

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus said that we should come into his Kingdom through the "narrow gate," and I'm reminded of the Pearly Gates in Heaven.

The story goes like this: When everybody on earth was dead and waited to enter Paradise at the Pearly Gates, God appeared and separated the men from the women and said, "I want the men to make two lines. One line for the men who were true heads of their households and the other line for the men who were dominated by their women." The line of the men who were dominated by their wives was 100s of miles long, and in the line of men who were heads of their households, there was only one man.

God said to the men who had allowed themselves to be dominated by their wives, "You should be ashamed of yourselves. You have been lazy; you have not fulfilled your purpose. I told you to be the spiritual leader in your family, but of all of you, only one man did as he was commanded. Now learn from him." And the Lord turned to the one man who stood all alone, and he said to him, "Tell them, my son, how did you manage to be the only one in this line?" The man replied, "I don't know, my wife told me to stand here."

Often, we think about our Christian walk as a passive thing, as in, "I belong to God, and nothing can take away his love. I believe he is always with me. Amen." We like to think that if we keep our noses clean and don't say and do too many stupid things, there is a chance God's will might be done in our lives. Cross your fingers and knock on wood.

But I think there might be more to it than that. This morning we're going to continue our study of how God's people can intentionally bear fruit in their lives, about how this approach impacts our walk with God and with one another.

## **OPENING PRAYER**

### **MATTHEW 7:13-23**

**Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. <sup>15</sup> "Watch out for**

false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup>By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup>Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. <sup>21</sup>"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup>Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

This passage of Scripture is the end of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. You might remember that Jesus began this sermon with the Beatitudes—"Blessed are the peacemakers"—and he continued with his metaphors of salt and light—"You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world"—he updated the Ten Commandment, and continued with his teaching about the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and tithing, etc. And now, here at the end of his sermon, he provided a final warning. He said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup>But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (vv.13-14).

The "narrow gate": Jesus wanted his listeners to picture in their mind's eye an actual gate that leads down a path. The gate's wide enough for only one person at a time. You pass through the gate, and the road on the other side is as narrow as the gate. And the reward is this: At the end of the road is eternal life.

But there's another gate too, and it's really wide, so wide in fact, you cannot veer too far to one side or the other. And the road it leads to is equally spacious, meaning you can continue to live just as you always have, behaving however you like. But at the end of this road is hell.

Jesus wanted everyone within the sound of his voice to know that right now he was beckoning them from the narrow gate, and that he wanted to walk with them down the path on the other side of it.

Sometimes I hear the teachers in our preschool say to the children, “make better choices.” Choosing the narrow gate is the better choice. And it’s not hard to find. Later on, Peter provided a concise roadmap. He said, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).**

That’s the short answer: Listen to Jesus’ words, believe them, and follow them, and you’re good to go. But if you’re a human being—if you have relationships, if you feel challenged in your work or home, if you have ever struggled with an addiction, a disease, a heartache, or a sin—you need the long answer.

Right before Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount, we read that he was preaching to all the people this simple message: **“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 4:17)**

This is how everyone ended up at the foot of that hill where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount: He called them to repent, and they did so. As we discussed last week, being a Christian begins with repentance or saying I’m sorry, and I suggested the tax collector’s prayer: **“God, have mercy on me a sinner” (Luke 18:13).**

To a gathering of repentant sinners, Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, saying, “Now that you’ve stopped rebelling against God, do these things—make better choices—and you will be living as God intended you to live; you’ll be living as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Indeed, the gate is narrow because one man stands in front of it: Jesus. And he calls you and me through that gate one by one. We hear his voice, we repent, and we walk through it living according to his teaching, his words.

But there are challenges along the way. Jesus warns us, **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup>By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup>Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (vv.15-20).**

Christ was warning his followers about false teachers, which would seem to be straight forward enough. But it's not that simple, for they will **"come to you in sheep's clothing."** In other words, they will appear to be gentle and kind; they will appear to be obedient and repentant. But in their hearts, they are not. Indeed, not only are they not citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, they are God's enemies, and they desire to turn you against him, for **"inwardly they are ferocious wolves."** Beware. They imitate their father, the devil, who **"prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"** (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:8).

In politics nowadays we hear about the dreaded "purity test," that there are these armchair politicians who are holier than everyone else, and if someone isn't perfect, they can't run for office. I sure am glad we don't do that to one another in the Christian church!

We know we are not perfect. We know that if our lives were put under a microscope, we would be cast out of the fellowship once and for all! Paul himself, a Christian for at least 20 years, confessed, **"I know nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. <sup>19</sup>For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want"** (Romans 7:18-19).

Thus we pray, **"God, have mercy on me a sinner."** John the Baptist preached, **"bear fruit in keeping with repentance"** (Matthew 3:8). Repentance is what distinguishes between a sheep and a wolf in sheep's clothing. A person who repents for doing wrong in the name of Jesus is a Christian. Such a person nourishes his heart with the salve of forgiveness which flows from the tree on Calvary; such a person bears much fruit in the name of Jesus.

Jesus said, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup>Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"** (vv.21-23)

On the one hand, there is the sheep who repents and produces fruit. On the other hand, there is the one who does not repent, but he produces fruit nonetheless. But it's rotten fruit. He prays and he teaches, and he even casts out demons and

performs other miracles. But he does not lead people to Christ, for repentance is the key to the narrow gate.

A wolf in sheep's clothing may be hard to detect, for he may possess satanic sources of power which can imitate the work of Christ. That's why Jesus warned that they may "**perform many miracles.**"

But all is not lost. Paul provided a defense when he instructed God's people to "**Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*" (Ephesians 6:11-12).**

Jesus said that the one who enters the Kingdom of Heaven is "**the one who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven.**" He told us the will of the Father in the Sermon on the Mount, a plan that begins with repentance: "**God, have mercy on me a sinner.**"

Friends in Christ, faith is the beginning of our relationship with the Lord. With faith we hear Christ's invitation at the narrow gate, the gate he first passed through on the Cross and with his resurrection from the dead.

With joy we accept his invitation, and we walk with him, for this journey with our Lord is the path to eternal life.

Jesus said, "**every good tree bears good fruit.**" A good tree has deep roots. This week, brothers and sisters in Christ, let us feed the root system of our faith with plenty of time in God's Word and prayer.

This week let us check ourselves. If we're feeling a little wolfish under our Christian veneer, let's say these words, "**God, have mercy on me a sinner,**" and let us get on with bearing fruit in keeping with repentance.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.