



WHICH WAY TO HEAVEN

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INTRODUCTION

Decision-making is regarded as the mental process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities. Moreover, every decision-making process produces a final choice that may or may not result in satisfactory results. From a personal perspective, the decision-making process begins from the time a person is born until the end of their life as a noteworthy amount of time is spent in making decisions. As an example, decisions can vary from choices that result in positive or negative outcomes such as making a bad investment, decisions that are the result of mundane repetitive activities such as turning on a television set to significant decisions that can be life altering such as marriage, employment, and buying a home.

Not unexpectedly, the decision-making process is a recurrent theme throughout biblical scripture and begins in the second chapter of the Old Testament book of Genesis when God instructs Adam that – *"You may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."* This directive from God was a life changing decision that ultimately results in Adam and Eve deciding to violate God's command by eating of the tree of good and evil that resulted in their eventual death and a curse placed on the universe. Continuing into the New Testament we repeatedly find numerous examples of important decisions as evidenced by the account of the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19:16-22, Mark

10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27 who had followed the law to the letter but sadly decides to focus on his wealth and not follow Jesus.

Of all the decisions that a person are faced with throughout their lifetime – and of all the decisions that are defined in biblical scripture – none are as important as the decision that each person throughout history must make that determines where they will spend eternity. As outlined in Matthew, every person must decide to either spend eternity in Heaven and eternal bliss or Hell and eternal torment. Although this decision would seem to be an easy choice, the book of Matthew paints a completely different picture by stating that *few* will make the right decision (Figure 1). With these thoughts in mind, let's look at the account of the narrow gate and wide gate in Matthew.



Figure 1

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Although the specific account of the Way to Heaven is found within the narrative of the Sermon on the Mount in the 7th chapter of Matthew, the Sermon actually begins in Matthew 5 with this introduction – *“After seeing the multitudes, He went up on the mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them.”* Jesus then begins to discuss Heavenly attributes that are commonly known as the Beatitudes that are the ethical guidelines for life in His Kingdom. In this discourse, Jesus intentionally directs His comments to an audience that was immersed in Hebrew tradition while also

specifically unmasking the Pharisees and their self-imposed legalistic righteousness. Although the Pharisees demanded and practiced a strict observance of the Mosaic Law – which they believed guaranteed a state of righteous perfection and an ability to earn Heaven – Jesus explains the full meaning of the law, showing that its demands were humanly impossible while also eliminating every possible avenue of human merit that leaves sinners dependent on nothing but divine grace for salvation. Jesus plumbed the depth of the law, showing that its true demands went far beyond the surface meaning of legalistic words and set a standard than is higher than the most diligent students of the law had previously realized.

After describing the eight Beatitudes, Jesus emphatically addresses the issue of self-righteousness when He speaks directly to the Pharisees in Matthew 5:20 – *“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”* This subject is also addressed in Luke 18:9 when Jesus says – *“Also He spoke this parable to some (Pharisees) who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”* With these comments, Jesus has defined an impossible barrier to works salvation. Scripture repeatedly teaches that sinners are capable of nothing but a flawed and imperfect form of righteousness that is clearly stated in Isaiah 64:6 – *“But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness’s are like filthy rags.”* Therefore, the only righteousness by which sinners may be justified is the perfect righteousness of God that is given to those who believe and repent.

Jesus then continues through Chapter 6 and into a portion of Chapter 7 with a brief dissertation on familiar subjects such as Salt and Light, Fulfillment of the Law, Murder, Adultery, Divorce, Oaths, Love, Prayer, Fasting, Prayer, Wealth, and the Golden Rule. However, the account of the narrow gate and wide gate in Chapter 7 is one of the most profound and challenging portions of scripture that clearly stipulates the conditions for the most important decision a person will ever make in their lifetime – their eternal destiny.

In verses 13 to 29 of chapter 7 – the closing section of the Sermon on the Mount – is an eternal gospel application that Jesus presents with a common teaching method of *“two ways”* used in Judaism and Greco-Roman philosophy. In this gospel application, there are two gates (wide and narrow), two ways (broad and narrow), two destinations (life and destruction), two groups of people (few and many), two kinds of trees (good and evil), two kinds of fruit (good and bad), two kinds of builders (wise and foolish), two kinds of foundations (rock and sand), and two houses with two results (lasting and failure). With this format, Jesus is using multiple examples of an *“either or”* by

drawing a clear line between two kinds of righteousness – one that leads to destruction (human achievement and hell) and one that leads to life (redemptive salvation of God and Heaven).

As a starting point and to focus on the clarity of this gospel application, let's begin by specifically looking at verses 13-14:

“(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”

In these two verses, Jesus indicates there are two gates and two groups of people as follows:

- First, one gate is narrow and difficult to find and the other gate is wide and easy to find, yet both gates *imply* that each is the way to heaven and eternal life – but only the narrow gate leads to life. Interestingly, the wide gate is not labeled as the way to destruction (hell) yet it goes there
- Secondly, the two groups of people that are mentioned are differentiated between the *few* that find the narrow gate and the *many* that use the wide gate

The clear difference between the two gates and groups of people is summarized by the difference between the self-righteousness of mankind and the divine righteousness of God. As previously mentioned in our discussion, the Pharisees believed that their self imposed laws and ability to keep those laws guaranteed a state of righteous perfection and an ability to earn Heaven. Today, many people find it much easier to not repent of their sins, submit their lives to Christ and become accountable to God – which is similar to the self-imposed legalistic righteousness of the Pharisees. Instead, it is commonly fashionable to be considered a good person, be a member of an established church, sing in the choir, and other similar attributes that by-pass the narrow gate of repentance and salvation by Christ as the only way to heaven.

With these thoughts in mind, let's look a little closer at the following stringent and non-negotiable attributes of the narrow gate:

ACTION

Each person must individually enter the narrow gate by making a commitment by submitting to the person of Jesus Christ as specifically outlined in scripture. Scriptural examples are Acts 4:12 – *“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* and I Timothy 2:5 – *“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man*

Christ Jesus." These verses indicate that entry through the narrow gate is not accidental and/or through good works by any person. Although a popular concept is summarized by the phrase *"there are many ways to heaven,"* there is no deviation from Christ and His saving grace. From another perspective, **no Christ, no salvation or heaven!**

BY YOURSELF

Salvation is not for the crowd but is for each individual although the path to eternal life is open to everyone who asks. A scriptural example is Romans 10:9 – *"That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."* Each person, on an individual basis, must confess their sins, repent of those sins and receive Christ as their Savior for eternal salvation. However, it is important to remember that a simple acknowledgement that the Lord Jesus is God and the Lord of the universe is not enough as even the demons acknowledge that to be true as found in James 2:19 – *You believe that there is one God? You do well. Even the demons believe and tremble."* The narrow gate requires a deep personal conviction – without reservation – that Jesus is that person's master. Romans 10:9 includes repenting from sin, trusting in Jesus for salvation, and submitting to Him as Lord. From another perspective, consider the narrow gate as a turnstile that will only allow a person to enter without their baggage (sins).

STRUGGLE

Matthew 7:14 contains the following phrase – *"Difficult is the way which leads to life"* and is also comparable to Luke 13:24 – *"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."* Both of these verses indicate that entering the narrow gate is not easy as opposed to the wide gate that is non-exclusive, allows for human works, and allows all of the other world's religions. The Greek word translated *strive* is *agonizomai* from which we get the English word *agonize*. The clear implication is that entering the narrow gate will require much effort, struggle and strain. Entering the narrow gate will be difficult because of its cost in terms of:

- Crucifying our human flesh
- Living by faith
- Human pride
- Living a lifestyle separate from the world
- A sinner's natural love for sin
- Opposition from the world
- Satan's resistance/resistance to the truth
- Etc.....

In addition to the difficulty that is required to enter the narrow gate is the fact that the words difficult and strive also eliminate the “*easy gospel*” approach that is common in many modern churches, including some evangelical churches. Although there are many examples of *easy gospel* such as a quick belief in Christ that may or may-not be followed by a baptism, attending and/or membership in a church, being a good person, positive thinking, adherence to the health-wealth-prosperity mindset, the bottom line is that *easy gospel* is based on a typical lack of repentance and submission to Christ as Lord.

As an example, a brief look through the Table of Contents in books by four current popular Christian authors feature the following chapters. Although these subjects likely contain some good information, they all can be viewed as interchangeable as they have a conspicuous lack of any mention of sin, grace, repentance, salvation, and Christ as Lord:

Author #1

- Instincts to increase
- Instincts under pressure
- Instinctive leadership
- Juggling instincts
- All that is within you

Author #2

- You can, you will
- Keep your vision in front of you
- Run your race
- Expect good things
- Have a positive mindset
- Commit to excellence
- Keep growing
- Stay passionate

Author #3

- Get your hopes up
- Raise your level of expectation
- Getting to know the new you
- Keep moving
- Identify and eliminate every can't
- The choice is yours

Author #4

- Become what you believe
- Developing a prosperous mindset
- Be happy with who you are

- Choosing the right thoughts
- Understanding your value

As a reminder and warning about the wide gate, Matthew 7:15-16 states the following – *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”*

CONCLUSION

As specifically described in Matthew 7:13-14, people are offered two eternal destinations that they must choose. The narrow gate is precise, constricted, and is entered only by faith through Christ. It represents the only true salvation that ultimately leads to eternal life and joy. The wide gate is the easy way that includes all works based religions and self-righteousness. It represents hell and eternal destruction. As we have previously discussed, true salvation (entry through the narrow gate) is only obtained by true repentance (which means to turn from sinful ways), submission to Christ as Lord, and a willingness to obey His will and word.

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