**The Wicket Gate**

Text: Matthew 7:13-14

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**Scriptures:** Luke 13:22-30; Matthew 7:13-14

**Confession:** Heidelberg Catechism LD7

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 160, 1b, 119:105-112, 338, 271, 444, 279, 523

**Series:** The Pilgrim’s Progress (#2)

**Theme:** Ultimately, there are only two gates, two ways and two eternal destinations

**Proposition:** Enter by the narrow gate that leads to life

**Introduction**

If you want to go from Christchurch to Dunedin by car, which road do you need to take? SH1 going South. If you want to go from Christchurch to Hokitika by car, which road do you need to take? SH73 going West. The point here is that if you want to get to a particular destination, then you need to travel the right road. In the ‘sermon on the Mount’ recorded in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus uses this basic principle of travel as a simple practical image that illustrates a fundamental spiritual principle. There is an easy way that leads to destruction and there is a hard way that leads to life.

Now you can actually get to Dunedin from Christchurch by taking SH73 first, then SH6 down the West Coast and come into Dunedin via SH8. You could also get to Hokitika by driving south on SH1 then turning West on SH8, and join SH6 to travel North along the West Coast. However, when it comes to our eternal destiny, there are **only two** routes, and they are accessed by two different gates. As Jesus reveals “*The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction*”; “*The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life*”. The two points of our sermon this morning mirror these twin truths.

1. Firstly, the wide gate and the easy way
2. Secondly, the narrow gate and the hard way
3. **The wide gate and the easy way**

‘*The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to that Which is to Come*’ is an allegory of the Christian Life, written in 1678 by John Bunyan. For many centuries it was the second most popular book in the English language; only the Bible was more widely read. If you have not yet read The Pilgrim’s Progress, I would encourage you to do so. Pilgrim’s Progress is deeply rooted in Scripture and reflects some of the Biblical theology that we confess as a church. The journey that Christian makes from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City mirrors the experience of the author, John Bunyan.

In the book, Christian has left the city of Destruction and is headed for the Wicket Gate. Before he gets to this entrance way, he meets Mr. Worldly Wiseman who offers him some advice, asking ‘*Who bid thee go this way to be rid of thy burden?*’ Christian was carrying a heavy burden – representing sin, shame and guilt. Worldly Wiseman directs Christian to take the easy path ‘with much safety, friendship, and content and to turn away from the dangerous way he was travelling’. Worldly Wiseman points Christian to a village named Morality where a gentleman called Legality lives. Mr Legality pretends to help relieve people of their burdens by teaching them a set of religious man-made rules to follow. What if Mr. Legality is not at home? No problem, Mr Civility can help instead. The English word ‘civility’ is not much used these days. It means ‘*formal politeness and courtesy in behaviour or speech*’. Surely just being a good, decent person will relieve the burden?

Mr. Worldly Wiseman represents those who love only the teaching of this world (1 John 4:5). Their destination, via the ‘easy way’, is ‘destruction’. The Greek word translated ‘destruction’ here literally means the loss of everything that makes human existence worthwhile. The idea is **not** the loss of being – that would be annihilation: ceasing to be. This is a non-Scriptural idea that evangelical theologians like Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, Philip Hughes and Stephen Travis have taught. It is also the official teaching of Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The concept behind the Greek word translated ‘destruction’ is the complete loss of well-being, not being.

Jesus described the end of the easy way which is accessed through the wide gate in these words: "*And these will go away into eternal punishment*” (Matt 25:46). This is the state of Hell – the awful realm of separation from God “*away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power*” (2 Thess 1:9) to ‘*shame and everlasting contempt*’ (Dan 12:2). Hell is a reality that many people struggle with today.

The problem that many people like you and me may have is that we think too little of our sinfulness and too little of God’s holiness. In writing of this reality, Welsh Protestant Minister Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: “*We are all on very good terms with ourselves, and we can always put up a good case for ourselves. Even if we try to make ourselves feel that we are sinners, we will never do it. There is only one way to know that we are sinners, and that is to have some dim, glimmering conception of God*”. The clearer we comprehend the holiness of God, the clearer we understand our own sin. This was the prophet Isaiah’s experience when he saw a vision of the glory of the enthroned Lord God (Isaiah 6:1-7).

Jesus was direct in speaking of the eternal fate of those who do not enter by the narrow gate. As we heard earlier from our reading in Luke’s gospel, Christ described the grief and anger of missing out on all that is worth living for in these words ‘*In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*’ (Luke 13:28). It seems to me that Hell is a place of dreadful unrelenting regret; a profound disappointment in failing to enter by the narrow gate.

The truth that many people take the easy way that leads to Hell, and few take the hard way that leads to eternal life, is clearly revealed in Scripture and is also summarised in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A7: “*Are all men saved through Christ just as all were lost through Adam?” “No. Only those are saved who by true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all his blessings*”.

How then are those who enter by the wide gate and travel the easy way distinguished from those who enter by the narrow gate and travel the hard way? By **true faith**, which is helpfully defined by HCA21, drawing on the foundational truths of Scripture: “*True faith is not only a* ***knowledge*** *and* ***conviction*** *that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep rooted* ***assurance****, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation*”.

Before exiting a flying airplane safely with a parachute, you need to understand about how to deploy it. That’s knowledge. You also need a personal belief that the parachute is able to lower you down to the ground without injury. That’s conviction. Then you need sufficient confidence to actually jump out of the plane into mid-air. That’s a deep-rooted assurance. True faith is a bit like parachute jumping. True faith is vital for eternal life. “*Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*” (Heb 11:6).

People like you and me journey through life along different paths, experiencing various events and circumstances, visiting a variety of places, but ultimately there are only two routes in this life and only two destinations at the end. Jesus clearly said, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36).

Are you journeying through this life without a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in His Word is true? Do you disbelieve that by grace your sins have been forgiven in Christ and that you have been made forever right with God? If your answer is ‘yes’ then you are on the wrong road and must change direction, turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, enter through the narrow gate and then travel the hard way, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The narrow gate and the hard way**

Did you know that originally in the game of cricket, the ‘wicket’ had only two (not three) vertical stumps and a horizontal bail across the top? This wooden structure at which the bowler aims the ball looked very much like a gate and that is, in fact, why it is called a ‘wicket’. A wicket is an old English word for a small door or gate. John Bunyan includes ‘The Wicket Gate’ in The Pilgrim’s Progress to represent the narrow gate that Jesus speaks of in our text when He says, “*enter by the narrow gate*” (Matt 7:13).

Evangelist gives Pilgrim (formerly named Graceless) a parchment roll with the words written within “Flee from the wrath to come!” When Pilgrim read it, he turned to Evangelist and said, “Whither must I fly?” Then Evangelist points with his finger over a very wide field “*Do you see yonder wicket gate?*”. Christian answered ‘no.’ As yet He had not come to true faith in Christ. So, Evangelist said ‘*Do you see yonder shining light?*’ – a reference to Psalm 119:105 – ‘*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*’ (also 2 Pet 1:19).

In God’s Word Jesus said, *"Enter through the narrow gate… for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few”* (Matt 7:13-14). The Greek word translated ‘narrow’ conveys the idea of obstacles standing close to each other. When we were living in Alice Springs in Australia, we visited Standley Chasm. It is a ‘slot canyon’; an 80m deep cleft in the rock that is only 3m wide. That’s the idea of narrow here. The root of the underlying Greek word comes from “to groan” to be under pressure/restricted.

Choosing to follow Jesus is not easy. His is a confined path, a constricted path, a hard route. The word ‘hard’ means to be pressed, crushed, afflicted. It is in the perfect passive participle form in the original Greek. Jesus is making clear that the way to life is an ongoing journey of struggle. This is what He means when He says: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23). For example, in The Pilgrim’s Progress, as Christian began to run towards the light, his wife and children cried after him to return to the City of Destruction, but he put his fingers in his ears and ran on crying ‘Life! life! eternal life!”.

Jesus said, "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14:26). It is not easy leaving unbelieving family and friends behind to follow Jesus. We earnestly desire that they would travel the narrow hard way together with us.

Later in his journey of faith, Christian will come in The Pilgrim’s Progress to the Hill Difficulty. After he has clambered up the steep path on his hands and knees, he will see two men running the other way. Their names were ‘Timorous’ and ‘Mistrust’. Timorous means lacking in confidence. Mistrust means ‘suspicious of, or having no confidence in’. He had seen a couple of lions by the way and did not dare go on.

Perhaps you are finding the path that Jesus has led you on to be hard and difficult? Perhaps you are surprised, because you didn’t think the Christian life would be so crushing at times? Perhaps you are tempted to ‘chuck it all in’ and travel the easy road instead? In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian’s journey of faith is hard. In His own life, John Bunyan’s way was marked by affliction. Did you know that He began writing ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’ whilst in the Bedfordshire county prison. His crime? Preaching outside of the established English church. After three months behind bars he was offered freedom on condition that he no longer preach. He refused. In total he spent twelve years in jail.

John Bunyan knew about hard. Much more than most of us do. John Bunyan knew Jesus. Jesus identified Himself as being the narrow gate through whom all must pass if they are to enter into the New Heavens and New Earth to live forever. He said: “*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture*” (John 10:9). The Greek word translated ‘door’ refers to any kind of door, gate or entrance. For example the Temple ‘gate called Beautiful’ in Acts 3:2.

Jesus is the Gate, and He is also the Way. He said "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). Through His sacrificial death on behalf of pilgrims like you and me, Jesus opened up the way to God (Heb 9:12, 24, 25).

Are you ready for the future? Are you ready for the Day of the Lord? Be sure to be on the right road. Enter the right gate through true faith in Jesus, there is no other way to true lasting life. *"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” (Matthew 7:13-14).*

AMEN.