

Matthew #36 – The Two Religions

Matthew - GIW

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Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, in that parable that I read for you a little while ago, Jesus dealt with one of the difficulties that people said they had in his day. He represents the rich man in Luke 16 as being in hell and having a just complaint. The just complaint is, "Oh, if only somebody who had actually been here had come back and warned me, then, well, then it would have been different." So he said, "Why don't you send somebody like Lazarus to my brothers who are still on earth to warn them, then they'll have a fair chance." And Jesus Christ, quite properly said, "No. If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." But for you and me, it's quite different because somebody has risen from the dead, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Now, he said a lot of very interesting things during the three years of his ministry, but you know, after he died and descended into hell and actually went over onto the other side and then came back and stood up again and got up out of the grave and met his disciples and said, "Here, feel my hands and feet because a spirit doesn't have flesh and bones as you see that I do have," Jesus didn't take back anything that he had said. He didn't revise any statement. He didn't say, "Well, fellas, you know, I said a lot of these things, but you're going to have to take it with a grain of salt." No, Jesus Christ said, "Now I want you to go into all the world and you teach them all that I've taught you and I will be with you even to the end of the age," because heaven and earth will pass away but not one word spoken by Jesus will pass away. And so to me, it is entirely fitting that on this day we should think about what Christ said. Remember that these words were spoken by the one person who really does have first hand knowledge not only of this life but of the life which is to come. And this is what he told us: you have to enter through the narrow gate for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it but small or restricted is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.

Now this is part of Christ's great Sermon on the Mount, and if you understand the structure of this great sermon, you'll know that at this point we enter into what is called the realm of application. Every good sermon should have application as the final thrust of it. It's no use to just hear things when it comes to the gospel of Christ, it has to move you to action and every creature should try to follow the example of Christ. Well, at this point

he is coming to application. He is applying all the things that he has said in the first part of this sermon and do you remember what he has said in the first part of this sermon? Well, remember, he's preaching this sermon to disciples and the first thing he did in that sermon was to give us a character portrait of a real Christian. If you're a real Christian, then you have to have a broken heart. You have to really hunger and thirst after righteousness. You have to have purity in heart and these other qualities that Christ talks about there. And if you're a real Christian, he says you're not going to go along with this constant tendency on the part of false religion to water down the law of God. "Don't think that I came to abolish the law, I didn't, for unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and scribes, you can't enter the kingdom." And one of the great sections of this sermon deals with Christ's simple teaching which puts the law right back up where it belongs as an absolute standard.

So the second thing Christ does in this sermon is to set before us God's holy law as the standard for the Christian. The third thing he does is to describe the kind of piety that lives in the heart of a real Christian. Nothing put on. The prayers are not long, wordy exercises in impressing other people. There's a simplicity and a sincerity. And when you give something, you don't do it with a flourish so other people will notice you and the like. It's a simple reality that rises from the heart of devotion to the living God. And then he goes on in this sermon to tell us about the lifestyle of these people, and unlike the people around them who have their treasures laid up on earth, these people have their treasures laid up in heaven. Consequently, they're not always anxious about tomorrow and about what they're going to eat and drink and wear and the like. And just because they have been saved by grace themselves by God's unmerited favor, they do not exercise a censorious judgment against other people. They're not harsh in their judgment of others because they understand that except for the grace of God, they would be like that too. Even though they're not stupid, they don't throw their pearls before swine. And you remember how Christ summed it all up: their lifestyle can be expressed in one golden rule, what they would have others do to them that's what they do to others.

Well, now after outlining these basic principles and precepts in this sermon, Christ now comes to the application and he says, "Here, then, is what you have to do. You've got to enter in through the narrow gate for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction and many are entering through it, but restricted is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life and only a few are finding it." Now the first thing that stands out in that great application of Christ is the awesome fact that there really are only two religious positions possible in this world. Now that contradicts popular thinking as much as anything I know of in the entire Bible. Brothers and sisters, we live in a very tolerant age, an age in which the idea that there is only one right way and that that right way is narrow, that is anathema to the mind and spirit of our age. And that is not only true today in general society, but to a great extent in the church.

When I was in New Zealand some years ago, Dr. D. T. Niles came there for a youth conference. Now, Dr. Niles is a high official in the World Council of Churches, and he came there to teach the young people of many denominations in New Zealand about world religions and he said, "Well, world religions are like the spokes of a wheel. They

are very different one from the other, one may be a bit crooked and other a bit rusty and broken but," he said, "all of those different spokes, in their own way, lead to the same hub and," he said, "so it is with the religions of the world." The whole point of his message to the young people of the churches in New Zealand was that there is no one true religion but all of the different religions of the world are ultimately equally valid.

Well, our Lord Jesus Christ not only rejects the idea that they are all valid, but he even rejects the idea that there are many. No, there's only two. There is a broad one and there is a narrow one. The one leads to eternal life and the other leads to destruction. And you would wonder how anyone could get any other conclusion if they, like Jesus, believed what is taught in the Bible. Do you know your Bible? What does it teach? Well, religion began in this world with the first family, the family of Adam and Eve, and already in the family of Adam and Eve, you had two religions. You had the religion of Cain and the religion of Abel and they're not the same. Now they talked about God, but they were not the same, and how do we know they're not the same? Because the Bible says God had respect to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering he did not have respect. So in spite of whatever may have been the opinion of Cain, God's opinion was that there was a radical difference between the two.

And what do you see in the early history of the Bible? You see that there was a line of people who adhered to the religion of Abel and they were some of the great people of the Bible. Seth and Enoch, the man who walked with God and God took him right out of this world, the only man who experienced that before the flood. And Noah. And there was also the ungodly line of Lamech and others. Now the Bible doesn't say only one was religious, the other wasn't religious. No, they were all religious but there is a great difference between them, and unfortunately, the vast majority were adherents of the broad religion. We know that because when the flood came there was only a relatively few who still adhered to the true religion, and that is why the flood took all the rest away.

Then what do you see after the flood of Noah in the history of the Bible? Well, I'll tell you what you see, you see the whole human race gathering together as one man at the Tower of Babel to defy God's command. Now God said, "I want you to fill the whole earth and replenish it," but they said, "We don't want to do that. We want to stay together in one place and build a great city and a tower that reaches to heaven." And so God came down and he confused their tongue and spread them out over the world against their own will and the Bible says the whole world was under a great cloud of darkness. And that's when God came down and called a man by the name of Abram living in the city of Ur of the Chaldees, an idolatrous city, and he said, "Abram, come and I will show you a great land of promise." And so, in the midst of a dark world, God once again revealed the narrow way with a straight gate and established that true religion again in the household and family of Abraham.

And what you see, then, throughout all the rest of the Old Testament period, well, you see all the nations of the world enshrouded in pagan darkness. That's why my ancestors worshiped a tree as god. I don't know what your ancestors worshiped, but it's probably just as bad. And there was only one narrow segment of the human race that had the true

religion and that was God's chosen people, the vehicle of his redemptive purpose on earth. And that's not all, and if you know the rest of your Old Testament, you know that's not all because the rest of the Old Testament shows us, it's amazing but it shows us that even in the household of Abraham, not once but many times, the majority preferred the false religion even in Abraham's household. That's why you have idolatry over and over again. Why did they go up on the high places of Israel to worship with the Canaanites in the cult of Baal? Well, because they preferred the false religion to the truth, that's why. And why did God have to raise up prophets like Elijah and Elisha to denounce the vast majority of God's so-called covenant people? The answer is because they preferred the false religion, for the fact is that even in God's covenant nation, again and again they turned away from the true God to serve idols.

And what was the situation when our Lord Jesus Christ was on earth? What was the situation in the nation where he was when he preached this sermon and amongst the people who were there and heard it? Now if you asked those people, "Are you the people of Yahweh, Jehovah?" They would say, "Well, sure we are." And if you said, "Do you all believe in the doctrine of the Messiah, the Christ? Do you believe the Christ?" They would have said, "Why, sure we do." And yet we know for a matter of fact that the vast majority in that day and generation in God's covenant nation of Israel, they did not accept Christ. They rejected him, leaving only a relatively small remnant to launch the early Christian church that you read about in the book of Acts.

Now what use would it have been for Christ, then, to say, "Broad and easy is the way that leads to life, and many are they that find it"? He would have been a liar. It's not true. It never has been true. It isn't true today. Christ was the faithful witness. The Bible calls him that. He said some hard things but he's the faithful witness. And he was telling the truth, there are only two religions and the true one is narrow and only a few are finding it. That's the way it is. We might not like it but it's the truth. And some people say, "Well, that makes it very hard, doesn't it? There's an awful lot of religion in this room. How in the world are you going to tell the one that's right?" I think I told you about that FBI display I saw once of counterfeit money, a whole table full of counterfeit money. All of them counterfeit except one. I said, "How in the world you going to tell the difference?" And the FBI man said, "Not hard at all. All you have to do is learn to tell the characteristics of the true money. Once you learn what they are, then you can look at the other ones and you can tell every time." Certain little threads that are in the real money aren't there in the counterfeit, and so on.

Well, that's also true when it comes to the true and the false religion, for they are profoundly different. Didn't Christ make that clear? What is the difference between these two religions? The first difference is that it is not easy to become a Christian. You've got to enter through the narrow gate, restricted is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. And we know from our Lord's entire ministry and teaching what he meant by that because he says you have to be born again or you can't see or enter the kingdom.

Now being born again doesn't sound like such an unpleasant thing, does it? Not until you study your Bible and find out that it means the same thing as dying. Then it becomes an unpleasant idea. But Christ said, "If you want to be my disciple, you have to lose your life in order to find it." What did he mean by that? He means that you have to die. You, as you are by nature with your natural man's ego and self-centeredness and the like, you've got to die. And that is not pleasant. And that is why in the history of the Christian church some of the greatest men of God confessed that conversion was for them at first a most distressing experience, most unpleasant. How could it be anything else when it involves the demolition of myself? I was never more miserable in my entire life than I was at the time of my conversion. That was not pleasant. False religion, on the other hand, is very easy to enter because it only deals with externals. It's not hard to get baptized outwardly. It's not hard to answer a few questions formally to become a church member. It's not hard to give a little money in the offering plate and the like. And broad religion, whatever its name may be and it's got so many labels you wouldn't believe it in this world, many of them, including the word Christian, it really isn't the authentic thing if it doesn't require you to humble yourself, to lose your life, to take up the cross and follow Jesus. False religion has a wide gate. It does not hurt. It is not costly to enter into it. But the true religion demands nothing less than the crucifixion of self.

The second thing is that the true religion is not only hard when you enter, it's hard after you enter also. That's quite clearly taught here by our Lord when he says not only restricted is the gate but also narrow is the road that leads to life. Did you know that if you're not prepared to pay any price to be a disciple of Jesus, you can't be a disciple of Jesus? If you're not prepared to suffer anything to be faithful to Jesus Christ in your life, you're not really a Christian. You're on broad way. Do you know that the Bible says without holiness no man shall see God? And I can assure you, brothers and sisters, holiness is not something we arrive at without striving. We must perfect holiness in the fear of God. It's an agonizing struggle against the world, the flesh and the devil. It's a putting off every day of the old and the putting on of the new. The Christian life requires sacrifice. It requires standing up for principle. It requires a real submission to the authority of Christ and the law of God. We live in a day in which it is commonly thought that you can be a Christian without being narrow. In fact, being narrow today is almost thought to be non-Christian, but I'm telling you, if you're not narrow how can you possibly say you're in agreement with Jesus for he says, "Narrow is the road that leads to life and broad is the way that leads to destruction."

The third great difference between these two religions is in the number of people entering in them because false religion always has been, and still is, enormously ahead of the true religion in popularity. Many enter in by the broad gate and travel down the broad way that leads to destruction because false religion is a very popular thing naturally. Doesn't the fallen nature of man prefer something easy t still gives him the feeling that he's religious? Of course it does. The true religion, by contrast, always has been unpopular and always will be, and yet the amazing thing is that so many people seem to think that popularity is one of the signs of true religion. I was talking one time to a relative, seeking to witness to him about the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the religion of the Bible, and his answer to me was, "I already have the true religion." I said, "Well, how do you know

that?" He says, "Well, because there's no way that so many people could be wrong." He prided himself on belonging to the largest denomination in "Christendom," and to him, the fact that it was the largest was his proof that it was the right one. And I said, "Well, it's just a pity that Jesus didn't see that because he said narrow is the way that leads to life and few are they that find it." But that made no impression upon him. The only thing that impressed him was the fact that there were many and how could many be wrong?

Well, many were wrong in Noah's day. Many were wrong in Elijah's day. The many were wrong in Jesus' day. The many were wrong in Luther's day. And my friend, the many are wrong today too. For sure, they are wrong because the way that leads to life is narrow, not broad, and a few are finding it, not many. And that brings me to the final point of my message which is this: if Christ is right, and remember the man who said this died and came back from the dead alive in the flesh and he never took back one word of it, and he said, "All right, now you have to enter that narrow gate." Or, as he said in Luke 13:24, the parallel passage I read for you, "Make every effort to enter through that narrow door because many," he said, "when it's too late will try and will not be able." Now that is the really shocking state of affairs of multitudes of people. When it's too late, they're going to see that this is true. Christ suddenly returns, the Bible says, without warning and then they'll say, "Oh, the broad way was wrong. The narrow way was right. Oh, I want to go the narrow way." And the Bible says it's too late. Can't do it. Proverbs 1 tells us why. God says, "I kept warning them. I kept telling them. I kept speaking to them through my word, and they wouldn't pay any attention. Well, now suddenly comes destruction and then I won't listen to them. They wouldn't listen to me, I won't listen to them." That's the way it's going to be.

Let's face it, brothers and sisters, the simple truth is that most people are just plain complacent. That's the whole problem, just plain complacent as if time was eternity because if there is no possibility that life could end today or even tomorrow. Maybe in the back of their minds they have the idea, "Well, I'm going to look into this one of these times and do something about it." But the real enemy of the souls of men is complacency and that's why Christ said make every effort to enter through the narrow door.

You know, it isn't really hard to discover the true religion if you want to. If you would make every effort for one month to really understand what the narrow gate is and the narrow way is, I guarantee you, you'll understand it. But the pity is there are people who live an entire lifetime and they never do that. They know all about farming. They know all about their physical, bodily health. They know all about the stock market and 101 other things, and they know nothing virtually about the way of salvation. One of the great church fathers, Augustine, was like that. He lived a fast-paced, dissolute life, almost like some of these college students out there in California; that's the way Augustine lived in his early life really. He had a godly mother but he lived an ungodly life and he used to say, "I want to be a Christian but not yet. I want to be but not yet." But then one day, he stopped to think about the end of the road and he realized that that is what really counts. What really counts in our existence is the end of the road, where we're going. And there's really only two roads and you're on one of them or you're on the other one. And Christ, the Son of God, came down here to live and die and rise again from the dead, to tell us

authoritatively which road we ought to take. Now you can celebrate Easter for 100 years, but what good is it if you don't listen to what Jesus said? What good is it if you don't listen to what Jesus said?

We live in a day of prevailing moods of accommodation, "Do your own thing." The church is supposed to tolerate anything. What we've done to Christ and his words is to water them down, to make them lukewarm and easy to live with. But you know the words of Christ can't be watered down and it is not easy to live with his statements. True, saving, biblical religion is narrow and if you're going to be one of God's people, you've got to be narrow too. Can't you see that? This is not an exaggerated statement, some extreme thing that he said once when he was out of control. This is the truth stated by one who died and rose again from the dead. So let me ask you today: where do you stand? Can you really say, "I know what he meant. How right because I went through that narrow gate." Now when I went through that narrow gate, I was the loneliest person in the world. I went through it all alone. Every real Christian will say that right off the bat, "I went through that narrow gate alone and it was like going through the wringer." Talk about narrow, that's what it's like. Did you ever go through the wringer? If you haven't been through the wringer, you're not on the narrow way yet. And of course, it's a narrow way. When you become a Christian, you have certain absolutes you have to live by and everybody in the world is going to call you narrow. The way you deal with the Lord's Day, you're going to be called narrow, and you will be narrow but that's what Christ says you have to be if you're going to have eternal life.

So if you're not on the narrow way and you haven't been through the wringer, stop and think. Won't you listen today to the one and only man who died and came back to tell about it? Maybe you wouldn't want to listen to me and say, "Well, gee, he's never been there. Why should I listen to him?" Okay, but listen to Jesus. He has been there and he came back and he said, "You'd better make every effort to enter through that narrow gate and go down the narrow road." It may be unpleasant at the start, it may be unpleasant many times along the way, but just think what's at the end of the road. Doesn't that make it worth all the narrowness, the suffering, the tribulation? I'd a thousand time rather go down that narrow road to life than to go down the broad road in a Mercedes-Benz with a stereo radio, and in the end have destruction.

Now that's what Christ is talking about, so I ask you today to honor the Lord who rose from the dead in the one way that we can honor him really and that is to take heed to what he said. May God give to every one of you the grace to do it. Amen.

We thank you today, Lord Jesus, that you speak to us with authority not as one merely above the situation, but who rose after being in our situation to life and glory. We thank you that you died and rose again and ascended to glory, and that you're coming again at the end of the age. And we thank you that you call us to take up the cross and follow you, knowing that if we do we will share your throne and glory. O, grant, that each of us may do it by your grace and for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.