

# LEARNING THE WAY: A series on the Sermon on the Mount

## “Narrow and Strong”

Matthew 7:13-20 and Matthew 7:21-29

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 19, 2107

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For the past five weeks, we have been reflecting on passages from the Sermon on the Mount, the collection of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. You’ve heard about Jesus teaching on

- Blessings and how we are blessed
- Righteousness and loving our enemies
- Integrity and hypocrisy, doing good deeds in secret
- Priorities, contentment, and seeking God’s Kingdom first
- Making sound judgments

The early church was often described as The Way, so we are trying to learn “the way.”

Today, our reading is the final section of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus offers some words of caution, words of warning.

An interesting side note: those of you who have read and studied Matthew know that there are four other collections of Jesus’ teachings, in addition to the Sermon on the Mount. Each of those collections of teachings ends with a warning, a word of caution, a call for integrity.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers essentially that listening is not enough. They have to make the words real. They make the words real by finding the narrow gate, the unpopular way. They make the words real but not just talking about them. They make the words real by making God’s teaching a solid foundation.

Listen for the words of Jesus:

“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 in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

This is the sixth consecutive sermon on this collection of Jesus' teachings. Some of you have been here for all six. Congratulations. Some of you have read or watched them on our website, or picked up hard copies on the bulletin board. Fantastic. Some of you have read Matthew 5,6, and 7, even more than once. Excellent. Others of you are thinking "I wonder what I missed."

That's all wonderful. Listening to the teachings of Jesus is very important.

But have the words of Jesus changed how you live?

Are the things you are hearing and singing and praying here becoming part of your life out there?

Are you taking what you LEARN here today so that you LIVE differently tomorrow?

Over the past six weeks, or the past few months, or the past year or two, how have you changed and more fully been living as a follower of Jesus?

"By your fruits you will be known" says Jesus.

Shouldn't the people in your life know that you're a Christian—not just from your words but especially from how you live? Shouldn't they know that you are called to serve God's Kingdom, to find the narrow gate, to have a strong foundation on God's word?

If being a Christian were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

We are called to LIVE our faith every day, in whatever situation we find ourselves. Going through the narrow gate means that sometimes we have to do difficult or unpopular things, to really love one another and to really serve God's Kingdom.

A few scenarios.....

- You're settled into your comfy recliner after a long day, and then you realized that you told your spouse you would wash the dishes, or you told your kids you would play with them. But you're so comfortable....
- You sit down at the TV or with your computer or your phone, and you see something very scintillating being advertised. No one else is around, so what does it matter, right?

- You're in a hurry at the store and you realize that the clerk has given you incorrect change—you have ten dollars more than you should. Who's going to know?
- You are reading or watching the news, hearing about poor and hungry people. Then you see an ad for a new car, or a new appliance, or an updated gadget and you wonder what to do with your money.
- You're with a bunch of friends and some makes a racist or sexist joke. You know it's offensive, but everyone else is laughing, so what harm is there in just chuckling along with them?
- You're in a gathering where other people are expressing political opinions that you agree with. They're saying mean things about people who hold different beliefs. You want to join in because you're frustrated too. But what about the good and decent people who have different political views than you?

Most of the time we know the difference between the wide gate and the narrow gate, the easy thing and the right thing.

Let's think about that last scenario for a minute, the political one.

The wide gate option would be to join in the simplistic generalizations about those with different political views, to take the most egregious example from the opposing side and assume everyone does the same.

The narrow gate option would be to recognize that people of good conscience see the world differently and while not abandoning your convictions, to really try to respectfully understand what others are saying.

Finding the narrow gate can be hard.

And what is really hard is that Christian faith is not just a one-time commitment. Jesus calls us to live faithfully every day.

- It's not just joining a church and making an affirmation of faith.
- It's not just signing up for the choir, a mission activity, or a fellowship group.
- It's not just like a post on the church Facebook page, or sharing a Bible verse in social media.
- It's not just shaking hands with the minister with a compliment on how fine the sermon was.

All of those things are well and good. But what do we do out there?

How do we find the narrow gate and how can we make Jesus' words our strong foundation?

Thanks to social media I learned recently about a young man who has learned Jesus' teaching and who tries to live it.

The story begins with a young man named Mitchell, who was born with a developmental disability. Mitchell loved basketball from an early age, but he was unable to play at the same level as his peers.

At his Texas high school, he became the team manager. In the last game of the season, his coach was determined to get him in the game.

With about 2 minutes to go and his team holding a ten point lead, Mitchell heard his name called by the coach. As he walked onto the floor, the home town fans roared with delight, chanting his name.

His teammates did all they could so that Mitchell could score a basket. But his first few shots. Then with the game almost over, his team got a rebound. They passed the ball to Mitchell, hoping for the dramatic shot, but he missed the pass and ball went over to the opposing team, with just ten seconds to go.

That's when it happened. A player on the other team named Jonathon called out Mitchell's name and passed him the ball. Mitchell turned around, shot, and scored.

The place went crazy with fans storming the court.

After the game a reporter interviewed Jonathon, who humbly said that he had been taught to do unto others as he would want them to do to him.

Here is a young man who has learned the teaching of Jesus, from Matthew 7.12, and he is living in with kind and gracious actions. Here is a young man who is finding the narrow gate and making Jesus' words a strong foundation for his life.

Several years ago, I went to a clergy retreat in Tennessee at a monastery.  
Beautiful architecture.

As I walked into the chapel I noticed a stone carving with the words:

“Expect great things from God”

Then as I left the chapel I noticed

“Attempt great things for God”

I learned that the words were spoken by Rev. William Carey (1761-1834), a  
Baptist missionary.

Those words make sense for us here at Covenant, where we think about  
Learning and Living.

Maybe you noticed the signs on the doors today:

What am I going to LEARN today?

How am I going to LIVE today?

Those are good questions for a church day, and those are good questions for  
any day.

Let us pray

*Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to teach us your way, to show us your love,  
and to lead us into new life. Give us the grace to follow. Amen.*