

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## ENTER BY THE NARROW GATE

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### Matthew 7:13-14

We will continue today our study of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' teaching is now drawing to a close. He concludes His message with a surprising toughness, giving several warnings and exhortations. This is what we read in Matthew 7:13-14.

*Matthew 7:13. Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.*

*14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

### A matter of life and death

This metaphor is very simple. There are two paths. The first road is broad and its gate is wide. Many people travel on that road. But although it is popular, it ends in destruction. The other path is very different. It is small, and the way into it is small too. Very few people are found on that road, even though it leads to life.

The figure of the two ways, or two paths, is already found in the OT. For example, Jeremiah speaks of two ways. He says in Jeremiah 21:8, *Now you shall say to this people, Thus says the Lord: Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. 'The way of life and the way of death.'* That is quite similar to what we read in Matthew 7:13, the way that leads to life and the way that leads to destruction. In Psalm 1:6, the contrast is between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. *For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.* The way of the righteous leads to life, but the way of the ungodly leads to destruction. They will perish.

In the NT, the Lord Jesus uses the same concept to communicate an important message. One way is wide and easy. The other one is narrow and hard. What conclusion can we draw from this picture? When we read these two verses, we are immediately impressed by the starkness of the contrast in this picture. Life and death are being contrasted with each other. One has the strong feeling that Jesus is talking about a matter of life and death. Well, that is exactly what Jesus is doing! He is bringing us face to face with the crucial question of our eternal destiny.

### Two gates and two roads

Earlier in His Sermon, in Matthew 6, Jesus has already set certain things in opposition to each other. There are for example two treasures, a treasure on earth and a treasure in heaven. There are two masters, God and mammon. There are two kinds of preoccupation. One is self-centered (being anxious

for one's own life) and the other one is God-centered (seeking God's righteous kingdom). Here in Matthew 7, the Lord Jesus takes this contrast further and speaks of an image in which a narrow gate and a narrow road are set in opposition to a broad gate and a broad road. It is helpful to know that in this metaphor the gate and the road are synonymous images. What we say about the gate applies also to the road. Now let's look at the details of this picture.

Here is the scene. A man is walking along and suddenly he finds a gate in front of him. The gate is wide and broad, and many people are entering in. But there is another gate that he didn't see. This one is very narrow and it takes only one person at a time. There is barely anyone near that gate.

Notice that this is not the picture of a man standing at a crossroads, as we sometimes see on paintings. What man faces is a single gate, not two gates. He can only see the wide gate even though there are two gates. The wide gate appears to be the only gate to enter because there are so many people entering it. With so much activity going on near that gate, nobody would think of another gate.

But there is indeed another gate. This gate is narrow. It is so small that it can be noticed only if you search for it. Otherwise you are going to miss it. Look at the last part of this passage, and take note of the final verb. ... *And there are few who **find** it.* The narrow gate is not readily seen. A person has to search for it in order to find it.

You would have understood that in this story, the wide gate represents the world. The narrow gate represents the kingdom of heaven.

The wide gate is the world and it is very easy to enter. Nothing keeps you from entering it. There is not a single hindrance. It is the only gate that faces man. That is why we are saying that every human being stands before the wide gate. It is so close to him that no entrance is necessary. All he has to do is to take a step and he has entered it. All you have to do is simply to follow your own carnal inclinations. And there is no restriction. No restriction on your thought; no restriction on your conduct. You can do anything you want. You can think anything you like. There is plenty of space for a diversity of opinions and for a laxity of morals. The wide gate of the world is easy to enter.

On the other hand, the precise opposite of the term 'wide' is applied to the other gate. It is a narrow gate. The narrowness of the gate expresses the fact that it is difficult to enter. There is no automatic entry like the wide gate. There is very little room. Jesus says in another passage that it is as narrow as a needle's eye. In Matthew 19:24, He says, *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*

### **Salvation is no easy matter**

Being saved is no easy matter. This point is important to stress because sometimes, in our effort to evangelize, the message of salvation is being distorted. Some people seem to preach salvation as though you can enter the kingdom of heaven by the wide gate. They coat the pill with a lot of sugar with the hope that most people will like it. They give the impression that to be a Christian is not very different from being a non-Christian, that it does not require anything from you, that you have nothing to lose in accepting God's invitation. You can enter into eternal life as easily as you enter your own home. But once you are inside, you begin to realize that it does not look like what you were told. As you walk, you discover that the path seems to become more and more narrow.

Jesus is not a politician who is trying to win as many votes as possible. He does not draw us to Himself under false pretences and using a rosy speech. The Lord Jesus is absolutely honest with us. If something is hard, He is not going to say that it is easy. 'You want to follow Me? You are most welcome to follow Me, but I tell you honestly, it is a hard road. It is a costly road because there are many things that you will have to leave behind you.' Christian life starts with a narrow entrance. Let no one make any mistake about it.

The gate is narrow because Christian life always involves persecution and suffering. The Greek word for narrow is *stenos*. It is interesting to notice that this is the root word for the word ‘distress’ in Romans 8:35: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress (stenochoria), or persecution?*

The Lord Jesus is telling us that if we are going to enter by the narrow gate, we must be ready for distress, suffering and tribulation. Acts 14:22 makes the same statement. There we read that Paul and Barnabas were *strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."* ‘Through many tribulations.’ This is another way of saying that the gate leading to the kingdom of God is a narrow one.

### **Strive to enter**

The parallel passage in Luke has a stronger expression than in Matthew. It does not just say ‘Enter by the narrow gate,’ but ‘Strive to enter through the narrow gate (Luke 13:24).’ The Greek word for ‘strive’ is *agonizomai*, which the English word ‘agonize’ derives from. It is a word that is taken from the Olympic games. To strive means to strain every nerve. In their races and wrestlings, the athletes ‘strove’ or ‘agonized.’ They put forth all their strength to gain the victory. It is a word that expresses intense effort. Think of the athlete running his 100-meter dash, or of the gladiator fighting for his life. They strain themselves to the maximum. Jesus uses the same word and applies it to the spiritual realm. ‘Strive every nerve to enter into the kingdom of God.’

Does that mean that a man can save himself by his decision and by his action? Are we teaching salvation by works here? Are we not saved by faith alone? These excellent questions seem to assume that faith and works and striving are somehow opposite. Now, it is absolutely true that no one can enter through the narrow gate without the assistance of divine grace. Nobody would argue against this point. But it is equally true that the free grace of God does not fall on your lap whether you like it or not. It has to be desired. You have to ask for it in humility. You see, some people seem to teach salvation as though the kingdom of God is like a trap door. You press a button, the door opens and you drop down. And there you are in heaven.

The Lord Jesus says, ‘If you ask, it shall be given to you. If you knock on the door, it will be opened to you.’ The door of heaven is opened to you as you call upon the name of the Lord. But you still have to go in. God is not going to fish you right into His kingdom. There is nobody behind the door to shuttle you in. You have to make the decision to go in. This shows both God’s part and our part in salvation. Grace does not remove human responsibility. God, in his mercy, opens the door. That is grace. You cannot smash that door down. But you have to get in and that requires a response on your part. You have to enter through the door. And it turns out that this door is a narrow door. It is difficult to be entered. You have to humble yourself. You have to put aside every weight that you have piled up on your shoulders. All the burdens of your sins have to be left behind.

### **Seek God with all your heart**

When Jesus exhorts us to strive to enter through the narrow gate, the idea is not that we can work our way to God. What He means is that we must labor hard at listening and especially responding to His message. We find the same kind of diligent effort in this passage in Proverbs 2:1-5.

*Proverbs 2:1. My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you,  
2 So that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding;  
3 Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding,  
4 If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures;*

*5 Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.*

This passage tells us that getting wisdom involves a great deal of effort. It involves openness, hearing, applying, requesting, and diligent searching. You pursue it like riches. Entering through the narrow gate involves a similar intensity of activity. Colossians 4:12 has the words ‘labor fervently.’ Labor fervently to enter through the narrow gate. Set your heart diligently upon God whatever the cost. Seek first the kingdom of God. It must be the top priority in your life.

As we mentioned earlier, this gate must be sought deliberately. You cannot just contemplate the Christian life and never do anything about it. When you listen to the truth and you agree with it, you must act upon it. ‘I hear the message of the gospel. I recognize it as God’s truth and as the call of Christ. I decide to put myself under its teaching in such a way that it is going to be my life. From now on, I will let the word of God govern my whole life.’ When you do that, you are already striving to enter through the narrow gate.

### **Entering on God’s terms**

The way of salvation is a door which God opens and man enters. If God does not open the door, nobody can enter. Once the door is opened, man has to make his own way in. And it is not easy. It is a matter of struggling in rather than strolling in. Some seek the narrow gate but they never enter it. They find that it is too narrow, too costly for them. And therefore, they turn back to the wide gate. If a person fails to enter, it is not because God is unwilling to admit him. It is because he did not want to enter on God’s terms.

What are God’s terms? They are determined by the narrow gate. We should think of this narrow gate as a turnstile. It admits only one person at a time and because of its narrowness, there are certain things you cannot take through with you. You have to leave them outside, behind you.

The first thing that you have to leave behind is worldliness. You leave the crowd, the activity and the attractions around the wide gate. You make a definite break with the world. The Christian way of life has never been and will never be popular. The decision to follow God’s way cannot be made by appeal to majority opinion. Don’t say to yourself, ‘Since so many people are traveling on the broad road, they can’t be wrong.’ In this case, the majority is wrong because this majority is on the path that leads to destruction. Turning from the wide way is like going out of your way. It requires a definite act of the will in which you decide that you are not going to follow the majority. You will no longer conform to the pattern of the world.

Not only do you have to leave the world, but you have to leave the way of the world. Leaving the crowd does not automatically guarantee that you leave the spirit of the world. Even if you are all alone, the spirit of the world and the way of the world may still be with you. We must leave outside the narrow gate the things that please the world and the flesh.

This cannot happen unless you also leave your ‘self’ outside the gate. You are not to take your old self with you when you enter the narrow gate. Our fallen nature must stay outside. The apostle Paul speaks of ‘putting off the old man (Colossians 3:9).’ There is no room for two men to go through the narrow gate together. The old man has to be left behind. The old self has no place in the kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus speaks of self-denial. He said to His own disciples, *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me* (Matthew 16:24). ‘If you don’t do that, you cannot be My disciple.’ If you don’t deny yourself, you cannot enter through the narrow gate. You have to be able to say as you go in through the gate, *It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me* (Galatians 2:20).

So we must enter on God’s terms. It presupposes that we recognize our sins and that we come to Jesus for forgiveness.

## A decision has to be made

This narrow and wide path imagery is one that demands a personal decision and a firm commitment on our part. The Lord Jesus is pressing upon our mind and conscience the necessity of a choice. Every body has to make up his mind. It reminds me of Joshua when he challenged Israel and asked the nation to make up their mind about who they want to serve.

*Joshua 24:15. ...Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

The wide gate is the world and the narrow gate is heaven. The broad way is the way of the world, and the narrow way is the way of heaven. The broad way leads to destruction and the narrow way leads to life. Many are entering the wide gate and perishing. Only a few are entering the narrow gate and living. And Jesus is saying, 'Choose for yourselves which road you want to take. I urge you to take the narrow road, but the decision is yours. You have to make up your own mind. I can't decide for you.'

When we think about that decision carefully, we realize that ultimately there is only one choice. There are two gates, two ways, two crowds, two destinations, but only one decision. Only the narrow gate requires a decision to enter. The wide gate requires no decision at all. If you are undecided about whether you should enter in at the narrow gate, you have to know that you are in the same situation as those who are on the broad way. The failure to enter by the narrow gate means that you are automatically on the wide way, the way that leads to hell.

## Are there just a few who are being saved?

I would like to conclude this lesson with a word of caution. Jesus says that those who find the narrow gate are few. If you are curious about theological problems, you will be tempted to ask this question: Does that mean that only a small number of people are going to be saved and that the vast majority of mankind is going to be condemned?

I will make two comments here. First of all, I don't think we can use this passage to conclude that the final number of the redeemed will be small. How would you define a small number? How small is 'small'? Revelation 7:9 tells us clearly that the company of the redeemed before the throne of God will be so vast that no man can number it.

*Revelation 7:9. After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands.*

How do you reconcile this passage with the fact that only a few find the door leading to heaven? If we are cautious about our interpretation of Jesus' teaching, we are not going to speculate on the number of the elect. All that we can say is that fewer people will enter the narrow gate than expected. And this leads me to the second and final point.

You will remember that Jesus was once asked, *Lord, are there few who are saved?* It is precisely this question that caused Jesus to say, *Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able* (Luke 13:24). If you read this passage, you will notice that Jesus does not answer their question directly. Essentially His answer was this. 'Whatever their number, make sure that you are among those who enter through the narrow gate. Don't assume that you have been redeemed because your father is Abraham or because you have been instructed in

the word of God. This is no guarantee.' You see, many people in Israel thought that they were in, but the tragedy is that they were dead wrong.

The message is the same for us today. 'Don't think that you are saved because your parents are Christians. Don't assume that because you come to church every Sunday and that you are exposed to the truth, you have it. This should not be the basis of your faith.' Faith means that you respond in obedience to Jesus' invitation to come to Him. If truly you have faith, you will take up your cross daily. You will deny yourself. Everyday you will say 'no' to yourself and 'yes' to God. When you do that, you have entered through the narrow gate.