

The Narrow Gate

“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.” (Mt 7:13-14)

Introduction

In the Book of Deuteronomy (28-32), God laid before the Hebrew people two paths. Each had a fitting destination. The one is the path of obedience and *blessings*. The other is the way of disobedience and *curses*. These two choices are summarized in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, in which is imbedded this entreaty: “Chose life” (Deut 30:19). Drawing on this covenantal background Jesus employed the analogy of two gates.

The one gate is called “narrow” because it is exclusively focused on one specific objective, fidelity to Christ. It is also narrow because one enters in single file, not as a group following the herd. This way is “hard,” which means it’s difficult - even painful, but it leads to eternal happiness. Few take it. The second gate is described as “wide,” because it offers many alluring options. These choices are enticing because they seduce our appetites. This path is “easy” because it is pleasurable, but it leads to death. Many choose it.

But why there are only two gates? After all, we have many choices in life. However, the idea of multiple gates is an illusion. There are only two gates because each is an entrance to a warring kingdom in a battle so fierce that no compromise is possible. There is no neutral place where those who wish to be non-combatants can avoid taking sides. Jesus put it succinctly: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Mt 12:30).

Therefore every choice a person makes is a decision *for* one side and *against* the other. This is why bad moral choices are so dangerous. They inevitably lead to worse moral choices. Our society did not become pagan over night. It happened inch-by-inch, decision-by-decision, over many years. Now we are spiraling out of control.

The Winning Choice

It is often the case that the hard choice is the winning choice, even in the natural order. When I began my business career my mentor and friend, Bill Cosentino, gave me a short essay that greatly influenced my thinking. The title of the article was “The Common Denominator of Success.” The author told of his search to discover the common thread that determined success. When he examined positive characteristics, for example, intelligence, education, family background and connections, experience, attractiveness, and many others; he discovered that they existed in some successful people, but not in others. He eventually discovered one common trait that was present in all successful people: *Successful people did the things that unsuccessful people didn’t like to do.* They didn’t like to do them either; they just did it anyway.

Years ago I supervised a struggling salesman. He was likeable, personable, bright, and honest. Each week I would meet with him to review his activity and give him needed direction. I can still remember him saying: "Jim, one day I am going to be very successful in this business." I would always respond: "Dave, I wish you would say, I will be successful today." You see, the hard part of his job wasn't selling or learning the technical aspects of the business, but prospecting – that is, making appointments, and he avoided it. Ultimately, he did not succeed. *Successful people do the things that unsuccessful people didn't like to do.* So it is in the spiritual life.

Why Hard and Easy?

Nevertheless, one may be inclined to ask, "Why is the narrow gate that leads to paradise *hard* and the wide gate that leads to perdition *easy*? Since we just celebrated Thanksgiving a comparison with weight loss might prove helpful. Obesity, not starvation, is a serious health hazard in our country. In addition to those who are obese, many of us realize that losing 10 to 20 pounds is a very desirable. (Hmm, come to think of it, I'm at the stage of life when I'm thinner on top and thicker in the middle!) Well, why is weight loss so hard and gaining weight so easy? Logic and objective reality has no bearing on the issue. Eating is pleasurable, highly pleasurable in south Louisiana, and dieting is distasteful – no pun intended. Ironically, when we over eat and gain weight we don't feel good afterwards, and when we do loose weight and slim down we feel much better about ourselves. So there we have it. Overeating is an easy process that brings negative results. Eating moderately is a hard process that brings positive results. So it is with the spiritual life, except our choices have eternal consequences.

Choosing the Narrow Gate

What, then, is so hard about entering through the narrow gate? "Accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior," is a beautiful Protestant expression. In the Catholic Church we call it a "conversion". It would be nice if we could make that decision and then coast into paradise on our laurels, but it doesn't work that way. Accepting Jesus or conversion is an ongoing process that we are called to make again and again in each present moment. That is because being an authentic Christian centers on love - loving God above all things and loving others as Christ loves us. Well, at first glance that doesn't seem so daunting. It even sounds a little romantic. This brings me to a discussion of the meaning of love.

Understanding Love

Contrary to popular misconceptions love has nothing to do with feelings. Love resides in the will or, as we commonly say, in the heart. Every struggle to love or not to love is in the will. The entire battle between good and evil is waged in the human heart. Every evil, injustice and misconception is first accepted in the heart. Even wars between nations were first fought and lost in the wills of those who rejected love. Therefore the human heart is the vessel that holds all virtues or is empty of them.

Although we romanticize about love, making it the focus of poetry, books, and movies, it is the most demanding, the toughest of virtues. Love requires that we conform our will to God's will. It means taking the focus off us and seeking the best interest of others. Love is challenging because it entails a death to selfishness. It means that God must become the center of our universe, not us. It means that we must order and gain control over our disordered appetites for things, power, and pleasure. It means we cannot play-act as God, and must give up the fallacy of control. Love means abandoning the obsession with one's physical appearance. Love demands that we cease trying to solve problems without depending on God's providence, and it requires that we are satisfied with all that He sends us – even our trials. Genuine love is unconcerned with reputation, because God's judgment is the only standard that matters. Real love demands that we abandon unforgiveness and all expressions of anger and resentment. Love rests on the solid reality that only God is secure. In contrast, nothing in this world is secure, neither nature nor man himself.

Loving someone, even God, is an endless series of choices made moment by moment. Recently, I have observed the patient love of my sister-in-law who is visiting with her two bright, very active, and mischievous sons. (They are not at all as angelic as I was at their ages – my mother had better not read this!) Watching her is a lesson on how to love others and how to respond to God.

The Bottom Line

It is apparent today that the dividing line between good and evil, between those with Christ and those against him, between a culture of life and a culture of death, is becoming sharply defined. Although the worldwide rejection of God is startling and unusual, Christianity has experienced similar challenges in the past when its very existence of seemed to be tottering.

Speaking of the sin of Adam and the gift of Christ, St. Paul wrote: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20). This marvelous equation of God's love and mercy is very much in play today. Ordinary men and women from all walks of life and from the depths of sin are being drawn into great holiness. There is a Chinese saying: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." The first step through the narrow gate begins with the decision to make the journey. Then it becomes a progression of choices to abandon sin that are renewed each day in each moment. Once through that stage it becomes a series of choices to love God in thought, word and deed. Finally it becomes surrender in love to the will of God at each moment. It is the choice to abandon everything to him, to deny him nothing.

The End

Every story has an ending. So does the narrative of each life, but not all end with the conclusion, "and they lived happily every after." No one enters heaven that does not love God and others. If Christ is not the center of our life, Satan is! Half a heart can't love God and the other half love sin. Jesus redeemed the world because he fully accepted His Cross in love and

completely surrendered to it in love, not because He suffered. Nevertheless, His human love was perfected in His suffering (Heb 5:7-10). It is only God's love in our hearts at the last moment of life that determines our final judgment and destiny. God allows what we choose. So we, too, must heed Moses' admonition, "Choose life!"

Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>

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