

The one choice that matters

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Amen. So this morning we're thinking about the one choice in our lives that ultimately matters. We're going to think about the choices that we make and the choices that we have to make.

! We'll begin with a great philosopher, Dumbledore, speaking to Harry Potter in the Chamber of Secrets. You might remember that. It is our choices, Harry, that show who we truly are far more than our abilities.

And we recognize that Dumbledore was on to something there. You know, every day we make hundreds of conscious choices. Thousands that we're not aware of, hundreds of conscious choices. Many of them are really mundane and ordinary. You know, what we have for breakfast, what we're going to wear to church, how we're going to get to church, fairly routine. But some of our choices have a shaping influence on us. They make us. If I say yes or no to that job offer, to that place in that particular university, if I continue with or end a relationship, if I change a location, each of those choices can change everything in our lives. And we also recognize, I think, that there are some choices that show who we truly are. Some choices that we make where we reveal our values and our goals, where there are these moments where we have to decide, what am I going to stand up for?

What truth or reality am I going to live by? And so Jesus, as He comes to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, He concludes by saying, effectively, we have two choices. There are two ways to live. Joshua said it, David said it in the Psalm, and now Jesus says it. And of all the choices that you're going to make in your life, here is the one choice that matters. Because King Jesus is saying to you and to me, I am the one you need to follow. I am the one you need to listen to, and I am the one you need to build your life upon. So let's get into our text. The first little section, verses 13 and 14, maybe a familiar image, we're invited to choose the right entrance, enter through the narrow gate. And Jesus gives us the kind of word picture we recognize. Lots of people talk about life being like a journey. And as Jesus paints this picture, there are two roads. There's a broad road and there's a narrow road. Interestingly, Jesus takes us to the beginning. He says there's a narrow gate, and there's a broad gate, but He also takes us, importantly, I think, to the end of the journey.

[2 : 48] There's a broad road that leads to destruction, a narrow gate, narrow way that leads to life. And so one of the things that Jesus is saying to us is so important is we need to learn to live life backwards. What is the outcome I want for my life? What is the destination I want for my life? Well, that determines the entrance that we're going to take and the path we're going to follow.

Jesus says enter through the narrow gate. To make that really simple, Jesus is saying come to God through me. In John chapter 10, He says, I am the gate. And the picture there is of Jesus being the gate for some sheep. Here's the way to get into the sheep pen where there's a wall, where there's safety and there's security. So Jesus, the gate, represents a place of security and life.

Jesus is telling us all along that He is the only way to enter into God's kingdom. He is the road that leads to life with God. Because He'll say again in John chapter 14, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. And to listen to Jesus' words, we understand that He's calling us to a narrow way. The only way, He says, to come to God is through me. But notice that just as in this little message there's a narrow gate and a narrow way that leads to life, Jesus says if we follow the narrow way of following Him, we get the broad life, the generous life of knowing our God. Seems narrow, but ultimately broad and generous and life-giving. An image that some of us at least might relate to is to think of the TARDIS in Doctor Who. I don't know if there's any, we have some Doctor

Who fans. I can't say I'm one of them, but we have some. But at least I know this much about Doctor Who. The TARDIS, the outside of it is the very humble blue police box. Looks really small

and narrow, but as soon as the Doctor steps in, it's huge. And it becomes this entry into a world of adventure.

And that points to something that Jesus is directing us to, that the Kingdom of God, especially if you're on the outside, if you're not a Christian today, the Kingdom of God might look really narrow and really restrictive, but when you're on the inside, you discover it's broad and it's life-giving and there is grace. So let's think about that for a moment.

[5 : 29] How do we see this narrow yet broad principle at work? So we heard Jesus say, I am the only way. That sounds really narrow and restrictive, and a lot of people resist that. Sounds really narrow.

But then the Bible also says, we are saved by God's grace, not by our efforts. That means the way into salvation becomes really broad. All who call on the name of Jesus will be saved. All, anyone, everyone. So it's narrow, but it's broad. Again, Jesus will talk about the need for us to be humble, to be ready to die to ourselves. He uses the imagery of picking up a cross and be ready to sacrifice. That sounds narrow, but then He says that if we die to self, then we actually gain true life. We gain honor within the kingdom of God. We become a child of God. We become a friend of Jesus. We get a new family, the church. So all of a sudden, it becomes really broad. Jesus says, you need to live according to my word. You need to live according to the Father's will. And again, we might say, well, that's really narrow. I want to choose for myself how to live. Sounds really narrow. But then we understand that if this is our maker and creator speaking, then His parameters are actually the pathway to freedom and flourishing. He's giving us access to the life that we were made for. So all of a sudden, it becomes broad. So it's narrow and yet broad and life-giving. But maybe it makes us ask the question, well, why would we choose the narrow way, the way of Jesus? Because Jesus is clear.

It is the path less traveled. To be a follower of Jesus, and if you're a follower of Jesus, you know this. All the time, we're standing out. We're going in a different direction. We've got a different way of life. We've got a different destination that we're aiming for. And so often, that makes us feel different. To follow the narrow way of Jesus means going against the grain of our culture, which says to live for ourselves, whereas we're saying we're called to live for Jesus.

We know that it's costly. He speaks of sacrifice. We understand that as the church, we live on the margins. It's like we're exiles. This isn't really our true home. So why would we choose it?

[7 : 54] Sometimes it's hard. Psalm 73 tells the story through song of a man called Asaph. He was a follower of God, but he was really honest. He was looking back on his life, and he said, do you know what? There was a time when I wanted to leave the way of following God behind, because it was really hard. And he began to envy the wicked. Their life seems so easy. They have no troubles. They don't think about God, but things seem to be going well. Maybe I should do what they're doing.

And so he almost gave up on following God, but then he lived life backwards. He went into the temple, to the place of worship, and he remembered what Psalm 1 was talking about, final destiny. He remembered that following God leads to eternal life and salvation and joy. He didn't just count the cost. He counted the reward of being a follower of God. To be saved and to be known by God is worth it. But it may be that you're a Christian here today, and the easy way seems appealing.

You're following Jesus, and it just seems like life is getting harder.

And maybe you're thinking, well, maybe if I just step off the path. Maybe I just change from that uphill slog in the life of faith. One thing I'd say is read Pilgrim's Progress. Wonderful book that considers that in so many ways. But there are some things that we need to remember as Christians. We need to remember we have a good shepherd who is with us. Jesus came to save us. Jesus promises to be with us always. And Jesus gives us grace for today and will give us grace for tomorrow.

When life seems to be filled with, you know, hundreds of troubles, we remember the power and the love of God and recognize that that means there's hundreds of ways in which God can come to us and help us and strengthen us. And when we're tempted to give up, let me encourage you to live life backwards. Go to the end of the road. Remember eternal joy and glory that's waiting.

[10 : 10] For the children of God. It's been recognized in our country, and I've mentioned a few times over the course of a few months, this quiet revival that's taking place in the UK. Lots of young people, especially, who are kind of discovering that, you know, the secular way of thinking is leading to a bit of a dead end. There's no hope. There's no meaning. There's no purpose. Surely

there must be something more. Let me say, if you're here today because you're searching for hope and meaning, you're absolutely in the right place. Listening to Jesus is absolutely the right thing to do.

And it's important for us to remember our role as a church is to be a signpost, not to ourselves, but to Jesus. One of the reasons why I think it's so important that we gather together for a thing like Engine Room on a Wednesday is that we can be trained and equipped and have confidence to be that signpost for Jesus. Let's consider Jesus. When we think about this narrow road imagery, remember that Jesus too walked His narrow road. His road of perfect obedience, of doing the Father's will. He never stepped off that path for a moment.

That led Him to a life of suffering. That led Him to be rejected. That led Him to die on the cross. But He walked that road knowing that in His death, there would be forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life for everyone who would believe. He knew that He'd come to be the good shepherd to lay down His life, who would call His sheep to hear His voice, to invite people to enter in by faith in Jesus to this wonderful new life that He offers. So, Jesus says, choose me. Enter the kingdom of God by faith to enjoy true, generous, eternal life. Choose the right entrance. And then in the second section, verses 15 to 23, he encourages us to choose the right influence. And this section sounds a strong warning. It begins, watch out for false prophets. But again, just to recognize something that we will probably all have experienced, that we have key influencers in our lives, not necessarily social media influencers, but people in our lives, perhaps our parents, perhaps our spouse, or a long-standing friend, perhaps a Christian minister, perhaps a colleague, somebody that you would rely on, somebody whose wisdom you would trust, somebody whose character you would admire. But it may also be the case, if you look back on your life, that you have had, maybe you still have in the moment, negative influences. People that have not been good news for you. If I think back to my school days, I can think about guys that I hung around with with bad attitudes or with bad behavior, and those were the times when I was going to be led down the wrong path. Well, Jesus' warning here is that if we choose the wrong voice to listen to, the wrong teacher to follow, the wrong influence to guide us, it can have a devastating effect. He uses in verse 19, when he's talking about a tree, the language of destruction. You know, there are those who will be chopped down and thrown into the fire. He uses the language of departure. I never knew you away from me. So, our choice of influence really matters. And again, to boil it down, what the Bible is saying, the choice becomes either we're going to listen to Jesus, or we're going to listen to someone or something else that can be defined as a false prophet. And it becomes this consistent theme throughout the Bible, the call to choose God and

[14 : 35] His Word and His wisdom and to reject whatever is false, whatever would draw a person away from faith and love and worship of God. And so, to help us, Jesus gives three traits to watch out for.

How do you and I spot someone that Jesus would describe as a false prophet and influence to avoid? Look first with me at verse 15. There is something about attitude here. Watch out for false prophets.

They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly, they are ferocious wolves. You know, a picture of innocence, but actually coming in to manipulate and to destroy. And so, one thing that we need to watch out for when we're choosing the voices to listen to is, how does that person relate to and treat God's people? God had consistently warned the church to watch out for false prophets, bad shepherds, those who do not care for the church, those who do not look after the people of God, those who would use and abuse the people of God. And so, we need to watch out for those with low views of the church, those who would use and abuse God's church for their own gain. He talks about character as well. Verse 16 and verse 20, he says it twice, by their fruit you will recognize them. And he has this picture that the fruit, just as the fruit of a tree reveals the true nature of that tree, is it good or is it bad?

And so, the fruit of our lives, the fruit of a teacher's life will reflect what's going on on the inside. And so, again, when we're thinking about who is it that we should be influenced by, who should be giving our attention to, we're looking for something of the character of Christ and his love in that teacher. Evidence that someone is abiding in the vine who is Christ in order to bear fruit.

And then he says something about priorities as well. Verses 21 to 23, 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. And the interesting thing at this point is that these false prophets seem to be

much more about big claims, boosting their profiles, than they are in doing the will of their Father, more concerned about making a name for themselves than knowing Jesus personally and vitally. And that's the thing that matters. Maybe just to take a step back, it helps us to remember that the order of the Christian life matters. We are called to, first of all, know God through coming to know Jesus, and then we serve from that relationship. We need God's grace in order to rescue us and change us from the inside out before we begin to think about obedience that pleases Him. But why does Jesus offer this issue, this warning? Well, it's clearly because our choice of influences can affect our eternal destiny. Influence matters. Think about the impacts of what you and I consume on a daily or a weekly basis.

[18 : 09] Maybe the first place to go is to our mobile phone. Have you felt the impact, the effect of doom scrolling on your phone, the restlessness, the anxiety that comes? And maybe you find yourself spending hours watching one-sided or angry videos on YouTube on a particular issue. What's the impact? We become more suspicious of the other. We put up walls. We become more hostile towards others.

We recognize, I suspect, that what we consume has an effect on our heart, either positive or negative. That matters for our spiritual life. Book of Proverbs says, walk with the wise and become wise.

Our input affects our output. And so the path of following Jesus requires a level of discipline from us to listening to His voice, to listening to the Word of God and thinking about it, to worshipping together, to worshipping together. It's a Psalm 1 kind of life. Remember that image right in the middle of the Psalm? There was this tree that's bearing fruit all year round because it's got the right supply of water.

If you want to know how to live as a Christian or how to grow as a Christian, you need a supply of the Bible. You need to be praying to enjoy life with God as Father. You need to be reminding yourself of the gospel all the time, of what God has done for us in giving Jesus to die on the cross for us.

You need the fellowship of brothers and sisters within the family of God. And again, that's why we're really encouraging as a church that each person who's committed to this church, that we commit to a community group. So that we can help one another, that we can see and learn Jesus from one another. It's one way that we can actually help each other in our consumption.

[20 : 11] Here's a window where we're going to be consuming what is for our good. I know what so often maybe happens where we're just consuming garbage if we're honest. As we're here today in this moment, how do we feel that we are doing in terms of who am I listening to?

One test is that we can go fruit picking. Can we see? Could another person see signs of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

Is there evidence that we are connected to Jesus so that the life of Jesus is making a difference to how we are living today? Again, if we want to mature and to grow as Christians, then we need to consider carefully what we're giving our time and attention to.

To make every opportunity count to hear from God. What place does Christ's voice have in our life day by day and week by week?

And as we think about that image, think again about Jesus. Jesus is the perfect one who lived the fruitful life.

[21 : 33] To read the Gospels is to discover here is what perfect character looks like. Here is Jesus full of love, even for his enemies. Here is Jesus full of joy.

Joy in knowing and doing his Father's will. Here is Jesus the man of peace who didn't respond when people threw hatred at him. Here is Jesus showing perfect patience with his disciples who messed things up again.

Here is Jesus showing kindness to the marginalized and the excluded. Here is Jesus known for his goodness in seeing what was wrong and broken and stepping in to help.

Here is Jesus full of faithfulness, doing the Father's will, going all the way to the cross to be the Savior that we need. Here is gentle Jesus.

Gentle with us in our weakness and our failings. Jesus full of self-control. He is the perfect blueprint for living God's way. And this Jesus who speaks and this Jesus who shows us how to live God's way, having died on the cross, he then rose again on the third day in victory.

[22 : 51] Death could not hold him. He then ascended to sit on the throne of heaven. That's what he is right now with a promise that he will one day return. And Jesus speaks to us about that reality

here in this section.

There is a day coming when you and I, all of us, will stand before Jesus, the judge. Think about at that moment, what verdict do you want on Jesus' life?

The one verdict we don't want is to have Jesus look at us and say, depart from me, I don't know you. We want to hear, well done, good and faithful servant, enter your master's happiness.

And to hear that, we need to choose Jesus. We need to receive him as Lord and we need to follow his voice, to have him as the one who influences our life.

And then thirdly and finally, as he draws the sermon to a close, we need to choose the right foundation. And again, this is a really familiar picture.

[23 : 59] Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and when the winds blew and beat against that house, it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock.

I was reading this week an article in the New York Times from, it was actually from last year, and it was telling the story, multiple stories of coastal erosion down in the southeast of England.

And it told one story, a lady called Lucy Asbro from Thorpness in Suffolk. And she said during one particular storm, I think it was in 2021, one, she was having her morning coffee, looking out her window, when she realized that the sea defenses below her house had been broken through, and she watched three and a half meters of her garden collapse into the North Sea.

And from that moment, she said every time she went out of her house to go to work, she lived with the fear. Every time I went out, I didn't know if the house would still be there when I came back.

Now, she was a very wealthy lady, and so it was possible for her, at massive expense, to get new granite foundations placed under her house to prevent further erosion, to protect the house.

[25 : 15] But her neighbor next door didn't have the same wealth, was not so lucky. They had to leave their home and actually have it demolished before it would fall into the sea.

To think about the image that Jesus is using, can you imagine watching your house? Maybe the house where you've raised a family, or you've built by your own hands sliding into the sea.

Can you imagine the feeling of all that you built coming, crashing down? Now, imagine that being true of your whole life.

Because that's the picture Jesus gives as he invites us to urgently choose to follow him as king. Did you notice the remarkable claim that Jesus makes in this closing section?

It is a remarkable thing to say, I am the rock that you need to build on. You need to listen to my word if you want to stand rather than fall in the final judgment.

[26 : 26] If you want to have eternal life, you need to build your life on me, Jesus is saying. It's really interesting. When he finished speaking, the crowds recognized his authority. Nobody spoke like this.

Nobody made these kind of claims. I wonder if we recognize his authority as we listen to his words. It's so important that we understand who is inviting us to choose to follow him.

He is none other than the eternal son of God, the king of kings and the lord of lords. But think about the picture that he is giving to us. He's saying here that storms expose foundations.

That the storms of life expose the foundation our lives are built on. And maybe, again, that resonates with us. You know, we have those kind of sayings that we felt all at sea.

Trouble comes and we're not sure where to turn, where to run to. Who is going to give us hope and help in this moment? Because storms do come, sometimes intense storms.

[27 : 33] And I've been a Christian long enough, and I know some of you have been a Christian long enough, to have seen people abandon Christianity because storms have come. When success left them, or security was taken away, or health declined, or the problem of evil confronted them and they decided Jesus couldn't be trusted to deliver.

I've seen people walk away. But on the other side, and in this church, there are mature Christians who have faced life with all its storms by faith in Jesus.

Still standing, still walking, still listening to Jesus as King. That's a wonderfully encouraging truth to see in someone's life.

But Jesus gives us this word picture to remind us that laying a strong foundation matters. Ahead of the storms that come. And especially as Jesus has in mind the final storm of God's final judgment.

So again, he's reminding us that one day we'll all stand before him. Being ready is important. We were up north when Storm Flores, I think that's what it was called, kind of came through Edinburgh.

[28 : 54] It wasn't too bad here, but up north it was really windy. And we lived really near a campsite. And the day before the storm, campsite was full, packed. But by the evening, every tent was packed away.

Everyone had found shelter. Common sense wisdom knows to be prepared when the storm is coming. Do we apply that same common sense wisdom, knowing that we will one day stand before Jesus, our judge?

It's one of the reasons why we want to be a church together that builds a strong foundation. Where we're listening to the Bible together.

Seeking to know and to do God's word. To believe the gospel is true and to live like it's true. We want to help one another to get more mature in our life of faith.

But that's something we all, of course, need to choose personally. Jesus says we need to build on his word. And of course, we don't do it perfectly.

[30 : 07] But we can do it. But Jesus knows that we won't do it perfectly. And even if you sort of reflect on the whole sermon, there are words that give us comfort.

You know, when we fail. What did Jesus teach right at the beginning? He said, blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who know they can't make it by themselves and who run to their father for help.

Blessed are those who mourn over sin. Because they know that they fail and they feel it and they want to put things right. And so they go to God. It was Jesus that said we should ask our father for help.

Jesus who taught us the Lord's prayer to ask for forgiveness and to seek his mercy. He knows we won't build perfectly and there is grace for us. But as we finish our time in the Sermon on the Mount, it's important.

As we picture the crowds on the mountainside. We imagine ourselves there. We're left with King Jesus calling us to choose.

[31 : 09] To choose wisdom and not folly. Choose life and not death. To choose him as the foundation for our life for here and for eternity. Consider Jesus.

This Lord, this King who willingly, gladly entered the eye of the storm. The storm of God's judgment on the cross for you and for me.

He would take the judgment for us so that we don't have to. He would be condemned so we could be forgiven. He died for us so we could live with him.

He is the risen eternal King. He is the one building his church so the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He is the church's one strength, one foundation. And he is the returning King.

And he says, before I return, come to me.