

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 54

THE NARROW WAY

Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 7:13,14

by Maurice Barratt

Jesus makes two statements, but begins with an instruction. The instruction is: enter in at the strait gate. Then he describes the wide gate and the broad way. We shall look at that in the next issue. For now, we are concentrating on the strait gate and the narrow way.

“Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it”
(Matthew 7:14)

This is the chapter of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is imparting wisdom to his disciples. There are three points that we should note straight away:

1. This is a message to Christians, not to unbelievers. So often the narrow way and the broad way is used as the basis of a gospel message: the narrow way leads to heaven, the broad way leads to hell. But Jesus is talking to disciples, and telling them that there are two ways they can go now they have become followers of Jesus.
2. This is wisdom with an instruction, not just information. We must do something about it.
3. Both of these two ways lead somewhere. The narrow way leads to life, the broad way leads to destruction. All Christians are on one of these roads, and no-one stays static. Every Christian is moving in one direction or the other, either towards life or towards destruction. We will examine what this means as we go on.

Key Words

The wisdom in this chapter interprets itself. We need only understand the key words. In this sentence the key words are “strait”, “narrow”, “life” and “few”.

“Strait” is not to be confused with “straight”. STRAIT means tight, restricted, limited, confining. The “Straits of Gibraltar” are a very narrow, confining passage in between two seas, difficult to enter and to navigate. The sons of the prophets found themselves too confined, and said to Elisha, “Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us” (2 Kings 6:1). A “strait” also means a difficult situation: we might talk today of being in “a tight spot”. In 1 Samuel 13:6, “when the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait, (for the people were distressed,) then the people did hide themselves in caves ...” We talk about being “in dire straits” when our means are very restricted.

And Jesus spoke of being “straitened” in Luke 12:50 — “But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!” The gate is restricted, not wide open, not easy to find. In Luke 13:20, Jesus says “Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” To enter in is a tight, uncomfortable squeeze.

And it’s a NARROW way. That means it doesn’t get any better once you’re through the gate. It doesn’t widen out into a broad place. It stays restricted. There’s no room for deviation, no room for doing your own thing, no room to take along your own agendas and decisions and preferences. This is discipleship, the narrow way of following Jesus only.

But it leads to LIFE. What sort of life is this? Not physical life, obviously. But neither is it eternal life. Jesus is talking about spiritual life, the resurrection life that we can have on earth now. It is what he meant when he said “Is not the life more than meat?” It’s what Paul meant when he said “The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20). In the same way, the broad way leading to “destruction” is not talking about eternal damnation or the lake of fire. It is talking of the destruction of everything we have done and been in our Christian life, the utter ruin of all our works. Paul says that at the judgement seat of Christ, Christians may find all their life’s work has been in vain and is burned up (1 Corinthians 3:12-15) Yet “he himself shall be saved”, so this is not about eternal life. It is like the man in Jesus’ final illustration in the Sermon on the Mount: he built his house on sand, and when the test came, everything he had was destroyed. But he was not destroyed, only his house. This is the destruction at the end of the broad way, and many — the majority — of Christians are walking in that direction, because it’s easy, and wide.

But there are FEW Christians who find the life that is gained through walking the restricted way of discipleship. “Few” is the minority, a remnant. Not many Christians follow the way that leads to life. Many have received the light, but don’t walk in the light (1 John 1:7). Many have received the Spirit, but don’t walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

Jesus walked a narrow way

Why should a narrow, restricted, awkward, confined way lead to life? Because Jesus walked that way, and we’re following him. Jesus said “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38). To never be able to do your own will, what you want to do, is pretty restricting. And God’s will was not easy for Jesus, for it was God’s will that he went the way of death. “Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12:24). There is never any fruit without death, without the seed first dying in the ground. And even when the tree grows up, there is no fruit without pruning, cutting off and cutting back hard. Without pruning, you may get a little fruit, and you will get a big tree. And some people love a big tree. But God’s purpose is not a big tree, but much fruit — and that means pruning, which means obedience, which means restriction, which means pain.

Creation tells us this truth over and over again. When a baby is born into the world, it is through the restricted, difficult way of the birth canal. And indeed, in the world, the truth is evident. No athlete gains glory except by following a narrow way, a restricted, strait, strict regime of training, of diet, of hours on the track, of weeks away from home, of toil and tears and sweat, just to gain a “corruptible

crown". No businessman becomes successful without putting in hours and hours of effort and hard slog, being willing to work seven days a week for years.

It's costly, and discipleship is just the same. Why do we expect otherwise? One simple reason: because the church has told us otherwise — the church has too often made Christianity "all of grace", and cut out the cost from the word of God. So Christians are surprised and shocked when they hear about counting the cost and paying the price. But how foolish! Creation shouts out the message and the world recognises it: there's no gain without pain. The church used to confess the same thing: "no cross, no crown". But that message is being drowned out today.

Restricted - but free

The narrow way leads to glory and success and life. The discipline leads to freedom. No-one was more free than Jesus, yet no-one was ever more restricted. It's a contradiction, and the contradiction continues in men and women of God today. The disciple's life may seem horribly restricting, yet the disciples are the most free people in the world. They have nothing and yet they have everything. But who wants that restricted way? Israel didn't want it. In the "narrow way" of the wilderness they told Moses that they preferred slavery in Egypt. They were on the way to life, to the promised land, but they detested the restricted way of having to trust God every day for provision. They hated the manna, and longed for the foods of Egypt. The manna was restricting — who wants to eat the same thing for 40 years? — but it was heavenly food.

The uncomfortable fact is that freedom — the freedom offered by Jesus through discipleship — is intolerable to most Christians. Christians prefer conformity to a system, a system of orthodox doctrines, an established, secure institution, and the traditions of the elders. Just as Jesus was too radical and too free for the Pharisees, he is too radical and too free for many Christians today.

Jesus had to go the way of the cross. But some Christians say, "Jesus went to the cross in order to bring us abundant life! He suffered so we do not have to suffer! He was obedient to death so we might have life!" But this is clearly not true. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Peter said, "Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind" (1 Peter 4:1). And for an example, let us look at the life of Paul.

Paul's narrow way

At the very outset of his ministry, Paul was promised a narrow, difficult way. Jesus appeared to Ananias in a vision and told him to go to Paul, "... for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). And Paul got the message. In Acts 14:22 we read that in Antioch, Lystra and Iconium, Paul stressed to the disciples that "we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God." Writing to the Corinthians, he testified that "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). To the end, Paul was "not disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). He ended his life in confinement under house arrest, and was finally martyred in Rome. His whole Christian life had been

a narrow way, the contradiction of a restricted man who was totally free. He was “in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings ...”, and he lived out the contradictions: “... as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:4,5,8-10).

How many Christians do you know who can say that? How many do you know who are truly free, who live that contradictory lifestyle — they seem so restricted and yet they seem more free and content than people who have all the so-called “freedoms” of wealth, health, success and everything that goes with the “broad way”. Few find it. Few Christians find it. This is nothing to do with grace and eternal life, it’s all to do with discipleship and the kingdom. Will you be one who will count the cost, pay the price, find the life, and one day “exchange the cross for a crown”?

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

HOW DOES THE SQUEEZE AFFECT YOU?

When I read through the article Maurice had written to see if I could write anything to complement it I was in a dilemma. Could I think of any situations in my own life which could give you an indication as to what the strait and narrow way could mean, or can we only see this in a spiritual way? As I pondered, I could see many many incidents which had thrown me off the strait and narrow, times when I had conformed to the world and been part of the system, you know, just doing what everyone else does although the things I did were not particularly what you would call sinful.

We all start out our journey, whether Christian or non-Christian, on the strait and narrow way. The foetus begins its life in a tightly restricted area, totally protected from outside elements. The birth is through an incredibly strait and narrow birth canal and as soon as the child is born it is washed and swaddled in tight blankets, because this very restriction gives the baby security and comfort. But after that, the fight for independence begins and unless someone applies restrictions along the way, the child will become a selfish, wilful, inconsiderate hooligan who is a law unto itself.

Christian Freedom?

There is no freedom for the Christian. Jesus freed us from slavery to the devil by paying the price for our sin. But we have now been bought, we are not our own, we are now the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ and have an obligation to fulfil the will of God in our bodies, minds and spirits. If we don’t do God’s will, then we in actual fact have become rebellious, stealing our own life which is the property of God, so that we can live as we please.

But is the fact that we have no freedom a horrible situation to be in? If it is then Jesus must have been the most miserable person ever to walk this earth because he said on numerous occasions that he did nothing of himself, he only did what the Father showed him to do. He didn't heal one sick person without his Father telling him to do it. He never spoke to anyone unless his Father told him to. He never went anywhere without his Father's permission. He was driven by the spirit of his Father into the wilderness to fast for 40 days and be tempted of the devil. He desperately pleaded with his Father in the garden of Gethsemane to be released from giving his life on the cross ... "Any other way Father, You can do all things. Yet not my will, but Yours be done." Was Jesus miserable? Did he find the "Christian" life too hard, too restrictive, too narrow? I don't think so. He said that his very meat was to do the will of his Father in Heaven. He seemed to delight in the close communion and relationship which he had with his Father. He even neglected to sleep at night because his being with God was so important. He was at peace when all around him was in turmoil, he wouldn't have even bothered to still the storm if the disciples hadn't woken him from his sleep. He was at peace with God at all times.

My Restrictions

I have cast my mind back over my life to see how I have reacted when I've been restricted from doing my own will by God. I remember on one occasion when I was about 23 years old and had courted a fascination for a very handsome, wealthy, worldly man who was paying me quite a bit of attention. He had invited me out for the day. I knew I shouldn't be with him, I was a Christian and he wasn't. I knew I was playing with fire, but the fire at that time seemed warm and appealing and suddenly my Christianity seemed too restrictive and confining. I was young and wanted to enjoy myself. I accepted his invitation so he called for me in his flash car. I just hoped that nobody from my church saw me with him and kept my head down whilst we were driving through the neighbourhood, but when he said he had to call in at his office to pick something up, I just knew something was going to happen to ruin my plan.

Freaked out

And I was right. When we arrived at his place of work and were getting out of his car, another vehicle rolled up. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw who was in it. The brother from the church got out of his car and came to me. He motioned to me to wind the window down and then said he had come to take me home. I was mesmerised! You cannot imagine how I felt. I was embarrassed, frustrated, frightened, confused, angry, you name it, I was so many emotions rolled into one. I got out of the car like someone sleepwalking and got into his. My worldly friend stared in disbelief because I was just walking away from him — and he was so very very impressive!

I remember vividly the journey home to my house. I was freaked out. I knew God was stopping me from getting into trouble, but to be quite honest, I wanted to get in trouble. I wanted to be free from God for a few hours. But He wouldn't let me. In those minutes I felt as though something sinister was happening to me. "This is nothing but satanic", I yelled, "God is supposed to be a gentleman and

never do anything we don't want Him to do. He would never take my free will away!" I was so confused because I had an understanding of God which wasn't true.

But then a strange feeling came over me. I suddenly felt very loved, very cared for and very special. Fancy God going to all that trouble to make sure I didn't do something I would regret! I felt those tight swaddling clothes wrapped around me and it made me feel so safe and secure.

Decisions and consequences

If God has fathered you then don't expect Him to let you get away with doing what you want. Like any loving parent, He will keep close tabs on you and make you feel very uncomfortable at times to let you know you are overstepping the mark. The problem really comes when you have matured spiritually enough in His view to make your own decisions and face the consequences your actions may bring. God writes His laws in your heart and mind and will not give you peace while ever you are pondering about what decision you are going to make, until you have made your choice. When you have come to your decision, either to follow His will or your own, then conviction ceases and you have peace. If you have made the right decision then this peace is wonderful and will bring the "peaceable fruits of righteousness". But if you have made the wrong choice, this "peace" means that God is not striving with you any longer, you have hardened up and He is "handing you over to a reprobate mind" because you have decided not to listen to His voice. God will never force you to serve Him. He is always seeking voluntary surrender from a heart that is filled with love for Him.

I face decisions every day. My walk with God requires me to feed my new nature and starve my old nature. Hundreds of situations crop up every day where I have to choose which path to follow. I never buy newspapers or magazines because I know that when I read the scandal, gossip and all the other smutty things that find their way into the pages, it only feeds my old nature. But sometimes, when I am in the dentists' waiting room I will be tempted to pick up a magazine just to pass the time, and when I have done this I've felt eyes on the back of my head as though 'big brother was watching me'. Sometimes it has really annoyed me that I don't feel free, but most of the time I am really grateful that God is keeping my conscience towards Him soft, because whenever we harden up to His voice He will stop speaking. "But we're all human!", I've heard people say. Yes, that's true. So was Jesus whilst he had an earthly body, that's why he said, "Not my will, but Thine be done." If we are to allow God to live through us, then we have to deny our human desires and do only the things we know will please God. When you are about to do something, ask yourself whether you would be happy or embarrassed if Jesus was visibly standing beside you witnessing everything you did.

Be soft to God

Whether it's keeping the wrong company, doing the wrong things, going to the wrong places or saying and listening to the wrong things, allow yourself to be soft to God. Harden not your hearts like the children of Israel did, but allow God to have His will in your life. "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1,2).

Restricting? Yes, but it will bring the real peace that only God can give ... "My peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth" (because your conscience is hard), but the peace that passes all understanding. And let's face it, in this troubled world we all need that.