

# Matthew 7:13-14

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*Jesus gives a parable about life and death. He urges His disciples to seek life by entering through the narrow gate that runs counter to the way of the world. The way of the world is commonly traveled but its end is destruction and ruin.*

The parallel account of this teaching is found in Luke 13:24.

After distilling His teachings concerning human interactions into a single ethical command to *treat people the same way you want them to treat you*, Jesus distills His message concerning His kingdom into a simple invitation—*enter through the narrow gate*.

His invitation is framed within a short parable. The parable describes two gates (*the wide gate* and *the small gate*); two ways (*the broad way* and *the narrow way*); two destinations (*destruction* and *life*); and two groups of people (the *many* and the *few*.)

Jesus counsels His disciples to *enter through the narrow gate*, before describing *the way*, destination, and group of people associated with *the wide gate*.

*For the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.* Both *the gate* and *the way* leading to *destruction* are described in similar terms: *wide* and *broad*. Both adjectives suggest that *the gate* and *way* accommodate *many* people who *enter through the gate* and travel upon its path. *Broad* roads accommodate a lot of traffic, and are easier to navigate, so they have greater appeal to travelers.

Contrast this with how Jesus describes *the narrow gate*. *For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.* The *small gate* and *narrow way* appear not only to be less appealing and more difficult to navigate, they also seem hard to find.

What does this parable mean?

A *gate* is a point of access that allows people to enter a path that leads to a defined area, such as a city, a palace, or temple. In this parable the gates represent choices that we make every day. The choices are between two kingdoms. Every day we decide which kingdom we seek. Are we going to seek the Messiah's kingdom and harmony with Him (His kingdom and His righteousness)? Or, are we going to seek the world's kingdoms and harmony with them? Once again, Jesus is highlighting the reality that God has granted to humans the amazing gift of moral agency. We decide who we trust, what perspective we adopt, and what actions we take.

The Messiah's kingdom is found by taking the *narrow way* that is accessed through *the gate* that *is small*. This is not the automatic or easy choice. The parable makes it clear that this way will not appear attractive on the surface. The Messiah's kingdom is not of this world, so it is not physically visible. It requires eyes of faith to recognize it, to see its tiny *gate*. It takes faith to

enter it. The *wide gate* is more appealing to the eye, and has far more travelers. The *tiny gate* must be deliberately sought after and chosen if we are to find and *enter* it.

The kingdoms of the world are found through *the gate that is wide*. It is the choice most native to us, to which we will automatically default. We live in the world, among the kingdoms of this world. Both they and their large gates are inescapably apparent. Because its *gate* is so obvious and appealing, it does not need any seeking to be found. It requires little effort, if any, to *enter through it*. It is natural and easy to choose the wide gates of worldly kingdoms. Unless we deliberately choose to follow Christ, we will always follow the world.

*The gates* do not represent a once-and-for-all decision. Jesus will later tell His disciples to daily take up their cross to follow Him (Luke 9:23). Following Jesus is a choice we must make hour by hour. And every decision we make is an entrance leading to *destruction* or leading to *life*. Christ's commands to seek His kingdom and His righteousness, and to *enter through the narrow gate* are perpetual.

A *way* means a road or path between two locations. People follow a *way* to efficiently arrive at their intended destination. A *way* can be used literally as in an actual road or a particular street. Or it can be figurative, as in a lifestyle or a *way* of living. Within the context of Jesus's parable the figurative meaning is likely. Each *way* is a metaphor for behavior. If *the gate* represents the inner choices of our mind and heart, then *the way* represents the outward behaviors reflecting those choices. The *way* into His kingdom is a life of righteousness, which comes through obedience to the principles of the kingdom of God. Its entrance is determined by our attitudes and actions. In other words, Jesus has been teaching throughout this entire sermon that whether or not we *enter* His kingdom each day is based upon our daily choices and actions.

It follows that the phrase *enter the kingdom* is a consequence of choices, rather than a statement of ownership. Israel is God's chosen nation. That has not changed. But Israel has suffered consequences from disobedience. They lost their kingdom. Similarly, being born as a child of God is a matter of simple faith. But becoming an active participant and ruler in the kingdom requires accepting and carrying the responsibility of kingdom priorities.

Does our *way* of living today align with the kingdoms of this world or with the Messiah's kingdom? Do we have hatred or lust in our heart this moment? Do we deal treacherously with others even as we claim the moral high ground this day? Are we merciful or judgmental at this time? Do we seek approval from men or from God in our next decision? Do we treat others with love as we want them to treat us today, or do we have a double standard, demanding their love for us as we withhold our love from them? Does our behavior follow the pattern Jesus taught and the example He gave, or does it mirror the lousy *way* of this world? How we live determines which *gate* we are choosing, which *way* we are traveling, and which destination we will reach and inhabit. It also determines whether we are of the *many* or the *few*.

Just as the gates do not represent a once-and-for-all-decision, neither do the ways represent a fixed and final lifestyle. Just because we decide to *enter the small gate* today and travel the *narrow way* does not mean that we will do the same tomorrow. We must choose *life* or *destruction* each day, one moment at a time. This is a quite practical admonition. We can treat

others with respect, invest in them, and grow great friendships. This kind of behavior brings *life* to the relationship. In doing so we also develop intimacy with God, and gain treasures in heaven. The next moment we can be jealous, controlling, and possessive, and bring *destruction* to the relationship.

There are only two possible consequences for each attitude and action. Any decision we make brings either *destruction* or *life*. If we decide as the world does and enter by its gate and follow its ways, we will live a self-centered life, following our appetites, and reap the reward of *destruction*. The *destruction* will apply to relationships. It will apply to the rewards associated with seeking His kingdom and His righteousness. It will apply to the fulfillment of life Jesus offers if we will “seek first His kingdom” (Matthew 6:33). The *wide gate* of the world promises life and happiness but delivers *destruction*. The way of Christ requires that we lay our lives down, but in that sacrifice we find a reward of *life*.

Sadly, *the gate that is wide and the way that is broad* is the one most people travel. That way *leads to destruction*. But because people go by appearances rather than by faith, *there are many who enter through it*. Conversely, *few people find the narrow gate that leads to life*.

The word translated as *destruction* is “apoleia” (G622). It is used in a number of contexts. Apoleia is used to describe *destruction* that comes upon those who twist the scriptures (2 Peter 3:16). It is used to describe the *destruction* of rewards from shrinking back from living in confident faith and falling into disobedience (Hebrews 10:39). It is translated “perish” in the passage where Peter says to Simon the magician, “May your silver perish with you” in response to Simon asking to purchase the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:20). It is translated *destruction* in Revelation 17:8, Rev 17:11, and refers to the pending judgement of the “beast.” The “beast” is thrown alive into the lake of fire in Revelation 19:20.

Apoleia is translated “wasted” in Mark 14:4. The only other time Matthew employs this word is Matthew 26:8, where it is also translated “wasted,” and refers to the same event recorded in Mark. In that instance, the disciples were upset that a woman wasted “an alabaster vial of very costly perfume” anointing Jesus’s head instead of selling it for profit. In each use of apoleia, something is being lost, squandered, or destroyed. The context determines what is being destroyed, lost, or squandered, by whom, and in what manner.

It is unlikely that Jesus is primarily referring to physical death in this instance, even though there are circumstances where following the *way* of the world does lead to physical death. Of course in Jesus’ case, choosing the way of righteousness will lead Him to physical death on the cross. His faithful disciples will also suffer death or exile for their faith.

Throughout Jesus’s sermon He has been discussing our works of righteousness, as well as our attitude and behavior. He has been talking about our moral works. He has emphasized the agency of choice each person has. He has brought up many times the opportunity to gain rewards from God by acting in faith, or lose God’s rewards by seeking the rewards of the world. In each case, it has been clear the rewards were based on choices. The loss of rewards could be described as the *destruction* of the greatest opportunity of this life. The interpretation of this parable given in the middle of this sermon should fit this context. Choosing the *wide gate* and the *broad way*

leads to the squandering of the great opportunity we have in this life to know God intimately by faith. The result will be the destruction of a portion of the reward of our inheritance.

It is common to interpret this parable to refer to eternal *destruction* of our souls on the lake of fire. This is problematic for a number of reasons. If *destruction* here refers to the *destruction* of our eternal lives in the lake of fire, Jesus suddenly changed to this subject without any indication. He would change the subject and suddenly threaten His disciples with hellfire for making bad choices, when all through the sermon He has consistently told them God was their loving Father who desired to give them good gifts. Suddenly their loving Father is rejecting them if they don't make the right choices. In all the previous passages in the sermon, bad choices meant loss of rewards. Jesus has emphasized the Father's desire to seek the believers' benefit, because they are His children.

Additionally, the Bible clearly teaches that believers escape eternal damnation by faith in Jesus' death on the cross. It is His deed rather than our own deeds and virtue that allows us to be born again. Faith in Christ and His sacrifice is how we avoid the *destruction* of our eternal selves in the lake of fire. Being justified in the sight of God is a gift based on the grace of God on the basis of faith alone (John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8-9).

The interpretation most fitting for *destruction* or waste in this parable is the *destruction* or waste of our opportunity to gain benefits from living well in this life. This leads to *destruction* of rewards from constructive living in this life, as well as rewards in the next life. The Sermon on the Mount principles make life better now, as well as setting up rewards for us in heaven. For example, if we live the mercy principle and are ready to forgive, we should avoid the self-destructive practice of harboring bitterness. If we focus on self-examination as a priority over judging others, we avoid a community-destructive practice of being divisive.

If Jesus's followers go along with *the way* of the world and enter by its *gate*, they become saltless and worthless to His kingdom (Matthew 5:13). This results in spiritual waste. They throw away their chances to inherit or possess their royal destiny in exchange for pursuing the empty and vaporous ambitions of the world. They miss the chance to gain intimacy with Christ as King in this life through living by faith, and the immense rewards that brings (Matthew 5:3, 11). And they miss the chance to be called 'great' when the Messiah's kingdom is fully established (Matthew 5:19). These aspects of *destruction* are tragic. Fortunately this waste is avoidable through obedience.

Comparing this interpretation of *destruction* with other passages throughout the New Testament, we see that it is consistent. For example, this parable is similar to the loss suffered by the man whose works are consumed at the Judgment Seat of Christ, even as he himself is saved, though as through God's refining fire (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). It is comparable to the destruction faced by the believers who shrink back and lack the faith in God to conform their mind and hearts (Hebrews 10:39). It matches the negative rewards expected for "deeds done in the flesh" that are bad deeds (2 Corinthians 5:10). It matches with the short-sighted believers the apostle Peter describes who forget their purification from their sins, and stumble and are denied an abundant entrance into Christ's kingdom (2 Peter 1:9-11). And we will soon see that it matches the believing Jews who lose rewards compared to Gentiles who will gain rewards when Jesus comes

in His kingdom (Matthew 8:5-13). Being born is the beginning of life, not the purpose. As it is physically, so it is spiritually.

The alternative to the *destruction* at the end of the *broad way*, is to instead *enter* into *life*. *For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life*. The word translated *life* is the Greek word “zoe” (G2222). Whereas the Greek word “psuché” (G5590), also translated as life or soul, means our existence, personality, and essence, “zoe” focuses on what we might call quality of life, or fulfillment. “Zoe” is similar to Makarios, which is translated at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount as “blessed” (Matthew 5:1-10).

*Life* (zoe) comes from living the principles of God’s kingdom now and serving Christ as King through the trials of our time on earth (Matthew 5:3, 11.) *Life* (zoe) comes from seeking harmony with God and seeing Him through eyes of faith (Matthew 5:6, 8, 20.) *Life* (zoe) is being called “great” when the Messiah’s kingdom is fully established (Matthew 5:19.) *Life* (zoe) is receiving the full reward from your Father who is in secret (Matthew 6:1, 4, 6, 18.)

*Life* (zoe) here means the same thing it means in passages such as Matthew 19:16 when the rich young ruler asks Jesus, “what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal *life*?” The rich young ruler is asking how to gain the greatest possible fulfillment from his time on earth. In Matthew 6:25, when Jesus told His disciples not to worry about the details of life, He used the Greek word “psuché.” Psuché life includes our personality and existence through time.

The choice Jesus asks His disciples to consider between *life* (zoe) and *destruction* was not a new one. It was the same offer Moses gave the children of Israel as they were about to *enter* the Promised Land. Notice in this instance, Moses defines the choice for his followers as being between life and blessing on one fork of the road and death and cursing on the other fork:

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.”  
(Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Jesus, the second and better Moses, makes the same basic offer to His followers from a different mountain (Deuteronomy 18:18). The offer between *life* and *destruction* that Jesus is presenting to His disciples as they are choosing whether to *enter* the kingdom through the *narrow gate*, is the same proposition Moses offered to Israel. The choice is up to the listeners. They can choose one of two roads. One leads to benefit and prosperity, the other to death and destruction. In each

case, faith is required to see the choice in the manner presented by God. The world will present the choice as exactly the opposite. It calls life death, and death life.

For both Moses and Jesus, much of the benefit comes as a natural consequence of living the principles themselves. The principles are the same (Matthew 5:17). If we choose forgiveness, we will avoid the *destruction* bitterness brings. If we exercise the mercy principle, we avoid the *destruction* that being judgmental brings to communities. If we exercise the Golden Rule, we bring *life* quality to all those we touch. But also in each case there is a divine promise for additional blessing. Moses promised divine blessing in addition to the natural, positive consequences stemming from a self-governing culture (Deuteronomy 30:9). Jesus expanded on Moses' promise of divine blessing, adding rewards in the next life as a primary motivation for obedience.

Sadly, *many enter through the gate that is wide. Many find destruction. Many* settle for harmony with the world and its righteousness. To fit the context, this would include *many* believers. Believers can lose portions of their inheritance, or reward. In 2 John 1:8, the Apostle exhorts his disciples to look to themselves and make choices that will lead to a "full reward." The clear inference is that rewards can be lost in part. *Many* believers will lose rewards, which will lead to bitter grief from what was lost and could have been (Matthew 8:12). Romans 8:16-17 makes clear that God is the unconditional inheritance of the believer, regardless of life choices. But Romans 8:16-17 also makes clear that reigning with Christ requires obedience, suffering the sufferings of Christ. The Bible makes clear that following Jesus' example is greatly to our benefit (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The sufferings of this world are not to be compared to what is gained through obedience to His way (1 Corinthians 2:9, 2 Corinthians 4:17). *Few* triumphantly *enter through the gate that is small. Few* people find *life* (zoe) and Makarios (blessing). *Few* believers find harmony living in intimate fellowship with God and following in His righteousness. *Few* believers win their divine inheritance. *Few* believers receive their full reward and "its eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). This likely explains why the Bible repeats these admonitions many times.

Jesus admonishes us to make every effort to *enter through the narrow gate*. Believers can have assurance that they are born again through faith (Romans 8:15-16, Romans 8:26-39). All it takes to become a believer is enough faith to look, expecting healing (John 3:14-16). However, receiving rewards requires obedience and perseverance. Jesus makes this clear. Paul echoes this reality in many of his writings. For example, in 2 Timothy, the epistle he wrote shortly before being martyred, Paul emphasizes the importance of finishing what we begin in order to receive the crowns laid up for us in heaven (2 Timothy 2:1-13). Paul also prays that a brother who ministered to him faithfully be rewarded by God, but in doing so prays that "the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day"—speaking of the Judgment Day before Christ (2 Timothy 1:18). The fact that Paul prays for "mercy" makes clear that God will decide our rewards based on His own evaluation. That is why we need to be diligent, and strive to faithfully walk in obedience to Christ.

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>13</sup>Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few**