

"The Narrow Gate"

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Would you return with me to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? We are looking at Matthew chapter 7, verses 12 through 14.

That's page 762 in the Pew Bible. Matthew 7, 12 through 14. Let me pray, and then I'll read for us.

Father, as we turn to the Sermon on the Mount once again, we pray that the seed of your Word would fall on good soil this morning and that it would bear much fruit in our lives, in our church, and in our city. Lord, you have shown us in your Word all that you have done to glorify your name through our rescue, through our restoration, and through the redemption of all things. Lord, help us to turn to you now in faith by your Spirit, receive what you have done, and live out what you are doing in our midst. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. All right, Matthew chapter 7, verses 12 through 14. Jesus says this, So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets.

Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

So, the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount, as we've been walking through it this academic year, is rightly considered some of Jesus' most important ethical teaching. And we've seen how the sermon is radical, from the opening Beatitudes with their upside-down vision of a truly blessed life, on through the call to extraordinary love, and generosity, and prayer. Jesus' moral vision, we might call it. It's groundbreaking, and it's inspiring, and it's daunting. Here, in these chapters, is the world's, is the world's rightful King, announcing how His kingdom is to be lived in the world He made, and in the world He has come to reclaim.

[2 : 4 9] And today, we come to an important moment in the sermon, because in these verses, Jesus is drawing together everything He has said so far, and He's going to start pressing it toward application, as we continue in the rest of chapter 7. You see, these verses here, these three verses, they're the transition from the main body of the sermon, the bulk of the teaching, into the conclusion, into the final exhortation.

But here's the problem. How does Jesus sum up this radical vision of kingdom life? How does He harness this hurricane He's been weaving for the last three chapters and bring it to a head?

Well, He does that in verse 12. But here's the trouble. Verse 12, the so-called golden rule, well, it doesn't strike us as all that radical or transformative at all, does it? In fact, it strikes us as well, obvious. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

I mean, every child over the age of three could recite that. Is that the climax of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? Is that it? Well, what I hope to do this morning is to help recover some of the original power of Jesus' words here. Now, of course, one of the reasons why the so-called golden rule feels so obvious to us is because we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by the life of Christ.

The fact that we can all recite verse 12 2,000 years later is evidence of how deeply transformative and history-shaping the life and teaching of Jesus have been. No one else has had such impact.

[4 : 43] But in order to really grasp the power of what Jesus is saying here, we need to go back and we need to consider it fresh. And to do that, I want to look at three things here in verses 12 through 14. Here's our outline. First, I want to consider the context of the golden rule here in the Sermon on the Mount. And then I want to consider a little more deeply the demand that it makes. And then last, I want to consider the decision that it requires. So the context of the golden rule, the demand that it makes, and the decision it requires. So first, let's consider the context. Notice at the beginning of verse 12, that little word, so. So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. What's that little word, so, doing there? Well, obviously, right? It's connecting verse 12 to all that's come before it. Specifically, that word, so, is, as we've said, bringing this whole central section of the Sermon on the Mount to its conclusion.

Remember, Jesus' sermon is broadly structured in three parts. There's the introduction in chapters 5, verses 1 through 16, where Jesus grabs our attention with the Beatitudes and calls us to be salt and light. And then there's the big central section, the body of the sermon, that starts in 517 and runs all the way here to 712, where Jesus talks about true righteousness in God's kingdom.

And then in verse 13 of chapter 7, the conclusion of the sermon begins, where Jesus will give the final exhortations driving it home. So, verse 12 then, where we're at, is not just some free-floating bit of moral advice. Rather, it's the way Jesus summarizes this whole central section of His sermon from 517 to 712. In fact, the first time that this verse was commonly called the golden rule wasn't even until, like, the 17th century or something like that. So, in order to really understand what verse 12 is about, we have to see it as integrally connected to what's come before.

Okay, so let's say we do that. What does that show us? Well, first, by bringing the main teaching of the Sermon on the Mount to a climax in this way, Jesus is showing us that what He's taught so far in the Sermon doesn't exhaust all the ways in which His disciples are meant to live. Jesus has been showing us what real righteousness from the heart looks like, a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of even the scribes and the Pharisees, as chapter 5 verse 20 said all the way back in chapter 5. Right? But the examples and the instances that Jesus has given and taught so far, like anger and lust and forgiveness and prayer and generosity, all these ways in which Jesus has begun unpacking that, that doesn't exhaust or encapsulate everything. We must continue to work out this exceeding righteousness in all areas of life. The so-called golden rule keeps us from saying,

I've done enough. Now I can stop. I've ticked all the boxes. I've done the eight things Jesus told me to do. No, it's saying now take these kingdom principles and push them out into every relationship, into every sphere of life, into every instant. In other words, the golden rule takes the Sermon on the Mount in all of its radicality and presses it into everything. Verse 12 is Jesus telling us, apply what I've taught you. Don't just listen to my words, but live them.

[8 : 47] Okay, on the other hand, the second thing that the context of verse 12 teaches us is this.

Our application of the golden rule cannot be detached from everything Jesus has just said. In other words, we cannot contradict or disobey Jesus' plain teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in the name of the golden rule. If Jesus says that anger and sex outside of marriage and hating our enemies are off the table, if He says that amassing wealth and living in luxury, if He says that discriminating against our brothers and sisters are off the table, then they're off the table.

They're always wrong. We can't evoke the golden rule to justify living in a way that's different from what Jesus has plainly laid out in the Sermon and in the rest of the teaching in the New Testament.

So I wonder then, where do you need to feel the challenge of the context of verse 12? Do you need to feel the challenge of the context?

To tether your application of verse 12 more closely to the words of Jesus in Scripture. After all, detached from its context, right, you can make the golden rule justify just about anything.

[10 : 52] Love your neighbor easily devolves into a bland, moral, anything-goes-as-long-as-long-as-no-one-gets-hurt sort of permissiveness, right? And suddenly we find ourselves saying, you know, what's the old saying?

Do unto others before they do it to you, you know, or something like that, you know? We need to constantly return to the words of Jesus in Scripture and let Him guide how we should apply these powerful words in verse 12. Okay, so the context of the golden rule helps us to recover how powerful this saying really is. Jesus is both pressing this teaching into our whole lives and tightly binding all of our moral thinking and acting to His words.

But once we get the context in view, now we can consider the demand. This is our second point. What actually is the demand that Jesus makes here? Now, at first blush, because we're so familiar with these words, it kind of just sounds nice, doesn't it?

What a nice principle. Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. Man, that's so nice. I'm just going to sew it into a pillow, right? It's wonderful. But the demand of this verse is beyond radical. If you're thinking that this is just a nice little principle, it has not hit you yet.

And to see that, it's helpful to recognize, to see kind of how Jesus' words here are so radical, it's helpful to recognize that Jesus wasn't actually the first one to summarize the law and the prophets in something that sounded like what we have here in verse 12.

[12 : 33] In fact, if you've studied ethics or comparative religion, you know that almost every culture has something like or similar to the golden rule. In 20 BC, about 50 years before Jesus' ministry, famously, Rabbi Hillel was asked by a would-be student, someone asked him if he could teach him the whole law while standing on one leg, right? And this guy had already asked one of the other rabbis to say this, and he said, no, I can't, get away from me, you know. But Rabbi Hillel said, yeah, sure. Here's how you summarize the whole law on one leg. What is hateful to you, don't do it to anyone else. That's the whole law. The rest is just commentary.

But you know, what's interesting is it's not just Jewish sources that sort of say something similar. You know, Confucius is credited with saying something similar. Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself. In Buddhism, you find hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. And you see that same kind of thing in Stoicism and Hinduism as well. Okay, so what are we to make of that? Well, on the one hand, it certainly seems pretty clear that every human being in every different culture has something of the law of God written on their hearts, don't we?

As the Apostle Paul says in Romans, we humans have just an indelible sense of objective moral norms, of a moral law that's outside of ourselves. And that is one very strong clue that there is an objective lawgiver outside of us. But whereas it's important to take notice not just of the similarities between what Jesus and others taught, I think it's all the more important to take notice of the difference because there is a difference. James Boyce, the late pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, gave this illustration when he was reflecting on these verses. He said, during the first quarter of the 19th century, toward the end of Beethoven's life, an unknown musician made a small alteration in the construction of the harpsichord that subsequently altered the whole development of Western music. Before his time, most of what we now call keyboard music was composed for the harpsichord. But because of its design, the music itself was quite limited. The strings of a harpsichord are plucked by a small hook, producing a sound even in intensity and similar to that of a harp.

But in this new change, the hook was replaced by a hammer so that the string was struck rather than plucked. This minute alteration made all the difference musically, for the dynamic range of the instrument was greatly increased. The harpsichord became a piano, and the way was paved for the dramatic and thrilling compositions of Rachmaninoff, Schumann, Brahms, and on and on and on.

A small difference brought about a radical change. A small hook is replaced by a hammer, and the history of music is transformed.

[16 : 06] You see, what Jesus does in verse 12 is to replace a little hook with a hammer. How? How does He do that?

Well, you see, nearly all of the articulations of this moral principle before Jesus are expressed in the negative. What's hateful to you, don't do it to anyone else. Don't do what you don't want done to yourself. But Jesus expresses the principle in the positive. Whatever you wish that others would do to you do also to them. Now, you might ask, oh, come on, is that really a big difference?

Absolutely. Absolutely. Just think about some of the Ten Commandments. Take the Eighth Commandment. Don't steal. Okay. I don't want anybody to steal from me. I won't steal from them. Have I stolen today?

Nope. Check. We're good. But consider the positive principle that Jesus expresses. Not merely don't steal, but give generously to those in need. Sell your possessions, Jesus says in Luke's gospel, and give to the poor. Give so proactively that your lifestyle has to change as a result, so that you drive a different car, live in a different house, and have a different standard of living than your work appears because you give. That's what Jesus is saying.

How about the Sixth Commandment? Don't murder. There's the negative. I don't want anyone to murder me. I won't murder them. Good. But consider the positive. Love your enemies. Protect the life of the innocent and the oppressed. Forgive everyone who's wronged you. Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile.

[18 : 04] Or how about the Seventh Commandment? Don't commit adultery. That's the negative, but Jesus turns it around. The positive says, use your life, your gifts, your time, your talents to bless your spouse, to see them flourish. Or the Ninth Commandment? Don't bear false witness. The positive says, speak the truth all the time. No exceptions.

So here is what Jesus is doing. He's uncovering what God's law really demands.

Yes, every human culture has a deep sense of ethical obligation, and that has been stated in similar ways, but Jesus plays the strings the way they were meant to be played, not just with a hook, but with a hammer.

And all the resonances of the law of God comes sounding forth. The life of God's kingdom is not just a life of refraining from wrongdoing, but of actively, sacrificially seeking the other's good, and that makes all the difference. With complete authority, Jesus tells us, the real and full intent of the law of God and what every prophet had been preaching. With total authority, Jesus says, this is what God's Word says. And then he ties it to his own teaching, as if to say, I'm no mere moral teacher.

I'm bringing the hammer. He is the lawgiver in our midst, showing us how it's meant to be played. But friends, what are we supposed to do with this demand?

[20 : 00] I mean, think about the implication for just a moment. This is what God's law requires. Not just refraining from doing wrong, but the positive, active seeking of my neighbor's good, just as creatively, just as actively as I seek my own.

Do we need more than a mere moment's reflection to realize that we cannot possibly do that on our own?

Who can hear that demand and say, that's nice? No, it drives us to our knees to cry out, who is sufficient for these things?

If this is the law and the prophets, then who can be saved? Who could possibly live a life pleasing to God? Who could possibly say that they are fit for the kingdom?

Of course, no one, no one, no one in themselves could possibly say they have done what verse 12 requires. And that brings us to our third and final point that Jesus makes here, and that is the radical demand drives us to a decision.

[21 : 26] There's a decision that Jesus requires. Knowing that we cannot do this on our own, in our own strength, the question is, will we surrender to Christ or not?

Will we enter the narrow way and become His disciple and receive the help that only He can give?

Or will we continue walking through the wide gate and down the easy way that leads to destruction? Notice, Jesus gives no neutral ground. There's no third way.

There's only the wide way or the narrow way. But friends, be careful. Be careful, because these two ways are not what we might immediately think.

We tend to think that the wide way, right, is the obviously immoral way, right, and that the narrow way is sort of the religious, pious way. But that's not what Jesus means.

[22 : 33] The wide way includes everyone who thinks they can do it on their own. Including the religious and pious people, including the Pharisees, who relate to God only at the level of external behavior.

On the wide path are religious people and irreligious people, people who on the surface look completely different, but who at the heart level refuse to admit that they need a radically new heart to be able to pursue God's ways.

Friends, there are a lot of church attenders on the wide path. There are plenty of good, moral people on the wide path. But ultimately, it is a path, Jesus says, that leads to destruction.

Why? Why? Because we can never fulfill the requirements of the law in ourselves. So what must we do?

Well, Jesus says, there's a gate, and there's a way that leads to life. First, consider the gate.

[23 : 50] How does one begin this life that Jesus has been describing in the sermon? How does one get started? What's the entry point? Jesus says, it's a narrow gate.

There's only one point of entry. If you're going to become a part of my kingdom, you must enter at this point and no other. It's like boarding an airplane.

You've got to go one by one, single file, through the checkpoint. One by one, single file, you must go through the gate, and no one can do it for you.

And there are no alternate entry points. But what exactly is the gate? The gate, friends, and what Jesus has been driving at and will continue to drive at in the rest of the Gospel according to Matthew and in the rest of the New Testament, the gate is Jesus Himself.

No one enters the kingdom without acknowledging the King. Think about it. You can't become a citizen of a new country, right, unless you relinquish your former ties and profess your allegiance to the government of the new country.

[25 : 17] Some of you have gone through different immigration processes and, you know, citizenship processes, and you know the kind of oaths you need to recite, right? Friends, it's the same here.

No one becomes a citizen of the kingdom of God without surrendering to the King. This is the narrow gate. And you find that throughout all the Gospel records.

In John chapter 10, for example, in John 10, verses 7 through 9, Jesus says, Truly, truly, I say to you, I'm the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

I'm the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and go in and out and find pasture. But it's not just John's Gospel. Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus will say, Come to me and I will give you rest.

Take up your cross and follow me. Entering at the narrow gate means admitting that we need a righteousness outside of ourselves and a power outside of ourselves and entrusting ourselves to Jesus the King.

[26 : 25] And in fact, just a few verses later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will say, A lot of you are doing wonderful things, but I'll say, I never knew you. Why? Because you never knew me.

But there's not only a gate. There's also a way. And Jesus says this way is hard.

It will be full of trials and full of difficulty, and it will be full of trials and difficulty the whole way. But what makes that way a hard way?

On the one hand, external opposition. Yes, Jesus has mentioned numerous times in the Sermon that following Him will mean opposition and even persecution. But the path is hard for another reason, too.

It's hard because it's a path of transformation. When you enter the gate, when you decide to surrender your life to Jesus Christ, God will begin His work in you to change you from the inside out.

[27 : 33] He will begin to make you a more loving, a more courageous, a more forgiving, a more faithful person. He will start to transform you into the image of Christ Himself.

He will begin to implement, verse 12, in your life. And He won't stop until the work is done, until you love the way He loves. But friend, make no mistake about it.

That real moral transformation, that inside-out change that comes from being a follower of Jesus. Apart from God, it is impossible.

But with God, it can be done, but it is not easy. But friends, the good news is God is faithful.

He will change you. Verse 12 is not just an impossible ideal, but the place where God and God alone can take you.

[28 : 40] So there's a gate that we must enter, and there's a way that we must walk. And note, friends, that there's a gate and there's a way.

There must be both. There is both conversion to Christ and a life lived. You know, Christians and even churches can make the mistake of just emphasizing one and excluding the other, right?

Some churches will talk only about conversion, about the need for personal decision to embrace Christ. Others will talk only about the way, the life lived, the need to depend on the Holy Spirit and cooperate with God's work of transformation.

But the reality is you cannot have one without the other. Anyone who has genuinely entered the gate must begin traveling the way.

And no one can travel down the way without entering at the gate. But as we walk this way, even though it is hard, consider that Jesus Himself walks with us.

[29 : 53] In John 10, where Jesus describes Himself as the door through which we must enter, He also says that He's the Good Shepherd who promises to lead us. In verses 11 through 15 of that same chapter of John 10, Jesus says this.

Right after saying, I'm the door, He says, I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd who does not own the sheep sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

He flees because He's a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. But I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus tells us that the gate is narrow and the way is hard, but He gives us this assurance that He is our Good Shepherd so good that He willingly laid down His life for us so that now, even if the path is hard, even if the road is rocky, even if we go weary and stumble, no one will take us out of His hand.

When enemies come, He will not flee. He will be with us unto the end. And what is the end of this way that is hard?

[31 : 30] Well, we've seen the gate and we've seen the way. Now consider the end. Jesus says that the gate is narrow and the way is hard. The end is life.

It's life. The wide and easy way leads to destruction. It leads to eternity alienated from God. But the way of Christ ends in the presence of God forever.

That is life. So as we wrap up, realize that Jesus is quite clear.

There is a decision that faces all of us. We can stay on the wide and easy path of self-reliance, but that path leads to destruction. Or you can enter the narrow gate by confessing Jesus as Lord and you can walk the way of transformation and the power of His Spirit.

Yes, it is hard, but it is the way, the only way that ends an eternal life. So how about you, friend? You know, the wide and easy way is certainly entertaining for a time.

[32 : 43] And as Jesus says, there's lots of people on the road with you. But it does not satisfy. Where will it eventually take you? Only further from God and eventually to destruction.

Listen to what Jesus says today. Enter the narrow gate. Enter. He has opened the way for you. The Good Shepherd has opened the gate with His own life.

He sets a path before you that won't be easy, but it will be good. Yes, you have to leave your pride at the gate. Yes, as you enter the narrow gate, other people might call you narrow.

But in losing yourself, you find yourself. And the you that God has in store on this way is radiant with glory.

This path leads to life. And fellow Christian, as you walk this way, as you keep in step with the Spirit dwelling in you, as you seek to implement this sermon in your whole life through all the strength that God gives, remember, when the way gets hard, when the sides look steep, when you feel like you can't go on, remember, this way leads to life.

[34 : 16] The end of your journey has been secured. There is glory in store for you and for all who walk this path beside you.

And your good shepherd, he will guide you every step of the way. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, how easy it is to just continue in the way that we've gone before.

the way before us seems so wide and so easy. Lord, we're so prone to comfort and ease, and yet you confront us this morning with a different gate in a different way, with a different destination.

Lord, turn our hearts from the wide way and grant us faith to enter the narrow gate. And for those that you have welcomed into this path of life, Lord, support us, sustain us.

Would we be the kind of church that walks this road together, rejoicing in trials because we know that this is the way of life?

[35 : 41] Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.