

IS THE GATE STILL NARROW?

The imagery of the narrow gate is particularly interesting to me in terms of its juxtaposition in the attitudes and proclamations of the liberal church in our time. First of all, it seems to me that there can be little doubt about Jesus' own perspective. The gateway is narrow and the road is hard that goes into the Kingdom of God. Jesus knows this. He knows it from personal experience, and He knows it from His own spiritual awareness. He does not mince words, and He tells us this same principle in a number of different ways, at a number of different times.

Various translations use various words, but the significance of the teaching does not change. Under duress, some have argued that it does not say that the gate is the gateway into the Kingdom of God. Yes, there could be other applications. The gateway into material success or financial security; the gateway into a happy marriage; the gateway into peace on earth; the gateway into an honest and moral life. Lots of important gateways are narrow. But however apropos such applications might be, trying to suggest that they are what Jesus was talking about seems thin and unconvincing. The gateway into the Kingdom of God is narrow and the way is hard. We may not like to be told or reminded, but there it is.

If there was a title to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, it would be "The Kingdom of God" (or "The Kingdom of Heaven"). Beginning with the Beatitudes and sprinkled through the rest of the sermon, the phrase is repeated often enough to make it clear to anyone who wants it clear that Jesus is talking about God's Kingdom.

So why does the liberal church have a problem with "the narrow gate"? By the way, all categories are superficial and inaccurate. But if we are using the familiar nomenclature, then this is a *liberal* church, and I am a *liberal* Pastor. That's hardly accurate, many of you would say, but we fit those categories more than we fit any of the other categories.

But why does the liberal church have a problem with "the narrow gate"? Quite simply, "the narrow gate" does not match the teachings or messages of the liberal church: "All are welcome." "Jesus accepts everybody." "Love is unconditional." "Forgiveness is automatic." "Grace is unlimited and knows no boundaries." In many places, the

liberal church is pushing an agenda that it thinks is better than the one Jesus claimed and proclaimed to us. On a good day, you can sometimes persuade me that this is unintentional – that the voice of the liberal church has simply stopped paying much attention to what Jesus actually taught and did. But if we willfully decide that we are smarter than Jesus, that is dangerous terrain.

Some people try to comfort me by reminding me that the conservative church distorts and changes the Message of Jesus even worse than we do. However much I may agree with that, it somehow fails to be comforting.

The liberal church is convinced that there is no such thing as evil. There are only people who have had a hard time; people with unmet needs. And if we can take away all the things that make people afraid of God, unhappy with the church, or resentful toward religious authority, then folk will come flocking back through our doors. Our pews will fill up, our coffers will fill up, and everything will be okay again.

Do we really care about racial justice, or do we merely reason that if more people of color join us, then as the white population continues to decline, our church will have been farsighted enough to ensure a better future? That is a semi-nasty comment. But I am aware of how many times over the years I have experienced meetings with Christians of various racial groups and our agenda has had little interest or time for sharing our experiences of prayer, the spiritual walk, or our allegiance or loyalty to God. When Christians get together, are they only interested in outer circumstances? What about our “life in Christ Jesus”? What about our relationship with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord?

If we are talking about the kingdoms – the organizations, the structures, the companies, the nations – of this earth, and Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, there will be an inevitable mismatch, an inevitable miscommunication. If we are focused in our own minds on what it takes to be acceptable or to belong to any human organization, including a church, then we cannot hear what Jesus is trying to tell us about “the narrow gate.” He is talking about one reality; we are thinking about a very different reality.

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Some of you try to track with Jesus; try to learn from Him; try to follow Him as much as you possibly can – I know you do. So why does He tell us that the gate is narrow and that the road is hard? Is He just musing to no purpose? Most of us are long past attributing that kind of attitude or motive to Jesus. He rarely does or says anything without a purpose.

So what is our danger? We may not like to admit it, but it is dangerous for us to start thinking that the gate will be wide or the road easy. Or that we will just wander into the Kingdom doing what comes naturally. We will love God and our neighbors because it is our natural tendency to do so. And following closely on the heels of that kind of attitude is a discouragement, a resentment, a shocked dismay when it turns out that the road is not easy and the gate is not wide. So Jesus warns His followers to get ready. If we want to be followers of His, we must go into training; we are signing up for more than we can handle unaided. The spiritual warfare of Jesus' followers never ends in this life.

And suddenly we realize that Jesus was constantly telling His followers this very thing: We ought always to pray and never ease up or get discouraged. We must continually remember that we are of more value than the sparrows or the lilies. We must repent or we cannot enter the Kingdom. We must die to the old life or we cannot enter the new one. If we try to put His new wine into our old wineskins, both will be lost. How much does the great pearl cost? It is the exact same price for everyone: ALL that you have.

It is all Jesus' fault, of course. He is so mean and exclusive and judgmental – not really loving or forgiving like some try to claim. Only, Jesus is not the Creator. Jesus does not make the rules or design the principles by which life operates. Amazingly, He does not soften them to please or appease us. It is one of the reasons many of us have come to trust and respect Him so much.

Most churches and most religious leaders are perfectly willing to lie to us if they think it will be good for us. If a lie will help us to believe more; if a lie will smooth things over; if a lie will help us to be more comfortable in our faith or more supportive of the church – then it is for a good cause. Don't you see that? Don't you agree? Jesus never did. *"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

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Jesus tells us the gate (into the Kingdom) is narrow – because it is. There are all kinds of “things” we would like to bring with us, but we cannot get through the gate without leaving them behind: greed, vengeance, depression, wanting our own way more than God’s way. Jesus mentions these and many other things as His teachings and parables unfold. “Hey, it’s okay with me if you want to bring some of your resentments and bad attitudes along with you, but the truth is, you cannot get through the gate with all that clutter hanging out all over you.”

How much you love God; how much you want to be who God made you to be; how much you genuinely care about others; how much you want to do God’s will and live for His Kingdom – all of that stuff fits through the gate. Even then, some of it needs a little adjusting. But here in this world, we try at first to mix it with lots of other things that do not belong in the Kingdom – things that would destroy the Kingdom if we were not willing to get rid of them.

How much fear can we keep and still get through the gate? How much of our desire to control and manage the people around us can we carry with us? How focused can we stay on earthly success or being right or wanting to associate with only the “right kind” of people and still make it through that gate? How much of our loneliness can we bring with us? How much of our mistrust of others, which always connects somehow to our mistrust of our own worth – our own deep and true acceptance by God – will get snagged on the walls of the narrow gate and hold us back?

So the real truth is: All ARE welcome! But all are welcome to come through the narrow gate. All of us do have to repent, all of us must be reborn – all of us must enter the great transformation in which we lose more and more of the things that weigh us down and keep us in bondage to principles and priorities that do not fit either the Kingdom or our own true selves.

Is there anything we really want to keep that the narrow gate scrapes off of us? Oh indeed, we think so at first. But the truth is, the narrow gate is kinder to us – more compassionate and loving toward us – than the great wide gate we think it would be so nice to go through.

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Back to my favorite Sunday School curriculum for a moment. What is the wide gate in the story of Pinocchio? The wide gate leads to Pleasure Island. Everybody is delighted to be there – at first. All the boys are doing exactly as they please. Nobody is telling them they cannot, or even that they should not. Finally there are no parental voices; no teachers or preachers; even Jiminy Cricket, a poor stand-in for the Holy Spirit, is temporarily out of the picture. And so, inevitably – left to their own desires and choices – the boys are all making asses of themselves. And behind that, the real tragedy – the true bondage of self-will – is locking in with less and less likelihood that they will ever be able to break free.

But by the narrowest margin (a narrow gate perhaps), Pinocchio stumbles into a higher purpose. A bit awkward, perhaps, but Geppetto's search has led them both into the story of Jonah – repentance and rebirth – and Pinocchio risks everything to find and free his father.

It is the opposite of Pleasure Island, yet clearly the joy and the purpose and the true pleasures of life are far greater than anything ever imagined on Pleasure Island. And instead of leading into bondage, it leads to true freedom.

But what of us? Have any of *us* found the gate into the Kingdom to be comfortable or the road to be easy? Have any of us ever discovered that the Christian WAY asks nothing, requires no changes, changes none of our priorities or purposes?

If someone did a sociological study of the members of this church – comparing them with the normal members of the society around us – would there be any difference between us and any other Newport Beach citizen? Would we have the same values, the same priorities, the same goals, the same hopes and dreams?

My father used to say, “If you can't tell the difference, what difference does it make?”

In many cases, I know there is a very big difference indeed. Just wondering if you know this also. The gate is narrow, and most of us know it. I even think most of us are grateful for it. And we are grateful to Jesus for telling us the truth – and inviting us into a very different Life.