Westlake Church Lausanne

The Way to Life
Matthew 7:13-29

This passage finishes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. And as we've seen, in this sermon Jesus is setting out the vision, as one writer [Stott] puts it, of God's 'alternative society': the counter-cultural standards, the counter-cultural values, the counter-cultural priorities of God's kingdom. And, as he closes this sermon, Jesus is setting before us a choice: which is it going to be? Are you going to follow the prevailing culture of the day and the way of the world, or are you going to live as part of Christ's kingdom and his counter-culture?

Four points: Two ways; two dangers; two builders; and one Lord and Saviour.

Two Ways
So, in v13-14 Jesus describes two different ways to live, two different paths that you can take in life that head in very different directions. And when Jesus talks like this, he sounds very much like Moses. Because when the people of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses said, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life" (Deut 30:19).

But to start with, Jesus describes the way that ends in death, the path you really don't want to be on. And yet Jesus says it's the one plenty of people take: v13, "For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many."

So this way is easy to get on, Jesus says, because the gate is wide. So you don't have to do anything special to start walking on it. You can get through this gate, at the start of this road, with all your baggage. We can get through carrying our big backpacks filled with our prejudices, or our self-centredness, or our self-righteousness. You don't need to take anything off to squeeze through the gate. You don't need to repent of anything, because this gate is wide.

And so is the road. Jesus says it's 'easy' and that word can mean *easy* or *broad*. Now when you're out hiking, there are some paths that are easy to walk on, aren't there? They're well maintained and they're wide, and there are no up-hills, and no edges, and there's no risk walking on them.

And Jesus is saying that that's like the path that ends in destruction: it's easy, it's broad, it doesn't ask anything of you. If you want to live the way you want, that's fine on this path. Anything goes. No-one's going to challenge your behaviour, or call you to repentance on this road. And if you want to believe whatever you want to believe, that's fine, no-one's going to challenge your views on this path. Everything's possible, everything's acceptable, there's space for lots of opinions, and lot's of behaviours on the broad way. You can do what you want to do, and you don't need to fear that anyone will tell you that you need to change, or that you're wrong. This way is *the* ultimate safe-space. It's *the* path for our 21st century.

Consequently, Jesus says, plenty of people take it. There's a crowd on this road. And that also makes it easy, doesn't it? Because none of us like to stand out, or be thought of as odd. It's much easier to follow the crowd, and go with the flow, and on this road there is a flow, so we don't need to worry about our image, or how others perceive us. There's no awkwardness walking on this path.

It's great, isn't it?

Except, if you saw a crowd heading for a cliff edge, would you follow them? Because Jesus says while this path is easy, it all ends in destruction. And history teaches us that sometimes it's better to be in the minority, doesn't it? That the real heroes were often those who didn't go with the flow, who didn't drink the Cool Aid, but who did stand out against the crowd, and who did oppose the cultural zeitgeist. You see, sometimes, following the crowd is not such a great idea.

Verse 14, "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." So, in contrast, this second way is hard. But sometimes those are the best paths, aren't they? I mean, have you ever been out hiking, and the path you're on turns out to be way harder and more uphill than you imagined. And mentioning no names, sometimes those you're hiking with start to complain: 'O dad, this is terrible.' And you think, 'Well it looked flat on the map!' But all the pain is forgotten when you get to the top, because the view is stunning.

And whilst *easy* ends in destruction, this second path, this *hard* way, ends in life, real life, Jesus says. And it's that that makes the hardship worth it.

Ok, but why is it hard? Well, the word Jesus uses for *hard* comes from the word for suffering, or when something is pressed, or crushed. So, firstly, it's hard because it's not the way the crowd takes, and maybe you'll suffer, maybe you'll face opposition, or criticism, or loss of reputation, for taking it.

But secondly, it's hard because it's narrow, and restricting. On the broad way you can live just however you want to live; but things are different on Jesus' way. This way restricts your choices. There is going to be stuff now that you can't do, even if you wanted to, things you have to say goodbye to. On this narrow way, you can't take that backpack stuffed with all your stuff. And just as you can't behave however you want, you can't believe whatever you want either.

Recently, I think I've lost my head for heights, and there have been a couple of times we've been hiking when the path has got harder and there's this edge and I've had to turn back and find a different way, leaving Su and the girls to go on without me. And because this path Jesus is talking about is hard, and there's a cost involved, maybe some of our friends will turn turn back. And that loss will make it seem all the harder.

So, it's no wonder that the crowd on the hard and narrow road is thinner – I mean, who wants to say goodbye to their freedom to do and think whatever they want? Who would ever want to say goodbye to their right to be king or queen of their own life? Who would want to risk the loss of friends or reputation? The answer is, those who realise that this is the way to life. Those who realise that the cost is worth it.

So no wonder Jesus urges us, v13, "*Enter* by the narrow gate." Don't stand there dawdling and prevaricating, like a man standing outside a shop who can't make up his mind whether to go in or not. Go in, Jesus says, enter, get walking. And, did you notice, the choice is binary. Switzerland prides itself on its neutrality, doesn't it. Well, Jesus says there is no neutrality when it comes to him, or to life. There is no third way. There are only two gates. There are only two ways. And only one of them is the one you want to be on.

So let me ask you, which one are you on?

Two Dangers
Jesus says that as you walk through life, you face two dangers. And the first one is from false teachers.

Verse 15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." So, at risk of stating the obvious, the first thing Jesus says is that there are such things as false teachers. That when it comes to religion, and spirituality, people can tell you things that are wrong. That what they teach you is false. And that means that Jesus is saying there is such a thing as objective truth, and that truth doesn't just matter for the world of science, or the courts of law, but for the things of faith as well. That some beliefs are wrong, that not everything is equal.

But the second thing Jesus says is that these false prophets come disguised in sheep's clothing. So they don't pitch up in your life wearing a great big sandwich board, or with a flashing neon sign over them, saying, 'Beware! False prophet!' They look and sound like sheep. And that means that they can take you off-guard. And one reason for that, as the apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy, is that they tell us things that our itching ears want to hear (2 Tim 4:3).

You see, Jesus gives this warning after telling us about the two ways, so it's not pushing it too far to think that these false teachers are people who encourage you to think that that broad road, that easy way, is the one to life. That you can indulge yourself, live a life of ease and prosperity, centred on yourself, and still think you're on the way to life. That what you do with your body, or your money, or your life, or how you treat others, how you behave, has got nothing to do with it, and you can serve all these other things and still find life.

And that's why Jesus tells us the third thing about them: that they're not just wrong, they're dangerous, and he calls them 'ravenous wolves.' Now, I don't know if you've heard but wolves are making something of a comeback in Switzerland, and the reason some people aren't happy about that is that they kill sheep. Which is what false teachers do – they can rob you of the very thing you want and are searching for – which is life.

But if that's the danger they pose, Jesus says you can still recognise them. In fact, he says the same thing twice, v16 and v20, "You will recognise them by their fruits." That just as you can tell a vine from a bramble, or a fig tree from a thistle, so you can tell a true teacher from a false one, and it's down to the fruit of their lives.

Firstly, it's their **character**. Do they display the fruit of the Spirit in their lives – the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Or, do you see more of the fruit of the flesh? And whilst it can be notoriously difficult to assess even your own motives, let alone anyone else's, is their ministry about Christ or about themselves? You see, a wolf feeds off the sheep, it devours them, it uses them for its own ends. And a false teacher is not in it for your good, or for God's glory, but for what they can get. So as you observe them, ask, 'Is God their God or does this smack of making a name, or money, or gaining power, for themselves?'

Secondly, their fruit will show in their **conduct**, and in particular in their influence on others. In 1 and 2 Timothy Paul warns Timothy against false teachers who cause friction between believers, who promote division and bitterness, and whose bad influence spreads like gangrene (1 Tim 6:4-5, 2 Tim 2:7, 16, 18, 23), and it ends in people's faith being torn down, not built up.

Thirdly, their fruit will show itself in the **content** of their teaching. Is what they teach consistent with what Jude calls, 'the faith once and for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3) – the historic, apostolic Christian faith? And, in particular, as the apostle John repeatedly drives home, is what they teach about Jesus, about his divinity, his humanity, and his centrality correct (1 John 2:22-3; 4:2-3)?

So it doesn't matter whether a teacher draws a crowd, flies a jet, writes best selling books or has gleaming white teeth, what matters is, do they display the fruit Jesus seeks in character, conduct and content?

But if false teachers are the first danger Jesus warns us of, the second is **false followers** – it's the danger, not of being deceived by others, but by ourselves.

Verse 21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." In other words, it's the danger of being all talk but no walk. I mean, imagine you met someone who claimed to be Swiss, but when they talked about being Swiss they

sounded very English. And they told you they hated eating melted cheese, and when you pressed them they couldn't tell a cow apart from a donkey, and they were always making noise after 10pm, and they steadfastly refused to recycle their rubbish. Now, they could tell you they were Swiss till the cows come home with flowers in their hair, but you'd be sat there thinking, 'you're not Swiss at all.'

And Jesus is saying the same is true for his kingdom. Someone can say all the right things; and what they say can be very orthodox – after all, they call Jesus 'Lord'; and it can be very fervent v22, '*Lord, Lord*, did we not *prophesy* in your name…'; it can even be supernatural, 'and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'; but there's very little evidence of them living like citizens of his counter-cultural kingdom.

You see, just because someone says the right stuff does not mean they've genuinely repented of their sin, and put their trust in Christ, and are filled with the Spirit and now live differently. And whilst Jesus tells us in v22 that these people claim to 'do many mighty works' the reality is that Jesus doesn't know them and he sees their works very differently: v23, 'I never knew you; depart from me you *workers of lawlessness*.' So it's possible for Jesus to be Lord on someone's lips, but not Lord of their life. And true citizens, he says, will be marked by heart-level obedience.

Which is why Jesus finishes his sermon by talking about what we build our lives on.

Two Builders

Now, anyone who's been to Sunday School knows at least three Bible characters, don't they? Noah, and these two builders. The problem is, that *knowing* about them is not enough, in fact *just* knowing is exactly what Jesus takes aim at here.

You see, both builders are very sincere, aren't they. They both build: v24, 'A wise man who built his house'; v26, 'A foolish man who built his house.' So they both want a house to live in, and they both work hard, and they both go about constructing that house. But they also both get hit by a storm: v25 and 27, 'And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat…' The one difference between these two men is the foundation they build on – rock or sand, and it's that foundation that makes all the difference to their outcome. And Jesus says that foundation is not just *hearing,* it's not just *knowing* his word – it's doing it. Verse 24, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and *does* them…" Verse 26, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does *not* do them…"

Now, don't you think it's interesting that Jesus chooses this parable to close this sermon with its call to live counter-culturally, as citizens of his kingdom? It's the man or woman who hears what Jesus says, and lives this way, who lives against the flow of our surrounding culture, who's the one who builds his life on the rock.

So, whilst there's a danger of being deceived by others, and whilst there's a danger of deceiving yourself and it being all talk, it can also be all head. Your faith can be all intellectual. You can know it all, you can quote your Bible verses, you can know your Bible characters, but still not be a doer. And then, Jesus says, it's as if you're building your life on sand. And it's the storms of life, the difficulties and trials and suffering we go through, it's the final storm of the end of life and the judgement that we all face, that reveals was it sand or rock we built on? Did we hear Jesus' words, but then go on living however we wanted, or did we hear these words and allow them to radically change the way we see and live all of life? Build our lives on ourselves, and it all risks collapse. Build them on Christ and obedience to him and your life will stand.

The trouble is you can hear that and think, "Well, have I done enough? Is my life built on Christ enough? Is my grasp of Christ's teaching good enough?" And you can find yourself shifting your gaze off of Jesus and onto yourself, and then you really are on shaky ground.

One Lord and Saviour

Did you notice the response of the crowd to all that Jesus has been saying? Verse 28, 'And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.' So they've heard everything Jesus has to say in this Sermon, and their response is: 'we've never heard anyone talk like this! Who is this guy?'

But if that's their question, another is: who does *this guy* think *he* is? Because did you notice the extraordinary claim that Jesus makes for himself? Verse 23, "And then *I* will declare to them, '*I* never knew you; depart from *me*, you workers of lawlessness.'" So here is a man who says that the final judgement on the last day belongs to him. That he will be the ultimate judge, and that eternal punishment consists in being sent away from him. So who does this man think he is?

Well, who else but the King gets to decide who enters the kingdom? He says he is the one who will declare sentence. But who but God is the ultimate Judge? He says that our eternal security is based on what we do with his words, but who can say that other than the ultimate standard by which everyone will be judged? So when you hear people say that in the words of the Sermon on the Mount we have Christ the great ethical teacher, your response should be, 'no we don't. We have Jesus Christ the Lord, who calls everyone to obey him.'

But we also have the one with the power to save. You see, look again at v23: "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you.'" So what is it that makes you safe, eternally safe? Safe when the storms of life come and safe at the end of life. It's when Christ *knows* you. When you come to him as Lord, and you come by faith, knowing that on your own you can't do it, then you're safe. Because he's not just Christ the Lord, he is also Christ the Saviour.

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You see it's only Jesus who has ever perfectly walked the hard and narrow way of obedience to God. He's the only one who has ever perfectly loved God with all his heart, and his neighbour as himself. And he did it by walking the way of the cross. And as we've already said, the meaning of that word translated in v14 as "the way is *hard*" comes from the word for *suffering* or for something being crushed; and at the cross Christ suffered for us, and as Isaiah the prophet wrote, he 'was crushed for our iniquities…' (Is 53:5). And Isaiah goes on, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Is 53:6). And he took the hard and narrow way for us. All our failures to take the hard way, all those times we have heard his word but not done it, the one Lord and Saviour took it all upon himself, and at the cross that storm the builders experience, that storm of eternal judgement, fell on him, and he was consumed by it, instead of us.

And yet, because he had perfectly walked that path of obedience, God raised him from the dead. And so now, by looking to him, by keeping our eyes fixed on him, you and I can walk this way of life. And knowing the measure of his love for us, and what he has done for us, can give us the desire, not just to hear his words, but to do them, and to live this counter-cultural life he calls us to.