

By guest Pastor, Ken Cavanagh

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My wife's cousin Barry died a couple of weeks ago. We attended the funeral in northern Indiana. It was a sad affair, Barry having wrestled with a progressively debilitating disease for the past 27 years.

The pastor explained why Jesus had come, and how Barry, in his final days, had asked Jesus Christ to forgive him of his sins. He urged anyone who had not yet asked Christ to come into their lives to do so. When the service was concluded, the funeral director invited everyone to make their way forward to pay our last respects.

Then the unexpected happened. One of Barry's friends, Eddie, *interrupted*. Although the funeral was officially over, Eddie felt he needed to set the record straight. He strode up and took the podium and began to contradict what the pastor had just emphasized. Eddie said, "I don't know about *you*, but *my* God is a God of *love*." He then went on to tell how, in *his* estimation, Barry *had* to be with God—not because of what Jesus Christ had done, but because, in Eddie's judgment, Barry was the kind of guy who *deserves* God's acceptance.

Who was right—Barry's sincere friend, or the sincere pastor who emphasized trusting in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sin? Are Christians too narrow in calling everyone to trust in Jesus Christ?

Jesus actually answered that very question. In a statement that directly contradicts the belief that it doesn't matter what you believe is the warning Jesus issues in Matthew chapter seven verses 13 & 14. Jesus cautions...

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Matthew 7:13-14

Look at the verse immediately preceding this one. Jesus goes from the *wideness* of the Golden Rule—*In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you*—to the *narrowness* of warning that there is only *one* way to life with God. If there was ever a claim from Christ that rubs against popular belief, this is it.

As Americans we rightly pride ourselves for the freedoms we enjoy, freedom to choose between multiple options on everything from toothpaste to cars to hair color. But when it comes to heaven or hell, Jesus warns, there are only *two* options from which to choose—each with a drastically different outcome.

You all know the big electronic traffic bulletin boards found on 465 and other interstates. Think of what Jesus says here as a huge sign bridging across the way you and I are travelling. It is a caution sign from heaven laying out the choice placed before every one of us, a choice laid out in a triplet of strong contrasts.

1. There is a choice everyone must make, Jesus says, because there are only two gates,
2. Those two gates bring access to just two roads,
3. And those two road lead toward one of only two final destinations.

Let's take them one at a time. If we had a chance to sit down with Barry's friend Eddie and reason with him from what Jesus says about the way to God, the first thing Jesus Christ would want Eddy to understand is **that there are only two gates from which to choose**. Not many, just two. There are *two gates*, Jesus warns—one *wide*, the other *small*.

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Diane Schuler, a 36-year-old mother, was driving her kids back from a weekend of camping. Along with Diane in her minivan were her 5 and 2-year-old children and three young nieces. When they reached the intersection of the Taconic Parkway, Diane drove on—the wrong way. Two miles into the highway, her minivan collided into oncoming traffic. Everyone except her 5-year-old son were killed. [source: CNN news, accessed online 8/14/09]

It matters which entrance you choose, which ramp, Jesus warns. The gate you choose means the difference between life and death. And it's easy, Jesus says, to find yourself on the wide road heading toward disaster. Because that entrance ramp is so wide. There's no barrier to be raised before you can enter it. There's no cost. Just come right on in. Many do.

"Enter through the narrow gate," he warns. The *small* gate, by contrast, *restricts what you can bring with you*. Its narrowness means in order to enter, you have to let go of *anything* and *anyone* that would keep you from getting through the gate. Jesus elsewhere calls this 'counting the cost.' Whatever competes for your allegiance—you have to let go, in order to enter through the narrow gate.

I remember when my wife and I were waiting on line at an airport gate in Germany, backpacks in hand. Everything we needed for our time in Europe was in those bags. We didn't want to let them out of our sight. Ahead of us on line, we watched as the gate attendant stopped a couple of passengers who had bags that were too big to take onboard. They didn't fit in that little frame that shows the carry-on size limit. The passengers ahead of us were then given a choice: either check the bags, or miss the flight. That was the choice. They weren't given three options, or four, or a dozen from which to choose. Just two. Because in flying, the *narrowness* of the carry-on *limit* determines whether you get *through the gate*...or you stay behind. It's a choice that has to be made.

"Enter the *narrow gate*," Jesus cautions. Because it's the only way onto the narrow road. Don't miss the gate. And don't take *the wrong gate*. It matters which gate you choose.

After spending Thanksgiving with family in, James & Kati Kim began their long drive from Oregon back to San Francisco. Along with their children, 4-year-old Penelope and 7-month-old Sabine, they headed south on I-5 until late that night, intending to exit onto Highway 42 and spend the night in nice lodge. In the dark, they missed their turn.

But instead of backtracking, the Kims decided to follow an *alternate* route. They exited onto Bear Camp Road, which they thought looked like a *more direct* path to Oregon's southern Coast. They failed to notice a little box on their map indicating that the road might be closed during winter. The Kims eventually came upon warning signs announcing that snow drifts had blocked the pass, so they decided to turn off onto a spur road.

15 miles into that unpaved road, their car got stuck in the snow. They decided to stay with the car in hope of rescue. They ran the car intermittently for heat, and rationed the little food they had. When the *gas ran out*, they burned magazines, wet wood, and eventually the car's *tires*, trying to keep warm.

A *week* into the wilderness with no sign of rescue, James Kim decided to chance leaving his wife and children and set off on foot in order to find help. He believed the town of Galice was about 4 miles away. It was in truth *15 miles* away.

After waiting two days for her husband to return, Kati gathered up her children and began *her own* trek to find help. She was spotted by a helicopter and rescued. Her husband James's *body* was found four days after he set out on foot. He had died of exposure and hypothermia. Source: Martin Kasindorf and Andrea Stone, "Rescuers Laud Dad as Hero," USA Today (12-8-06), 3A

It not only matters which *gate* you choose. It's also crucial, Jesus warns, that you make sure you're on the *right road*. There ultimately are not many roads leading to God, he warns—just one. Be careful which road you're on. Look back at the Scripture:

*"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and **broad is the road** that leads to **destruction**, and **many** enter through it. But small is the gate and **narrow the road** that leads to **life**, and only a **few** find it."* Matthew 7:13-14

Be careful which road you're on: it matters more than you can imagine. While it's popular to believe there are many ways to God, the teaching that there is only one way to God is clear throughout the Bible—not just in Jesus' teachings but from Old Testament to New. Psalm one is a good example. Psalm one is the first Psalm by design, because it so clearly lays out the choice before us of two ways, two paths, two roads. If you have a Bible, please open to it as we read:

*Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

There are ultimately only two paths from which to choose, the Psalm says—the way of the righteous, or the way of the wicked. One walks with God beside him and is protected at the judgment that follows death. The other walks independent of God and stands alone on judgment day, unprotected. Be careful which road you're on.

What is the narrow road, then? The narrow way is the revelation God has given us in his written Word and in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. That's it. The narrowness of the way Jesus commends is found in Scripture.

- The Bible is where we find *the lane markers* for God-honoring belief and behavior;
- The revelation of God in Jesus and in the Bible are where we find the *double yellows* that indicate “*Don't cross this line*” or the dashed markings indicating “*feel free to pass here.*”
- The Bible provides the guard rails on either side, **for our good, for our protection.**

The clearest statement in the Bible indicating how you know which road you're on is another statement by Jesus: John 14:6,

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”

How can you know which road you're on, the road to life with God or the road that ends in judgment? You can know by what you're doing with Jesus. Is he your spiritual GPS? Is he the roadmap you follow? Do you seek to walk in his ways, follow his leading, as revealed in God's Word—or are you your own authority? Be careful which road you're on.

Only two gates from which to choose—wide or small.

Only two roads—broad or narrow.

And third, Jesus cautions, there are only two final destinations. Look with me again at Matthew 7:13-14:

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that **leads to destruction**, and **many enter through it**. But small is the gate and narrow the road that **leads to life**, and only a **few find it**.”* Matthew 7:13-14

Just a few weeks ago I had conversation with my friend Paul, whose wife was starting to consider Scientology. We've been friends for 15 years. Paul is a fan of L. Ron Hubbard's science fiction stories and knew that Hubbard *created* Scientology. So Paul was hoping I would talk his wife out of giving any serious credence to Scientology. I talked with his wife a little bit, then Paul wanted to talk again. He told me that as a family they had recently started attending a Unitarian Universalist church. He said he hoped I wasn't going to tell him that's a cult, too—but he wanted to know what I thought about that.

I told Paul I treasure our friendship, and I don't want anything to get in the way of that. But if he was asking, I'd tell him what I do think of Unitarian Universalism. I'll share with you just one of the things I said to my friend.

It's attractive and common to look for the things various religions have in common and based on that to conclude that the differences don't matter, they're not important. Jews and Christians and Unitarian Universalists, for example, would all say there is one God.

But in every other area of life, we know the differences can make all the difference. One example: the difference between water and hydrogen peroxide. One will refresh you and renew you and help sustain your life. The other is a poison that will kill you if you drink it. The peroxide you buy in the drugstore to put on cuts is just a 3% solution—and that weak a solution has a label warning to keep out of reach of children. Water is H₂O, while hydrogen peroxide is H₂O₂—just one molecule difference between them. They have almost everything in common. But that one molecule difference is the difference between life and death.

Back to Christ's warning:

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that **leads to destruction**, and **many enter through it**. But small is the gate and narrow the road that **leads to life**, and only a **few find it**.”* Matthew 7:13-14

Several years ago I went with a summer missions team to West Africa. We landed in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. Within minutes of leaving the airport, we wondered if we were going to die—because the wide, wide road leading from the airport there had absolutely *no lane markings!*

The missionary driving our little Peugeot acted like he was in the Brickyard 400. He dodged in and out between vehicles. He braked and accelerated. He wove that little car through the congestion like thread through a needle, from one side of the road to the other. While he was doing that he let us know that Abidjan had one of the highest traffic fatality rates in the world! *We believed him!*

While in Africa that summer, we saw a severed guard rail over a river, bearing testimony to those who had died there. We passed an overturned truck carcass—evidence of just how dangerous driving there was. Similarly, Jesus warns, in life. The *broad* road, he cautions, leads to destruction. Right up to the moment of impact, most people on the wide road are convinced they're traveling the *best* way, that the *wide* way is the *right* way! That whatever you choose to believe or do, that's your right and it really doesn't matter. We're all headed the same direction. That's the common belief, isn't it—and it is *dead wrong*, Jesus says.

"There is a way that seems right to a man," Proverbs 14:11 says, "But in the end it leads to death."

More than you realize, Jesus warns, it matters which road you're on.

Many, he says, are at this very moment on the wide road that ends in hell. While just a few, Jesus says, are on the narrow road...which leads to *life, life with God*. *"Only a few find it."*

The whole warning is visual. On the one hand, Jesus says, there is what looks like a huge superhighway, jam-packed with travelers—people ripping along, racing forward. They have no idea that just around the curve, a heartbeat away in the direction they're heading...the bridge is out. Many, Jesus says...hurtle over the precipice. Their destiny...is destruction.

While at the same time, off to one side, is a narrow strip of asphalt, the way of Jesus. It's a road that's very rough at some points. It's a road that was paved at great cost—more costly than any ever earthly road project ever will be. There are places along the way where the few who are on that road wonder if they're going to make it—seasons when their legs get wobbly, when they feel frightened by the hazards and pitfalls around them.

But—just around the bend for those few who travel the narrow way entered by the narrow gate, is a world of wonder that begs description—the destiny God intends for us and to which he invites us. Let's wrap it up.

- 1. There are just *two gates*, Jesus warns—one wide and the other small.**
- 2. There are just *two roads* from which to choose, Jesus cautions—one broad and the other narrow.**
- 3. And the reason it matters which you choose, Jesus says, is that there are only *two destinations*—*life with God, or destruction, separation from God*.**

Jesus is talking about heaven and *a whole lot more*. **We were made for life with God.** That's the destination God *wants* for you. But you have to choose.

- To enter *life*, you have to choose the right *gate*—the *narrow* gate.
- You have to choose the right *road*—the *narrow* road.
- And the reason the choice of gate and choice of road matter is because *only one leads to life*. The other...leads to hell.

This is what Eddie needs to understand. It's what makes all the difference for you and me. We each have to choose—the way of the crowd, or the way of the cross; trusting in what we do to try to get to God, or trusting in what Jesus has done to reconcile us to God. Speaking as one who was on the wide road for too long, I pray you'll choose the narrow way—and live.