

"TRAVELING THE UNTRAVELED WAY"

A Sermon by:

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TEXT: "Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life."
Matthew 7:14

I think that one of the most unpopular words in the modern American vocabulary is the word, "narrow". It immediately suggests to us a life that is unnaturally encased in whale-bone. And we associate with this word, "narrow" all of those psychological demons - restraints, restrictions, repressions, inhibitions, intolerances, and blindness. We dislike narrow streets. Furthermore, we dislike narrow minded people. We don't want to be fenced in by anything. Above all else, we want to be broadminded and free.

And yet with all of our desire for breadth, and with all of our fear of narrowness, we are, to many impartial observers, sadly restrained and restricted as we paddle about in the shallows of life. We're told that there are more people today than ever before in the mental hospitals and institutions of our land. There are more suicides. And I think this too, that there are more people than ever before who feel that they have never come out into the deep waters of adult existence. We've torn down all the fences, and yet we're so pathetically fenced in. And so it's with these few thoughts as a background, that we come to those words of Jesus:

"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!"

I think that Jesus here is simply reminding us that there are two ways by which a person may choose to travel through life. There is the broad way, and there is the narrow way. I imagine that most of you are fairly familiar with both ways, at least in appearances, so I need only to describe them briefly. The broadway, generally speaking, is the easy going way. You never put much into life so it never takes much out of you. It's the way by which you satisfy the daily desires of your physical equipment. You pick up everything along the way in much the same fashion that a vacuum cleaner picks up everything....everything from dust to diamonds, everything that's goo and bad. It's the all inclusive way. And further more, it's a well traveled way. There are crowds of people drifting along this easy going way, satisfying their normal desires without giving much thought to others, without giving much to anything. They drift along without exercising much energy, without asking many questions about life, and without setting many distant goals. Yes, generally speaking, the broad way is the easy going way.

But on the other hand, the narrow way is the hard way. It's far more costly than the easy going way because it demands personal discipline. Instead of being the all inclusive way, it is the exclusive way for on the narrow way, a person is sometimes called on to set something to one side in order that he will not be distracted from something towards which he is moving. It's a hard way. It calls for discipline. It's a lonely way. There's never a crowd on the narrow way.

We look at both ways, and we realize that a person cannot travel both ways at the same time. Perhaps we're reminded of the position that the poet, Robert Frost was in as a young man. He may have been trying to make up his mind as to what he should do. Should he remain in the hills of Vermont, mending a few shoes, teaching school in relative obscurity, or should he risk coming down to the city where he might become prominent, and perhaps make a name for himself in the literary circles of the world. We can't say for sure what the situation was, but in later years he did have this to say:

"Two roads diverged into a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent into the undergrowth....."

I think that many of us may be confronted with a similar situation. Which road should we travel? In which direction should we go?

SOME HELP IN REMEMBERING
THE WORDS OF JESUS.....

Now I think that we can find some help
in answering this question by remembering
that Jesus points out quite specifically

that it is the narrow road, the hard way that always leads to life. It may not always seem to us this way in the beginning, but I think that if we bring to mind those whom we have known through the years that have traveled down one road or down the other, that we shall see that there is truth involved in this observation made by Jesus. We have known people who have traveled the broad, easy going way, the crowded way, and it has never taken them to a high goal. On the other hand we have known those who traveled the narrow, hard, disciplined way and they have found life, and discovered self fulfillment.

Perhaps an illustration will help us to see the truth involved in this observation. Take for instance, a young man who enjoys life a great deal. A young man who has a great many friends, and included in his circle of friends are a number of young attractive ladies. He enjoys their company. He enjoys taking them out to dances and parties, and for some strange reason, life always seems to be much more interesting and exciting when they are in his presence. But this young man is not ready to become emotionally involved with any one of these young ladies. He's not ready to assume the responsibilities of a young man who is in love with any one young lady. And perhaps he thinks that if this were to happen to him, his world, instead of being filled with romance and glamor and alive with exciting possibilities, would suddenly become limited, narrowed down and perhaps filled with diapers and dirty dishes. But the time comes when this young man, in spite of all of his resistance falls in love with one wonderful young lady who stands out in his own mind above all the rest. And he is suddenly surprised when he discovers that his world instead of being less romantic, less glamorous, and less exciting, is filled with more romance, more glamor, and more excitement. His world is just wonderful! I think it was Aldous Huxley who once remarked that "All the world loves a lover". It's true, but I think it's equally true, that "A lover loves all the world."

But back to this young man. He travels the narrow way of being in love with one young lady, and he finds to his amazement that this leads to a broader appreciation of everything. Day follows day. He becomes more and more involved. And finally that day comes when he stand before the altar of God and solemnly pledges to forsake all others and keep him-

self only unto her so long as they both shall live! He's narrowed down his life, romantically and economically. And in so doing, he discovers that for the first time he is traveling out into the depths of real life and experiencing love, tenderness, and companionship in a way and to an extent that in the narrowness and shallowness of his earlier days was never possible.

"For straight is the gate, and narrow is the way
that leadeth unto life."

When you leave New York City by ship for Europe, you sail down the harbor and before you reach the wide open sea, you pass through the Narrows. It's a distance of one mile, with Long Island on one side, and Staten Island on the other. It's a parable of life. That's an illustration of the words of Jesus. There's no way to the great sea except through the Narrows. Disciplined ambitions, disciplined emotions, disciplined consciences, disciplined thinking, disciplined living.... these are the narrow gates through which a person must pass if he is going to reach the open seas of deep living. The pampered soul is a stranger to great living. Harry Emerson Fosdick summed it up in this fashion:

"No horse gets anywhere till it is harnessed. No steam or gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. And no life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, and disciplined"

THERE IS A NARROWNESS
IN CHRISTIANITY.....

Now I'd like to carry this idea one step further and in so doing, I would suggest that there is a narrowness in Christianity that leads to life. Sel-

dom do we like to think of Christianity in terms of narrowness. I think that all of us want a religion that's broadminded. A religion that takes in everything and leaves out nothing.

But at the same time, I think we need to recognize, and perhaps come to a greater appreciation of the fact that there is a certain narrowness in the thinking of the Christian. And there is also a certain narrowness involved in the behavior of the Christian. To begin with, a Christian should recognize that Jesus is supreme. He should recognize that somehow in Jesus, all of the reality of human life and the spirit of God are mysteriously joined together, and that in him we see the highest standard of character and moral perfection. And when he seriously accepts Jesus as being supreme that he is faced with the necessity of setting to one side all of the other heroes and idols that have been claiming his time and thought. All others are secondary to him. All others must yield to him. In this way he is forced to narrow down his thinking.

And this too, I feel that when a person recognizes seriously that love and goodness are at the center of life, then he is driven to exclude force as an instrument of human relation and as an instrument of change. In this way and in others, the Christian narrows down his thinking. He becomes rigid in accepting and believing and confessing those things that a Christian believes. He excludes other possibilities, not in a spirit of intolerance, but in a spirit of understanding and appreciation. For he knows that he cannot travel both ways at once.

And furthermore, I feel, there is an element of narrowness in the behavior of the Christian. By this I mean that there are some things, I think, that a Christian should not do. He's not always free to do exactly as he pleases. A dedicated Christian, takes into consideration the will of God, and also the will of his fellow beings. He should consider what pleases God, and what pleases the people around him. And so in this sense, he restricts and he restrains himself. And he does this, not because of fear of the consequences, but rather because he is committed to those values which puts life on a high level. He disciplines himself. He tries to live by these values. He has an inner sense of responsibility. It's not always easy, but whatever he does must be done in relation to the will of God and the will of his fellow men.

I could go on and mention other things that a Christian should not do. He's not free to fly off the handle, and lose his temper, and criticize those unjustly who perhaps might offend him. These are the seeds that build up resentment, and breed hatred and cause wars. A Christian is not free to stay up all night and Saturday night because he is part of a fellowship and on Sunday morning that fellowship comes together to worship its creator, to hear his word, and to take the direction for living from his word. Nor is he free to disregard the welfare of the community in which he lives. Nor is he free to make his own decisions without taking into account the will of the most high in relation to whom all decisions must be made.

And so perhaps you begin to see that there is a narrowness in the thinking and in the behavior of the Christian that leads to life. If you're like I am, you don't like to be reminded of these things but I think it's well for us to be reminded of them from time to time. I think it's well for us to remember that there is in Christianity not only a wonderful message of comfort and consolation, but also a very sharp edged message of discipline and challenge and personal responsibility. "Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to life." The narrow way always leads to greater life. It takes us up to the higher levels of of life where a person feels that he is handling life and life is not handling him. Well...this is about all I had planned to say in connection with this particular idea. But before I finish, just let me say this that I believe quite deeply that if a person chooses to steer his life through the intellectual narrows of Christianity that he shall some day come out into the broad seas where his mind will have not only stability and steadiness, but also a certain maturity of conviction. This will enable him to ride the roughest storms of life. And this too, the person who ~~steer~~ chooses to steer his life through the narrows of moral behavior will have a depth and breadth and height and beauty to his life that no other life will ever have.

At the beginning of this sermon I referred to the poet Robert Frost and how as a young man he was confronted with a choice. We know now which road he chose to travel. In the same poem from which I quoted at the beginning, there are these lines:

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
two roads diverged into a wood, and I
I took the one less traveled by...
And that has made all the difference

Two roads. Two ways.....a broad way and a narrow way. We cannot travel both. We must choose. The broad way leads to destruction. The narrow way leads to life. Which one will you take. The one less traveled by. I hope. For I think that you'll discover as so many others have discovered, that in the long run, it shall make all the difference.

LET US PRAY: Guide us our Father through the narrows of life and out into the great depths of living. Help us to regulate our minds, and discipline our bodies that we may pursue those things which are valuable above all others in life, and finally realize the blessings of a life that travels the untraveled way. Amen