

“Keep It Simple”

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“The narrow way is the way to spaciousness.” (Tim Keller)

Matthew 7:7-14

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Highway to Hell

*Living easy, living free
Season ticket on a one-way ride
Asking nothing, leave me be
Taking everything in my stride
Don't need reason, don't need rhyme
Ain't nothing I would rather do
Going down, party time
My friends are gonna be there too*

*I'm on the highway to hell
On the highway to hell
Highway to hell
I'm on the highway to hell*

“Highway to Hell” is a song released in 1979 by the Australian rock band AC/DC. Since I wasn’t at that time (or since) a fan of rock and roll, I resorted to the internet to find the lyrics and the story, both of which are likely much more familiar to some of you.

The song was inspired by the seemingly endless drive across the continent of Australia from Sydney to Perth, roughly comparable to drive from Hickory to Los Angeles. The reason it’s a “highway to hell” is not only the distance across the Nullabor Plain but the destination, a popular pub called The Raffles. The final descent on the Canning Highway was steep, and many lost their lives on that highway to hell.

In the church of my youth, it was rock and roll music itself that was the highway to hell. I'm not saying anything like that. But pursuit of glory and pleasure has been a highway to hell for many – not just for rock and roll bands, but for politicians, athletes, authors, business tycoons, and almost any other field including pastors and evangelists. It's too easy to sell one's soul on the road to fame, or when you arrive there. A major aspect of the deception is that "My friends are gonna be there too."

We have only this week and next week remaining in our studies of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7:7-14 we find three seemingly disconnected topics, one of which contrasts the broad highway to destruction with the narrow road to life.

The connection I see between these three topics is that each of them is a conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, a summary of how to respond. I've said repeatedly that Jesus' words in this sermon present an impossible set of ideals toward which to strive. I see Jesus offering three different answers to the question, "What do we do about these impossible demands of following you?"

Each time his answer boils down to "Keep it simple."

Keep praying (vv. 7-11)

First, keep praying. In an earlier section of the Sermon on the Mount (6:5-15) Jesus has already said that prayer is not about impressing people in public or endless repetitive babblings. He teaches what we call the Lord's Prayer. He says prayer is about simple, direct requests of your Father, who sees you in secret and will reward you. Now he returns to prayer, but this time with a different spin. The response to all Jesus has said in this sermon is to keep praying.

"Ask and it will be given to you" is how the New International Version translates it, but a better translation is "Keep asking and it will be given to you." Jesus continues: keep seeking and you will find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you" (7). The focus is on persistence, on tenacity, on never, ever giving up. Why? "For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (8).

Jesus seems to overhear our objection and responds with a two-part illustration. If your son asks for bread, you won't gleefully give him a rock that looks like a round loaf of bread. If he asks for fish, you won't give him a snake. The African Catfish, which abounds in the Middle East, looks snakelike. It's important to note that both bread and fish are basic life needs.



African Catfish
Clarius Gariepinus

So Jesus is not talking about giving you a Porsche or a model's shape or a comfortable life if you keep asking. If we see this illustration as a conclusion to the rest of the sermon, we have a clear answer to the question of what we're supposed to pray for. We're asking for help to follow Jesus in all the ways he's laid out for us in the sermon – "Blessed are the poor in spirit," "Rejoice when you are persecuted," "Don't lust," "Love your enemies," "Never do your religious duty in public to be recognized," "Don't lay up treasures on earth," "Don't worry," "Don't keep judging," and so on.

When you think about all those discipleship demands, your response is, "But I can't do that! Sin lurks inside me. I'm evil." Jesus hears you thinking that and responds in verse 11, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children..." It's true that your inside is incapable of doing all he says, but you still love taking care of your children, whether it's providing for their food or letting them know they're loved or buying gifts for them. If you give goods to them, "...how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him."

"How much more" (*Qal wahomer* in Hebrew) is a very common argument in literature produced by Jewish rabbis in Jesus' day. If the lesser truth is valid, "how much more" is the greater. If you can trust a human heart to give good gifts, *how much more* can you trust the heavenly Father.

What do you do about the impossible demands of this sermon? You turn your focus upward. Do you know God? Do you trust God? Do you believe he is "the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth"? Is God big enough? Keep praying. Is God good enough? Keep seeking. Is God wise enough? Keep knocking. Is God enough?

You're tempted to ask, "Well, exactly how does this work? How does God decide which prayers to answer now, later, or not at all?" Why is that your business? Keep it simple. Keep praying and keep trusting God to take care of his children. The purpose of prayer is deeper intimacy with your Father in heaven. If whatever has stymied you, challenged you, prompted you to prayer has that effect, you will have received every good gift you truly need.

Keep doing

Verse 12 may be the most well-known saying of Jesus. "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." It's called the Golden Rule, because the third century Roman emperor, Alexander Severus, is reported to have inscribed this saying of Jesus on his wall in gold. There's no archaeological evidence for that, but it sounds reasonable.

I can't imagine anyone has done more research and writing on the Golden Rule than a man by the name of Harry Gensler, a Catholic priest and professor at Loyola University of Chicago. If you think the Golden Rule is simple and straightforward, or if you think Jesus uniquely spoke these words, check out [Fr. Gensler's writings and videos](#). To illustrate the complexity, Gensler tells the story of the monkey and the fish who were

caught in a flood. The monkey climbed high into a tree to save himself. Then, applying the Golden Rule, he plucked the fish out of the water. The point is that the Golden Rule is only about doing to others what you would want them to do if you have first mentally switched places with them.

Versions of the Golden Rule are found in virtually every human culture and era – Confucius, Homer, Buddha, Mohammed, Aristotle, and more – and, of course, Judaism including our Old Testament. One of the most well-known and influential Jewish rabbis, Hillel, died when Jesus was about 15 years old, raising the possibility that he may have been one of the Jewish teachers Jesus encountered at age 12 in Jerusalem. Hillel’s version of the Golden Rule was, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn.”

I’ve heard it said that Jesus was the first one to state the rule positively, but that’s not really true either. The positive and negative formulations of the Golden Rule are just two sides of the same coin.

So why is Jesus, in his longest and most famous sermon, repeating a line that is not only not new, but universally affirmed? “Everybody knows that.” Well, notice two parts of this verse that are easy to overlook. The first is at the beginning of Jesus’ Golden Rule. “In everything....” Once again, as Jesus does throughout this sermon, he raises the standard to the impossible. Do this always with everyone in everything.

Also, Jesus twice makes this a comprehensive summary. The more obvious place is at the end of the verse, when he says, “This sums up the Law and the Prophets.” The place easier to miss is the first word of the verse: “So....” That tiny little word is so easy to pass over I wish the translators had used the more common “Therefore....” What Jesus is doing is not only summarizing the entire Old Testament but his own Sermon on the Mount.

This is what he’s been saying all along, from “Blessed are the meek” to “Don’t misuse God’s gift of sex” to “Love your enemies” to “Don’t keep judging.” I know it all sounds possible, especially to juggle all those balls in the air at once – to keep your thoughts and words and actions other-centered.

Now, here at the end of the sermon, Jesus takes that impossible ideal and makes it simple. He’s not negating the guidelines of the law or the even deeper demands of his sermon. He’s just giving you a basic rule of thumb when you’re in the middle of a situation demanding a response. When it gets confusing or overwhelming, switch places with that person and keep doing whatever you would want done to you.

Every human community and relationship is imperfect and always will be. But any follower of Jesus can focus on the next good thing to do for someone else. First, keep praying. Second, keep doing.

Keep choosing

And third, keep choosing. But hold on. This one is worded a bit differently.

Enter the narrow gate is in the aorist tense, which implies not so much continuous action as a point in time. It's a single life-choice. But woe to the person who believes once you make this choice you never have to make it again. This gate leads to a way, a road, a path, and you'll have to keep choosing to stay on this path.

Why? Because this path leads to life and the wide path leads to destruction. The two words are used in the New Testament of eternity – as in, heaven and hell, but not exclusively so. There's also "life" on earth, and there's "destruction" in this life as well. The same path that leads to hell will ruin this life as well. The same path that leads to eternal life leads to the best life on earth.

Tim Keller has a marvelous message on this text called "How to Find the Way." He notes that the word "narrow" – not only today but in Jesus' time and even in the Bible – is a negative word. You don't have to be claustrophobic to dislike narrowness. There's ductwork running down both sides of this sanctuary underneath the floor that's about 30" wide. You can get from the basement under the narthex to underneath the organ through that ductwork, or so I'm told. I've never tried it because I don't like narrowness.

Yet Jesus uses the word "narrow" and the uncomfortable idea of narrowness to say that's the way to life. What you really want deep inside – life – requires that you enter through a narrow gate and follow a constricted way. If you choose the wide gate and the broad way, you'll find yourself squeezed into inevitable destruction. In today's world, we hear that's intolerance, it's arrogant, we shouldn't say that the way of Jesus is the narrow way.

Tim Keller reminds us, though, that what Jesus wants on our behalf is what we want for ourselves: life, full and free, spacious and forever. What's easy to miss in our daily lives is that the way of the many that seems so easy and free because it's all about self-fulfillment will actually lead increasingly to the restriction we fear most deeply. The open road of lust and greed and self is a highway to destruction. Keller says, "The broad way is the way to narrowness and the narrow way is the way to spaciousness." Who would have thought?

Jesus is saying that the more companions you have, the more suspect you should be of the road you're traveling. When your viewpoint is shared by everyone you know, that's potentially a problem. That's so countercultural, particularly in America, where opinion polls and elections drive not only politics but morality. Of course, everyone loves the surveys and polls when the majority – even a bare majority – falls in their favor. But we don't like them when ours is the minority view. It's clear that sometimes the majority is sometimes right and sometimes wrong.

To wrestle with such questions is to miss Jesus' point, though. His focus is not on the statistics, the numbers. He's not quantitatively comparing the number of people who will go to heaven or hell. He's saying that blindly following the crowd – doing what everyone's doing – will destroy you. Your discernment of what's right or wrong must go deeper than that. Don't lazily follow the open road. Choose the narrow gate, then choose it again and again. Don't even ask whether others are doing the same thing or getting different benefits.

About a decade ago in a sermon I shared a tract written by a Holiness preacher named G. D. Watson in the 19th century. Titled "[Others May, You Cannot](#)," he expresses this theme –

If God has called you to be really like Jesus He will draw you into a life of crucifixion and humility, and put upon you such demands of obedience, that you will not be able to follow other people, or measure yourself by other Christians, and in many ways He will seem to let other people do things which He will not let you do.

The King's Highway

So, keep it simple, friends. Yes, the Sermon on the Mount is about Jesus' impossible demands. But that's only so that you'll never think you can do this on your own and so that you'll never look down on someone who's not following Jesus as well as you are. At the end of the sermon Jesus takes the impossible and makes it doable.

In the next moment, keep it simple. Keep praying. Keep doing. Keep choosing. The narrow gate to the narrow path will lead to the spaciousness you long for.

Here's another "highway song" as we close:

*It's a highway to heaven.
None can walk up there,
But the pure in heart.
It's a highway to heaven.
I am walking up the King's highway.*

*If you're not walking,
Start while I'm talking.
Walking up the King's highway.
There's joy in knowing
With Him I'm going.
Walking up the King's highway.*

Amen.