

TITLE: "From Here to Eternity"

TEXT: Matthew 7:13-27 (NT p. 7)

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

"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!"

Introduction – What is my job description?

One of the metaphysical questions from the 60s was, "What is life?" ...What IS life?

Black Elk said, "Life is a circle."

Christopher Morley said, "Life is a foreign language."

John Gay said, "Life is a jest."

Abraham Cowley said, "Life is an incurable disease."

John Berryman said, "Life is boring, but we must not say so,"

Longfellow said, "Life is real! Life is earnest!"

According to Christianity, life is a battle. ...Fortunately, it is a battle we can win with the Lord's help. And when we win, we will have a wonderfully secure life here on earth and we will live with the Lord in heaven forever and ever.

1. C. S. Lewis take on the Devil

In his amazing book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes this about the spiritual battle that is going on the universe.

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the power behind death and disease and sin. Christianity believes that this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees with Dualism that the universe is at war. (Dualism believes that there are equal powers of good and evil at war with each other in the universe.) But [Christianity] does not think this is a war between independent powers. [Christianity] thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel [who is the devil].

Enemy-occupied territory—that is what the world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed [Jesus Christ], you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. When you go to church you are really listening-in to secret [broadcasts] from our friends: that is why the enemy is so anxious to prevent us from going [to church]. He does it by playing on our conceit and laziness and intellectual snobbery.

I know someone will ask me, “Do you really mean, at this time of day, to re-introduce our old friend the devil—hoofs and horns and all?” Well, what the time of day has to do with it I do not know. And I am not particular about hoofs and horns. But in other respects my answer is, “Yes, I do.” I do not claim to know anything about his personal appearance. If anyone really wants to know [the devil] better I would say to that person, “Don’t worry, if you really want to, you will. Whether you will like it when you do is another question (pp. 45, 46).

2. The narrow gate

Many think that if Christianity is true, it should be easy. This is simply not true! Name one worthwhile thing in life that is easy:

It certainly is not our jobs. The owner of a company I worked for used to say, “Thank God for your problems; easy jobs don’t pay much.” NO job is easy. Some of the simplest jobs are the most stressful.

Is marriage easy? I can vouch that marriage is wonderful, but anyone who has been married a while will tell you that at times marriage is very hard work.

Is it easy to get a college degree?

You see what I mean? Nothing worthwhile in life is easy. Christian faith is not easy. I will tell you why in few moments. But you will NEVER have time to go to a Bible study or Sunday school unless you make the time. You will ALWAYS have something easier and more fun to do that get up, get ready and go to church. There will ALWAYS be something more alluring or interesting to do that go to a church meeting.

This past week the Church Life committee met and there was a Syracuse basketball game I know several wanted to be watching. Jesus says: "For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." God APPRECIATES ALL of your sacrifices so you can do his work in our church; so do I.

3. A tree and its fruit

Christianity is not easy because, as C. S. Lewis says, Satan and his forces are fighting tooth and nail against our faith. The devil is wise and subtle and he uses every way possible to disguise what he is trying to do, which is lure people away from God. The primary weapon he is using right now is money and what money can buy.

I am not saying that money is evil in itself. We all need money to live and provide for our families. It is a dependence on money and what it can buy that competes with what God is trying to do in our lives. The world says, achieve financial security and everything in your life will be fine. BUILD your retirement account, buy that new car, own that vacation home and you will be happy and secure.

It's simply not true. However much you have, you will always want more. Five years ago, a couple let us use their family's summer cottage. He was a surgeon in Boston and he and his wife owned several large homes in Boston, this home on the shore and other investments totaling millions and millions of dollars. He told me that someday he hoped to REALLY have money like a neighboring family who had just bought four adjacent quarter acre lots at \$125,000 each and put up a 3 million dollar home, or the family who owned the string of islands we could see from their living room window. He said, "Wow, wouldn't it be great to REALLY have money and own your own island?" ...No matter how much we have, it will NEVER be enough to give us complete security.

That is why Jesus says: “You will know [people] by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?” What kind of fruit do you want from your tree of life? Do you want to follow the prophets who say, ‘The more you have the happier you will be’ or serve Jesus who says: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27).

4. Concerning self-deception

Part of our Scripture this morning contains what many believe are the scariest words in the Bible. Let me read you these words again:

“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.’

This passage has to do with self-deception. Someone said that “God created human beings in his image and we have been returning the favor ever since.” A person can imagine God to be anything he or she wants God to be. A few years ago, I invited a woman in our neighborhood to come to church. She said, “Well you know, I *should* go to church; I’m the spiritual one in the family.” When I asked what she meant, she said something like, “I listen an inner voice that tells me what I want to hear.”

God gave us the Bible so we would know what God is truly like. And God is NOT just an “inner voice that tells us what we want to hear!” God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ and to KNOW Jesus is to KNOW God. KNOWING Jesus is the key to eternal life. If you KNOW Jesus here on earth, when you meet Jesus face to face, he will say, “Well done good and faithful servant; enter into the joy I have prepared for you.”

5. Hearers and doers

One morning, a woman I barely knew marched into my office and said, “Do you know what craziness is?” I looked up from whatever I was doing and as I was trying to collect my thoughts and focus on this unexpected question, she said, “Craziness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

For how many things in each of our lives is this true?

It may be self-delusion rather than craziness, but for long stretches I eat whatever I want and still am surprised, and annoyed, when I gain weight.

I will stay up late reading and when the alarm goes off the next morning I'll say to myself, "I HAVE to go to bed earlier tonight" and then I will read late again.

I will get really busy and, for perfectly good reasons, skip my exercise program for awhile and inevitably, INEVITABLY, my back will start to hurt.

If you are like me, we can hear all KINDS of good advice, from others and even ourselves, yet nothing is going to change unless we actually DO something, unless we actually MAKE some changes. Nowhere is this truer than in our Christian faith. When we DO come to worship God, when we DO pray each day, when we DO read and study the Bible, when we DO help others, when we DO get involved in the life of the church, then we will find that when the rain falls, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat on our house, that it will not fall, because it is been founded on rock.

Introduction – You're not home yet

Let me close with a story ("Personal Glimpses" *Reader's Digest* 6/89 – "Heaven"):

A missionary who had been in China for many years and a famous singer who had been on tour in China for two weeks were traveling back to the States on the same ship. When they docked in New York, the missionary saw a crowd of the entertainer's fans waiting at the pier and watched as they swarmed around him when he walked off the gang plank. "Lord, I don't understand," the missionary said. "I gave 42 years of my life to China, and this guy gave only two weeks, yet there are thousands welcoming him home and not one person to welcome me."

And the Lord said, "Son, you're not home yet." (*The Conway Twitty Story* by Wilbur Cross and Michael Kosser-Doubleday).

TAKE that hard road that leads to life.

Go THROUGH that narrow gate, which is Jesus Christ.

LISTEN to those who help you to bear SPIRITUAL fruit in your life.

Get to KNOW Jesus Christ.

If you do, when the rains come (and they WILL come), and the winds blow (and they WILL blow) and they BEAT on your house, it WILL NOT fall, because the FOUNDATION of your house is built upon the SOLID ROCK, which is Jesus Christ.
Amen.