrong direction, chasing that which, in the end, disappoints and even ruins us.

In his excellent and important book, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, James K. A. Smith helps us to unpack all this.

To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as “flourishing.” And we want that. We crave it. We desire it. This is why our most fundamental mode of orientation to the world is love. We are oriented by our longings, directed by our desires. We adopt ways of life that are indexed to such visions of the good life, not usually because we “think through” our options but rather because some picture captures our imagination. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*, succinctly encapsulates the motive power of such allure: “If you want to build a ship,” he counsels, “don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” We aren't really motivated by abstract ideas or pushed by rules and duties. Instead some

panoramic tableau of what looks like flourishing has an alluring power that attracts us, drawing us toward it, and we thus live and work toward that goal. We get pulled into a way of life that seems to be the way to arrive in that world.⁴

What picture of the world really gets you going? What does “flourishing” look like to you? What do you most desire out of life? Your answers to those questions will go a long way to telling you what you really love. Of course, answering those questions is not as straightforward as we might think. First, there are the answers we tell everyone. Then there are the answers we admit to ourselves in our private chambers. And, finally, there are the answers that lie so deep within our hearts, we hardly know they are there. For the truest answers, the ones that really matter, are the ones that come from the heart, the ones we don’t think about. And because our hearts are distorted by sin, rather than seek God, we chase all the pretenders: money, fame, the big job, amazing vacations, sex, power, even family.

Reorienting the heart

If our “natural/sinful” heart is going to lead us astray, urging us to run with the crowd and hit the easy button of popular choices, what are we to do? And that question brings us back to building good moral habits, the virtues, or what we might call in Christian parlance, training in righteousness. Back to Dr. Smith:

Virtues, quite simply, are good moral habits. (Bad moral habits, as you might guess, are called “vices.”) Good moral habits are like internal dispositions to the good—they are character traits that become woven into who you are so that you are the kind of person who is inclined to be compassionate, forgiving, and so forth. Virtues thus are different from moral laws or rules, which are external stipulations of the good. In fact, as Thomas Aquinas points out, there is an inversely proportionate relationship between virtue and the law: the more virtuous someone is—that is, the more they have an internal disposition to the good that bubbles up from their very character—the less they need the external force of the law to compel them to do the good. Conversely, the more “vicious” [as in “vices”] a person or group of people is, the more they need the “stick” of the law to compel them to do what they ought. Anyone who has raised children is intimately familiar with these dynamics. Early on, we need to constantly tell (and compel) our children to do the right thing. We are training their moral sense. But the goal and hope is that, in the process, they are internalizing a sense of the good and will become the kind of people who do this without the “stick” of rules compelling them to do so.⁵

There is irony here. If we put in the hard work to build good moral habits, then the hard choices, the better choices, won’t seem so hard at all. So the question becomes this: How do we acquire these; what sort of hard work does it take? It isn’t by doing what comes naturally, but by imitation and practice. Dr. Smith again:

First, we learn the virtues through *imitation*. More specifically, we learn to be virtuous by imitating exemplars of justice, compassion, kindness, and love. In our culture that prizes “authenticity” and places a premium on novelty and uniqueness, imitation has received a bad rap, as if being an imitator is synonymous with being a fake (think “imitation leather”). But the New Testament holds imitation in a very different light. Indeed, we are exhorted to be imitators. “Follow my example,” Paul says, “as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Similarly, Paul commends imitation to the Christians at Philippi: “join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (Phil. 3:17). Like a young boy who

⁴ Smith, James K. A. (2016). *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (p.11-12), Brazos Press

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17

learns to shave by mimicking what he sees his father doing, so we learn to “put on” the virtues by imitating those who model the Christlike life.

Second, acquiring virtue takes *practice*. Such moral, kingdom-reflecting dispositions are inscribed into your character through rhythms and routines and rituals, enacted over and over again, that implant in you a disposition to an end (*telos*) that becomes a character trait—a sort of learned, second-nature default orientation that you tend toward “without thinking about it.” . . . Virtues are learned and acquired, through imitation and practice. It’s like we have moral muscles that are trained in the same way our biological muscles are trained when we practice a golf swing or piano scales.⁶

And when should we begin building these right-path habits? As mom said to me and my brothers too many times: “No time like the present!!”

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Esther*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

This Sunday: *World Religions in Seven Sentences – Islam, Part 2, Jihadism*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19