

TWO WAYS AND TWO GATES

And the Conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount

Matt. 7:13-27

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Introduction

Most Bible teachers consider Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) as the most outstanding of His teachings. In it Jesus unveils the spiritual reality of the kingdom of heaven, showing us how the people in that kingdom should live in accordance with the highest morality ever revealed to the mind of man. He intended that His words would be careful and provocative instruction to His disciples (Matt. 5:2). And, He certainly intended that the very hearers of these words would carry them out, as indicated in the conclusion of His discourse (Matt. 7:24-27). Therefore, all of His disciples should humble themselves to hear Jesus' words and apply them to their own lives.

Two ways, two gates and two destinations

¹³"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matt. 7:13-14)

Because Jesus mentioned the gate first, many people assume that one first enters a gate and then walks upon the way, with the destination being at the end of the way. Actually, Jesus mentions the gate first because He is drawing attention to it as the goal. When Jesus mentions a gate and a way, the hearer of that day would certainly picture the gates which constituted entrances into a walled city, and the roads which led up to those gates.¹ Jerusalem, for example, had fifteen gates leading into the city. The main gate into the city was about fourteen feet wide, and a correspondingly broad road led up to that gate. Several people could enter at once through such a gate. However, other gates were low overhead and very narrow, and would only allow a single donkey or a lone traveler or two to pass through the gate. The paths leading up to these gates were naturally narrow and would not be traveled by many persons.

That the gate is at the end of the way, and is the entrance to the final destination, is confirmed by a similar passage in Luke:

²⁴"Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' ²⁶Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; ²⁷and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' ²⁸In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out. ²⁹And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline *at the table*

¹ Grateful acknowledgment is given to G. H. Pember for the understanding that the way leads to the gate in this passage, in accordance with the civilization of that day. See Pember's *Great Prophecies of the Centuries Concerning the Church*, pp. 212-214.

in the kingdom of God. ³⁰And behold, *some* are last who will be first and *some* are first who will be last." (Lk. 13:24-30)

Jesus is speaking in this passage in Luke. Here we can see some parallels to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Both passages speak of an entry: in Matt. 7:13-14 the positive entry is through a narrow gate, and in Lk. 13:24 it is through a narrow door. In Matt. 7:21-23 the Lord Jesus states that He will deny entry into the kingdom of heaven for those who do not do the will of the Father, that is, for those who practice lawlessness. In Lk. 13:24-27 Jesus (as "the head of the house") denies entry to those who are evildoers.

In Luke Jesus tells us to strive in order to enter. The narrow door pictures something future – a day when many will seek to enter but will not be permitted once the head of the house arises and shuts the door. According to this picture one **strives now**, during our Christian life here on earth, in order **to enter at a future day**. The entry is pictured clearly in Luke 13 as entry into the future kingdom of God, which will be established upon Christ's return (Matt. 16:27-28; Lk. 19:11-15). God's kingdom spans across all ages and all generations (Ps. 145:13). Yet, it is important to realize that it comes in different phases. The next phase will be Christ's kingdom of 1,000 years, and it is entry into this phase of God's kingdom that Jesus speaks of in Lk. 13:28. Our participation in the eternal phase of God's kingdom is not what Jesus is dealing with here.

Jesus is not teaching people how to obtain eternal salvation in the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, the context of demand for righteous living shows us that He is teaching His disciples concerning reward. When Christ returns, He will set up His Judgment Seat and evaluate the lives of believers (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). This judgment of believers will involve **reward according to our works** – those works which we have done after conversion (Matt. 25:14-30; Lk. 19: 11-26; 2 Cor. 5:10). The principle of **reward according to works** must be distinguished from the principle of **eternal salvation by grace** through faith, which is apart from works (Rom. 3:24-28; 4:2-6; 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9).

The believer's **reward** primarily affects his participation and status in the coming kingdom of 1,000 years when Christ will openly reign upon the earth (Matt. 19:27-29; 25:14-31; Lk. 19:12-26; Rev. 20:6). Various crowns (signifying co-rulership with Christ) picture reward for faithfulness (1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Thess. 2:19; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; 2 Tim. 4:7,8; Jas. 1:12). The **gift of eternal salvation**, however, is a matter of grace received by faith. This gift is based solely upon our acceptance of the merits of Christ's work, our trust in Him and His work on the cross for our eternal forgiveness and eternal life (Jn. 3:16; Acts 10:43; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 1:7; 2:8-9). All believers will be with God for eternity, and the eternal phase of the kingdom follows the millennial kingdom of Christ (Jn. 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:29-30; 1 Cor. 15:20-26).

The **way** that leads to the gate signifies **the life we live now** in preparation for the coming Judgment Seat of Christ. The life we live now as a believer may take on the characteristics of **the broad way** or of **the narrow way**. The **gate** signifies **our entrance**, either into the millennial kingdom **by the narrow gate**, or, in case of failure, into ruin **by the broad gate**. At His Judgment Seat, Jesus Christ, the righteous Judge, will determine our destiny for the coming 1,000 year kingdom age (2 Tim. 4:1, 8). Note that Jesus is pictured as the Judge in both Matt. 7:21-23 and in Lk. 13:25-27.

Jesus tells us that "the gate is small and the way is narrow that **leads to life**." (Matt. 7:14) Here is a confirmation that the **goal** of the narrow way is **an entrance (the narrow gate) into the coming millennial kingdom**. The Jews of Jesus' day were looking for the Messiah's kingdom. They believed that participation in that glorious kingdom on the earth would be granted to those Jews who did good works in God's eyes. Based upon Dan. 12:2, the Jews believed that at the resurrection God would reward some with "everlasting life" (the Hebrew expression here means "life belonging to the age") and others with shame and contempt. The Scripture records two cases where a Jew came to Jesus with the question of how he could gain this **life in the coming age of Messiah's kingdom**. These two cases confirm that it is our works, our deeds and our living, that determine our status during the next age, prior to eternity. Luke 10 records one of these cases in the story where a lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to gain this future life:

²⁵And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do **to inherit eternal life**?" ²⁶And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" ²⁷And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." ²⁸And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; **DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE.**" (Lk. 10:25-28)

When Jesus states "you will live" (v. 28), He meant that the lawyer would be granted life in the coming age at the resurrection (Dan. 12:2). The second case recorded in Scripture is that of the rich young ruler:

¹⁶And someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may **obtain eternal life**?" ¹⁷And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is *only* One who is good; but if you wish **to enter into life**, keep the commandments." (Matt. 19:16-17)

Both of these passages show that entry into that future realm of life is dependent upon a life of obedience to God's commandments (His revealed will). Therefore, a life of discipleship, not just initial faith, is needed to gain "eternal life" in the next age of the Messiah's Kingdom. Jesus makes this very clear in His talk to the disciples based upon His encounter with the rich ruler: ²⁹And He said to them, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰who will not receive many times as much at this time **and in the age to come, eternal life.**" (Lk. 18:29-30) The "age to come" refers to the next age of 1,000 years, and the Scripture makes it clear that there is more than one age yet to come (Eph. 2:7).

The New Testament uses the phrase "eternal life" 42 times. In many cases it is used to speak of God's life, which we receive as a gift when we believe in Christ and which we experience as a present possession (e. g., Jn. 3:16; 5:24; 10:28; Rom. 6:23). In some passages, however, the phrase is used of life belonging to the next age, the 1,000 year kingdom of Christ, where the experience of God's life will be realized in a greatly magnified way. In these latter passages, such a life is shown to be something that is gained by our obedience and cooperation with God during our present lifetime (Matt. 19:16; Lk. 10:25; Jn. 4:36; 12:25-26; Rom. 2:7; 6:22).

So, how may we describe **the narrow way that leads to life** in the next age? The context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount gives us some solid clues on how we may interpret the meaning of "**the narrow way.**" Let us remember that Jesus tells us about the two ways and the two gates as a concluding exhortation to His sermon. Therefore, it is only logical that the narrow way will have been already described in some fashion in the Sermon. Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:3-7:12 has portrayed the inner life of the people of the kingdom, as well as the actions of righteousness demanded by Him. **The narrow way is the way of God's exceeding righteousness, a righteousness that is revealed in the living of the disciple.** In His sermon, Jesus said plainly that such a practical righteousness is needed in order to enter the future kingdom: "For I say to you that **unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**" (Matt. 5:20). The context of this statement is clearly one of good works, so the Lord was not referring here to positional or imputed righteousness, which is granted by simple faith (Rom. 4:5, 10-11). This righteousness means an actual doing of what is right in God's eyes. In other words, **the narrow way is the way of obedience to God in our daily living.**

The Greek word for narrow carries the meaning of constricted or compressed, and one might picture this narrowness in a passageway constricted by high walls of rock on each side. **To walk the narrow way is to be confined to walk in obedience to God's will alone.** Later in the conclusion of His sermon, Jesus reiterated again that only the actual doing of God's will shall provide an entrance into the kingdom: "**Not everyone** who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' **will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father** who is in heaven *will enter.*" (Matt. 7:21)

The **narrow way** may also be described as "**the way of the cross.**" Surely, Jesus was the first one to take the narrow way and we are to follow Him. Hebrews tells us that He came to do only God's will. "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" (Heb. 10:7). The doing of God's will is clearly represented in the voluntary taking up of the cross. There Jesus laid aside His own human will in order to accept God's will. "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done." (Lk. 22:42) In the way of the cross we deny ourselves – all that we are, all that we can do, all that we possess, all of our will and choices – in order to accept His will as our will and follow Him (Matt. 16:24-25, Lk. 9:23-24; 14:26, 27, 33). This is the life of faith, not carried out by our efforts, but in full dependence upon God, trusting in Christ as our new life, our strength, our wisdom, and our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30; 15:10; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3-4).

This way means "Not I, but Christ." The truth and spiritual reality is that we were crucified with Christ, and have now been raised to walk in the newness of His life (Rom. 6). The actual experience of our union with Christ must be pursued and learned, "so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). Finally, then, we see also that this **narrow way** is **the way of the Spirit.** We must learn to live and walk according to the Spirit in order to know and carry out God's will. It is only by the direction and empowerment of the Holy Spirit that we can live a life of exceeding righteousness.

It is very important to note that we are not speaking of "sinless perfection" when we describe the narrow way. All of us may have a failure, a sin, at any time. What we are speaking of is a sincere heart attitude that brings about concrete actions in our lives – a daily seeking after God and His will, the willingness to put away in repentance and

confession any known sin, the desire for full obedience at any cost, and the dependence in faith upon God and His grace to carry out His will. We must remember too that the Christian life is a life, Christ's life. Every life entails growth and development. No believer is mature from the beginning. We need to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18); we need to be "transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18); we need to grow until "Christ is formed" in us (Gal. 4:19). Importantly, Peter reminds us that for the development of Christ's life in us we must be those "applying all diligence" (2 Pet. 1:5).

Now we must turn to examine **the broad way**. Once we have seen the characteristics of the narrow way, it is easy to understand the broad way. **The broad way is the way of compromise with God's will. The broad way is the opposite of complete self denial; it allows for the self to have some play. The broad way is opposed to the subjective work of the cross in our lives**, which should be progressively putting away sin and self. For example, on the broad way I am not willing to completely deny my thoughts, my attitudes, my emotions, my desires, my habits, my intentions and my goals in order to do God's will. I don't allow God to touch these areas of myself, or, I only allow Him to touch certain things, but not others. Instead, I subtly fit these aspects of myself into my own concept of how to live the Christian life. On the broad way I am letting the self live, instead of humbly agreeing with God that all of myself, including my "good points", must go to the cross so that Jesus may live in me. **Remember that Jesus is talking to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. The broad way and the narrow way speak of two ways of "living" as a Christian.** A person on **the broad way** does not continually set the mind on the Spirit and follow the Spirit, but **tends toward setting the mind on the flesh** and follows the flesh (see Rom. 8:4-5).

Jesus told us that **the broad way leads to "destruction."** What does this mean? Firstly, we need to understand something about the Greek word that is translated here as "destruction". The word is *apoleia* (Strong's Concordance #684). We must remember that this is a common word from the Greek language and therefore carries no implicit theological meaning, such as eternal damnation. Its meaning must be understood from the context. The word can mean ruin, a loss or destruction. It does not mean annihilation. It must logically be contrasted with the end of the narrow way, the gate that leads to life. Therefore, the end of following the broad way is some type of loss or ruin for the believer. We have seen that the narrow gate leads to a magnified experience of Christ's life in His coming 1,000 year kingdom. At a minimum, any believer who follows the broad way will **not gain entry** into this coming wonderful kingdom. (There are severer penalties beyond this revealed in God's word, but we will not examine them here.)

In Matt. 25:14-30 our Lord Jesus gives us a parable for understanding the contrast of the two gates in relation to gaining entry to the kingdom. In the parable the master (Jesus) judges his slaves in regard to their faithful use of his possessions while he was away on a journey (gone from the earth). At that judgment the faithful slaves were told that they could **"enter into the joy of your master"** (vs. 21, 23). This speaks of entering the future 1,000 year kingdom. On the other hand, the master judged the unfaithful slave as follows: "And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (v. 30). The opposite of joy is pictured here. This scene depicts the slave cast out of the kingdom, away from its brightness and joy. The weeping signifies great sorrow (over missing the kingdom joy), and the gnashing of

teeth signifies great regret and self-blame (concerning one's failure to have lived as God intended).

The apostle Paul warned believers in several places that if they persisted in certain sins they would not inherit (possess) the coming kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:7-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5). Then, we have the following sobering passage where the same Greek word translated **destruction** again appears:

¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; ¹⁶however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained. ¹⁷Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. ¹⁸For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are enemies of the cross of Christ,* ¹⁹**whose end is destruction**, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. ²⁰For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; (Phil. 3:14-20)

In Phil. 3:7-14 Paul is revealing his heart - that he is a person forsaking everything in order to pursue an extraordinary resurrection from the dead, which will be a reward to the faithful believer (Heb. 11:35), and which constitutes the prize which he sought - to rule with Christ in His 1,000 year kingdom (Rev. 20:6). Then, in verses 15-16 he urges those who are mature in Christ to maintain a similar attitude. In verse 17 Paul makes a specific appeal to the brethren to follow the example of his and others' conduct, which is a pattern for the believers. He then contrasts this godly walk with the walk of "many" who had chosen to satisfy their own fleshly appetites.

We must ask the question here: are the "many" in verse 18 believers or unbelievers? Why would Paul have "often told" the Philippians about the fleshly conduct of unbelievers? This knowledge concerning unbelievers is common knowledge and does not need stress. We all know that the unregenerate walk according to their fleshly appetites and mind earthly things. Paul here is contrasting his exemplary walk with the walk of many believers he had observed. He was weeping for them, because they were now conducting their lives as enemies to the cross of Christ by serving their own fleshly appetites.

If we are mature, living with the sole purpose to know the Lord and gain the prize, we will grieve and weep when we see believers living for fleshly pleasure (see Ez. 9:4). The "many" in Phil. 3:18 were not enemies to the cross as respects eternal redemption, but **enemies to the work of the cross in their lives, which should have been putting away the love of the things of this world** (Gal. 5:24; 6:14; 1 Jn. 2:15-16). James tells us that we believers can be enemies of God if we love the world and pursue our fleshly desires. ³"You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." (Jas. 4:3-4)

The "many" whom Paul had observed were minding earthly things: food, entertainment, pleasures, riches, and earthly success. Their heart and their talk were

occupied with these things, because these were what they sought and esteemed. But, their love of these things should have been their shame. Of such sensual and world-loving believers, Paul said weeping, "**whose end is destruction.**" (Phil. 3:19) "**The way is broad that leads to destruction.**" (Matt. 7:13). Part of that way can be the minding of earthly things, with the result that one's heart is not looking eagerly for the Lord's return in order to be with Him in the heavenly kingdom.

Many and few

Our Lord told us plainly that many would walk the broad way and few would walk the narrow way. Actually, Jesus said that there would be few who would "find" the narrow way and the narrow gate that leads to life. The fact that Jesus used the verb "find" only in connection with the narrow way is significant. To walk along the broad way is very easy; it does not require any seeking. It only involves following along with the great religious crowd, the majority of Christendom. But, to find the narrow way and the narrow gate involves some earnest seeking after Christ Himself. To my observation it means that a believer is not satisfied with the usual church routine, but is intensely hungry for God alone and is willing to pay a price to find Him and to do His will. A great picture of this seeking heart is found in Jeremiah 29. There Jeremiah prophesies concerning the end of the 70 years of captivity of the Jews in Babylon. He tells of God calling His people back to Jerusalem. He also vividly portrays the seekers praying earnestly to the Lord in order to be involved in His plan concerning Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the proper worship of God.

¹⁰For thus says the Lord, "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. ¹²Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." (Jer. 29:10-13)

It was only a remnant that returned to Jerusalem to rebuild - this pictures the principle of the "few".

A warning about false prophets

¹⁵"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes* nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰So then, you will know them by their fruits." (Matt. 7:15-20)

Immediately after exhorting the disciples concerning two ways, two gates and two destinations, Jesus spoke several sentences about the danger of false prophets. Have you ever considered the connection here? Why does Jesus shift to the topic of false prophets? It is because He is so aware of the danger. In the Scripture the false prophets seem to

always be near, every ready to mislead God's children. Now the Lord is warning the disciples that as they seek to walk the narrow way there will be false prophets subtly trying to lead them astray onto the broad way. They will appear in sheep's clothing, meaning their character and intentions are cleverly disguised. This does not mean that all false prophets are unbelievers. They may be. But, they may also be true believers who have turned aside from the right way (following God's path of righteous living), as in the case of the false teachers in 2 Peter (2 Pet. 2:1, 15, 20, 21). Instead of helping the disciples progress along the right way, their motive is to use the disciples for their own selfish ends.

The Lord told us that we would know them by their fruits. The test of the fruit is not to determine if the prophet (one supposedly speaking for God) is a true Christian, but the test is to determine if he is a false prophet. What kind of fruit is meant here? It seems that the testimony of Scripture is that false prophets may have bad fruit either in their words (their speaking for God) or in their deeds (their lives). We should never be afraid to test those who come to us, claiming to speak for God. Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for testing apostles (Rev. 2:2). Shown below is some of the "bad fruit" of false prophets in the Scriptures.

The "bad fruit" of their words:

1. Claiming to speak for God when He did not send them or speak to them. (Jer. 14:14; 23:21; 29:8-9).
2. Failure to speak so as to turn people from their sins. (Jer. 23:22; Lam. 2:14)
3. Disregard for the truth of God's word and failure to teach the people rightly according to God's truth. (Jer. 23:26-28; Matt. 16:12; 2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:18; 1 Jn. 4:1-3; Jude 1:4)
4. Speaking arrogant words of vanity. (2 Pet. 2:18)

The "bad fruit" of their lives:

1. Greed. Ministry for personal profit. (Ez. 13:19; Mic. 3:5; 2 Pet. 2:3, 14-15; Jude 1:11)
2. Ambition to be recognized, to gain a following. (Acts 20:29-30; Gal. 4:17).
3. Self exaltation and boasting according to the flesh. (2 Cor. 11:18, 20)
4. Taking advantage of others. (2 Cor. 11:20; Jude 1:16)
5. Insulting or otherwise mistreating believers. (2 Cor. 11:20)
6. Attempting to bring others into submission to themselves. (2 Cor. 11:20)
7. Preying upon unstable souls. (2 Pet. 2:14)
8. Unchecked, improper sexual lusts. (Jer. 29:23; 2 Pet. 2:14)
9. Living sensually, indulging the flesh. (2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 1:4)
10. Deceitfulness and lying. (Jer. 23:14; 29:8; 1 Tim. 4:2; 2 Tim. 3:13)
11. Enticing others by appealing to their fleshly desires. (2 Tim. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:18)
12. Causing division (Jude 1:19)

To stay on the narrow way we must avoid false prophets. Therefore, we must look at the fruit of those who would try to speak to us in the name of God. Perhaps a so-called minister of God seems to have all the right doctrine. We had better check his life before we let his ministry have influence in our life. Or, perhaps one seems to be so

gracious, so kind and so humble. Yet, we had better check his words carefully against the truth. Jesus warned us ahead of time to beware of the false prophets.

Jesus also told us that the false prophets who had bad fruit would be severely judged: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matt. 7:19). The "fire" here is used in an illustration, and should not be strictly understood as "the lake of fire." It certainly means a severe judgment, because those who claim to speak for God will have a stricter judgment applied to them, and God will surely not treat lightly those false prophets who lead His people astray (Jas. 3:1; 2 Pet. 2:17).

The Judgment Seat of Christ depicted

The next section of the Sermon on the Mount continues the theme of entry into the coming Kingdom, and includes the matter of the coming judgment. However, this is not the judgment for unbelievers, but the judgment for believers.

²¹"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*.

²²Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'" (Matt. 7:21-23)

Here Jesus is speaking of a coming day of judgment. In verse 22 Jesus is speaking of that future day when many will say to Him, "Lord, Lord." The specific day pictured here is the time of Christ's Judgment Seat, where He examines the believer's works upon His return to the earth (Matt. 25:19; Lk. 19:15; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). This scene of judgment upon believers takes place before the millennium, conducted upon Christ's return (Lk. 19:15). Unbelievers (those deceased) are not judged until after the millennium at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15). The judgment itself determines recompense (**reward**) according to the works of the believer (2 Cor. 10:5). This judgment of believers does not determine eternal salvation, as that matter has already been decided by the faith of the believer in Christ (Jn. 5:24). Eternal salvation is by grace through faith, not according to works (Eph. 2:8-9). The reward for the believer can be positive or negative (Matt. 25:20-30; Lk. 19:17, 22-26; Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25).

In the scene depicted in verses 21-23 are persons who come to the Lord for judgment, presenting their works to Him. They address Jesus, "Lord, Lord." Only believers can address the Lord with this title in sincerity (1 Cor. 12:3). Many will tell Jesus about their Christian works done "in Your name." Believers may claim that works are done for Christ "in His name" (representing Him), but that does not make it so. In an outstanding chapter on false prophets God says that the false prophets prophesied lies "in His name" (Jer. 23:25).

The Lord Jesus will declare to these who tell Him of their Christian works: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." (Matt. 7:23). Here we have one of the most commonly misinterpreted verses in Scripture. The Lord is not saying that these people never knew *Him*. Rather, Jesus speaks from His perspective, that He never knew *them*. The word for "know" here is *ginosko* (Strong's Concordance

#1097). Like any word, it can carry different meanings depending upon the context. Here it means to recognize, or acknowledge, someone for what they claim to be. This meaning of *ginosko* here is confirmed by a standard Greek lexicon (Arndt and Gingrich's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*). So, Jesus here is not saying that these people never had a relationship with Him. Rather, He is saying that He has **never recognized them, or acknowledged them, as proper servants of His**, doing His work according to His standard. Instead, He declares that the work they do for Him is "lawlessness." It is important to note that the ground for Jesus' rejection of these people is their works, not their lack of faith; they "practice lawlessness."

This matter of "lawlessness" is very revealing, and provides a key for understanding the Lord's rejection of these believers. The Greek word here is *anomia* (Strong's Concordance #458), which means not having or acknowledging the law. The law here does not refer specifically to the Old Testament Law, but generally to His Biblical commands and principles. We can use an example from everyday life to illustrate this matter of disregarding the law. Many times we see drivers on the road who have little regard for the law. They routinely speed, or perhaps follow too closely or run yellow lights when they could stop. The same pattern can be observed in many believers, who disregard God's principles in their Christian life or in their work for the Lord. Just like drivers who want to drive the way they like, these believers **like to live their lives their own way, refusing to be controlled by God's clear commandments or principles**. The Amplified Bible makes this matter clear: "And then I will say to them openly (publicly), I never knew you; depart from Me, you who act wickedly – disregarding My commands." (Matt. 7:23, AMP).

The disregarded commands could include principles revealed in the Sermon on the Mount, but would not necessarily be limited to these. These unapproved believers are self-willed, refusing to give full ground to the word of God in their lives. This does not mean that they never do anything the Lord requires, but it does mean that they are basically self-willed, only giving ground to the Lord according to their choice, when it is acceptable to them. This type of living is in contrast to the victorious Christian, who is actively seeking to learn God's will and be governed by it. Such believers can, of course, have failures, but their heart is to repent, confess their sin and rise up again, sincerely seeking to fully obey the Lord.

In Paul's last letter, he writes to Timothy, giving him careful and fatherly instruction how to serve the Lord. In chapter two of 2 Timothy Paul uses the illustrations of a soldier, an athlete and a farmer in respect to service. Concerning the athlete, Paul says: "And if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules." (2 Tim. 2:5). Here Paul is clearly telling Timothy (and us) that if we disregard God's principles we will not receive positive reward at the Judgment Seat. Any servant of Christ who chooses to serve not in accordance with Biblical commands or principles will be denied entry into the coming Kingdom. This denial is exactly what is prophesied by the Lord Jesus in Matt. 7:22-23.

One may ask, "What commandments or principles are we talking about?" Let me give just a few as examples. Some may serve God, but they do so in order to be noticed by others and receive praise from them. This is a violation of the principle revealed in Matt. 6:1-6, 16-18. Here Jesus clearly tells us that they will not receive a reward. He also

tells us in Matt. 7:19 that all of the false prophets will receive a negative judgment. The bad fruit they bear is evidence of their violation of God's principles. Review the list above of the "bad fruit" and consider the violations to God's ways of holiness and integrity. Others may serve God using fleshly (according to man's natural wisdom or energy) or worldly methods, such as entertainment. Any such fleshly or worldly methods will cause the works to be burned up as wood, hay and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12-15). The same is true if the building work is divisive in its nature (1 Cor. 3:3-4).

An example from real life of a self-willed believer may help. A Christian brother told me this story from his own experience. He started attending a church where the pastor and others seemed to be sincerely open to follow the Lord. This brother actually had more experience in the Lord than the young pastor and his inner circle had. They invited him to participate in times of fellowship among the leaders and wanted him to bear some responsibility there. This brother met with them many times and shared principles from the Scriptures, including the model of the New Testament church. That model calls for a plurality of co-equal elders, not just one "pastor" who rules over all (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Jas. 5:14). (This pattern is not only confirmed as God's way in the Scriptures, but is also a fact of early church history). The inner circle and the "pastor" in the church seemed open to this brother's sharing and they eventually conceded that a plurality of co-equal elders was the Scriptural pattern. However, they finally told this brother that they would not follow this way. They were happy with the way things were going under the traditional "one pastor" leadership model. In the end, then, they deliberately rejected God's principle for church leadership in order to carry out their own will.

The temptation in Christian work is often to gain the greatest number to join our church, or come to our evangelistic service or conference, or follow our ministry. This temptation leads many to choose worldly or fleshly ways which seem expedient in accomplishing their ends. **But God is more interested in the way we serve Him** than in outward "success." He is more interested in us following His commands than He is in the "results" we can obtain by using our methods. Saul failed God's test when he decided to spare the best of Amalek's flocks to sacrifice them to the Lord. God had told him to destroy them all. Samuel rebuked him: "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice." (1 Sam. 15:22)

Let us recap this most important section of the Sermon to be sure we understand its message clearly:

v. 21: Jesus states that not every one who says to Him "Lord, Lord" on that future day of judgment will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one **who does the will** of God.

v.22: On that future day many will call Him Lord and **present their works** to Him as works done "in His name."

v. 23: Jesus will declare to them that He has never recognized them (as proper servants), and He will tell them to depart from Him **because they work lawlessness, disregarding His commands.**

The very next word Jesus speaks is "therefore", indicating that He will now draw a lesson or a conclusion from the preceding statements. The "therefore" introduces a section wherein Jesus concludes that to build a proper foundation requires one **to do what He commands**, not just to hear His commands. It should be very clear that the entire context here is speaking about a believer's works – not his initial faith. Indeed, works is not only the immediate context, but righteous actions (works) constitute the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount. This section does not concern unbelievers. If the "many" in verse 22 were unbelievers, and their problem was a matter of trusting in works, rather than faith, in order to be eternally saved (entrance into the eternal kingdom), then Jesus would have drawn a different lesson in His concluding words (verse 24 and following). His "therefore" (v. 24) would have been followed by an admonition that faith is what is required to be approved. The entire Sermon is instruction to Jesus' disciples on how to live, and in verses 21-23 Jesus is warning His disciples that even works done "for Him" by them will undergo scrutiny as to whether or not obedience to His commands has been observed.

From this section we should be very clear that the determining factor of our future entry into the coming 1,000 year Kingdom of Christ is our obedience to God's will. This truth is in accord with the previous admonition Jesus gave concerning the two ways and the two gates.

Hearing and acting upon our Lord's words

²⁴"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall." (Matt. 7:24-27)

The Lord's final word in His Sermon again deals with the matter of obedience. But note that the obedience the Lord requires is not ambiguous. It is very specific. It is obedience to His words. Here the specific reference is to "these words", the words of the Sermon on the Mount. However, as a principle, we should be those who obey all the words of the Lord, not just those in Matthew 5-7. In introducing the same parable in Luke Jesus begins with a question (obviously asked of His own disciples): "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Lk. 6:46) Those who would hear and obey "these words" build on a solid foundation.

The rain, the floods and the wind all describe various tests that will come to challenge us in our Christian life. When those tests come, who will stand, maintaining a proper and approved testimony of Christ? The only ones who will stand will be those who make it a practice to hear His word and obey it. Those who have not made this their habit have only sand for a foundation. They hear the word, but they have not made it their heart habit to obey. When the tests come, then their Christian testimony crumbles.

How can we describe the tests that come to a Christian? These come in many forms. The Bible tells us that the entire history of the generation that came out of Egypt and wandered in the wilderness was a history of being tested. And their experiences are

an example for us, written for our learning (1 Cor. 10:11). **This testing was to see who would really obey God during that time of trial.** God desired that all of the trials would produce a learned attitude of obedience, as shown in Deut. 8. "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not." (Deut. 8:2) **Also, it was a time when they were often brought low, so that they could learn to depend upon God and His supply.** "And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." (Deut. 8:3)

It was God's intention by such testing that those Old Testament saints would be **trained in the matter of obedience, thus becoming mature and responsible children of God.** Our Father has this same objective with us. "Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him." (Deut. 8:5-6)

We will encounter many circumstances and difficulties in our human life. Things will not turn out the way we planned. Perhaps our marriage will not be what we expected. Perhaps we will have a trial of illness. Perhaps our children will give us much heartache. Maybe someone will oppose us or criticize us wrongly. Perhaps we will know only poverty or great difficulty in making a living. Or, it may be that we will suffer severe persecution for our faith. Another problem could be that we feel our opportunity for service to the Lord is not what we envisioned. Perhaps we wanted some grander "ministry" or some full time Christian work. Perhaps we desired a service with less heartache and trials. Will we grow bitter or disappointed in all of these trials, or will we learn to seek the Lord's will for us in the midst of each circumstance and obey His will for us?

There are other tests besides difficulties. Maybe we have an abundance of material goods, as many do in America. Will we spend our money upon ourselves for our enjoyment, or will we be rich towards God (see Lk. 12:16-21)? Will we store up treasures for ourselves upon earth, or in heaven (Matt. 6:19-20)? Paul learned to be faithful to the Lord both in poverty and in abundance (Phil. 4:11-13). The bottom line is: will we sincerely seek to obey God no matter what our circumstances are in life? We must also trust that His way of carrying out His plan in our lives, including all of the testing circumstances He allows, is much wiser than our way (Is. 55:8-9).

The Scripture reveals that God tests us in order to bring forth our obedience to Him, thus revealing the reality of the life of Christ in our lives. For example, God tested Abraham in Gen. 22. God wanted to see if Abraham would be willing to give up his most cherished possession, his son Isaac, in order to be obedient to God. Of course, Abraham had to trust the Lord in this circumstance and even believe that God would still be faithful to His promise to make Abraham the father of a multitude through a son born from his seed (Gen. 15:3-6).

So it is also when God tests us. He wants to see our obedience, even if costs something precious to us. This something could be a possession, a relationship, some enjoyment we savor, some way we use our free time, some object of security or even a "ministry." Are we willing to leave houses, mother, father, children or jobs for His sake

and the gospel's sake (Mk. 10:29)? Or, perhaps He will ask us to give up something of the self that we hold dear, such as our "right" to be respected or appreciated by our family members or others. We must give up what He requires, trusting Him that He will still carry out all that He has planned for our lives.

At the core of Jesus final words in Matt. 7:24-27 is the matter of not just hearing, but also obeying His words. The fact that Jesus points this out tells us that believers can be "hearers only." It is a frightening thing to realize that those who hear but do not obey may actually deceive themselves into thinking that their walk is approved by God. James tells us of this possibility: "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers **who delude themselves.**" (Jas. 1:22). Is this not what happened to those in the scene of the Judgment Seat in verses 21-23? These thought that they were doing the will of God and presented their Christian works to Jesus as evidence. However, they were disapproved because they did not keep God's principles while carrying out their service. To be active "in church" and under Bible ministry carries with it a danger. The danger is that we may be in a Christian atmosphere, hearing many things from the Scriptures, and deceive ourselves into thinking that we are doing fine as a believer just because we hear and learn the truth. Yet, the Lord is seeking those who have a humble heart, sincerely desiring to live out what His words require.

The final test for all believers will be at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Those who have built upon a foundation of sand will find that the "house" of their Christian doings will crumble before the searching, judging eyes of Jesus, the righteous Judge.

So, Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount are really meant to prepare us for that coming day of judgment (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5, 16). He is telling us how we should live in light of the coming Judgment Seat of Christ, with its momentous and decisive consequence of reward and entry into the coming 1,000 year Kingdom of Christ. May we be those who heed His Sermon with the utmost seriousness and prepare. We only have one Christian lifetime in which to prepare.

A word of encouragement

The words of the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount present a very high standard for Christ's disciples. When we realize how great the demands of the Lord are for obedience, we may lose heart and feel that we just cannot make it. We should realize, however, that God not only presents a "demand" for obedience, but also provides a "supply" that enables us to obey! This "supply" is called "grace" in the New Testament. Grace, which has sometimes been defined as "unmerited favor", is actually much more than that. Let us explore this matter a little further.

Too often believers still hold a wrong concept concerning obeying our Lord. They tend to feel that God wants them to obey all the commands of Scripture, and calls upon them to accomplish this by an act of consecration, a decision to live for God. This idea is one of those dangerous "half truths" that one may encounter in life. Yes, God does want us to make an absolute commitment to follow Him, but He does not want us to focus on "obeying the commandments", using our best efforts to carry them out. Such thoughts are all in the realm of being "under law." To be "under law" means that our relationship with God is focused upon our responsibility to obey a set of commandments in order to be acceptable to Him. Such a focus sets into motion a self-effort to obey the commandments. This self-effort in turn leads to failure, because the power of indwelling sin is triggered by such self-effort. This is exactly the struggle that Paul wrote about in

Romans seven. A life lived "under law" is characterized by independence from God. The person himself must know what to do and must supply some effort to carry out the demands of the law.

Instead of trying to live up to God's standards by being "under law", the New Testament reveals that we should be those living "under grace." Being "under grace" involves the living union of the believer with Christ, realized by means of the Holy Spirit directing and supplying us with His life and power. This life is pictured by the branch abiding in the vine (Jn. 15). A person living under grace is one receiving and experiencing Christ as his life and his empowering supply (1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 2:20-21; 5:4). The believer experiencing grace is focused upon the living person of Christ. This experience is characterized by a complete dependence and looking away to Christ for everything – both direction (what to do) and empowerment (ability to do what Christ directs). Such a person draws completely upon the grace of God for every step and for every task. And, wonderfully, God meets such dependency and faith on our part with the very supply of Himself as grace. This is a life where the old "I", who we were in Adam, is experienced as having been crucified (in union with Christ), and where the new "I", who we now are in Christ, is experienced through our union with Him in His resurrection. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." (Gal. 2:20).

If the reader has not had much experience of this living by grace, do not be discouraged. Rather, seek the Lord to learn more about this. It is very freeing to live in union with Christ and to abandon living up to God's standards by our efforts. This writer has authored a book that should render some help in living a life of grace and that book is available on the Internet to be read or downloaded (or ordered). The book is entitled "The Victorious Christian Life" and is on the following website: www.seekersofchrist.org. Other helpful books on the Christian life are also listed at the end of this book on the victorious Christian life.