

The Narrow Gate and the Hard Way (Matt. 7:12–14)

By Jacob D. Gerber

So far through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been teaching us *how* to live—that is, teaching us our ethical responsibilities before God. This is a difficult stretch of Scripture, where Jesus tells us exactly what a “righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees” (Matt. 5:20) would look like. Jesus doesn’t sugarcoat the infinitely, high-as-heaven standard of God. Now, in Matthew 7:12–14, Jesus brings this section to a conclusion with an incredible summary statement (known as the “Golden Rule”), and an exhortation to follow Jesus in spite of the fact that his gate is narrow, and his way is hard. Even so, Jesus makes clear that to follow him is the only path to find life itself, since *Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life*.

Duty (Matt. 7:12)

Jesus’ “Golden Rule” is one of the more famous verses in all the Bible: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Less understood, however, is the connection that this Golden Rule has to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. As we have studied this Sermon, we have often observed the difficulty of understanding Jesus’ logic as he works from section to section. Nevertheless, we have decided to err on the side of assuming and seeking out continuity in Jesus’ sermon, rather than treating each section as though it were independent. How, then, does the Golden Rule relate with what has come before?

In v. 12, Jesus connects his statement to what has come before by the conjunction “so” or “therefore” (οὕτως; *oun*). While this gives us a clearer connection to the previous passage(s) than we find in other sections (e.g., Matt. 7:6), there is still a debate about what Jesus means by “therefore” in v. 12. At one level, Jesus probably wishes for us to see a direct connection between the way that we ought to treat people and the way that our *Father* treats people: “how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:11b).¹ If *we* wish that others would give us good things when we ask, then we should give *others* good things when they ask. So, Jesus’ “therefore” not only exhorts us to follow the example of our Father in heaven but also convicts us of our reluctance: “If you then, who are evil...” (Matt. 7:11a).²

At another level, Jesus probably intends for us to think through the entire ethical thrust of the Sermon on the Mount.³ Jesus has been teaching us many different principles for how we ought to live, and now he gives us a simple utility rule that may function “like a pocketknife or carpenter’s rule, always ready to be used, even in a sudden emergency when there is no time to ask for the

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 365–66.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 295.

³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 172.

advice of a friend or to consult a book.”⁴ Whether we are talking about anger, lust, divorce, oath-breaking, retaliation, or hating our enemies (Matt. 5:21–47), all of Jesus’ teaching may be summarized by doing unto others as we wish that others would do unto us. The ESV (“whatever you wish”) under-translates the sweeping, comprehensive nature of the situations that Jesus intends to invoke by this one rule: “Therefore, all things—as many as—you wish....” The King James Version translates this well: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would....”

Indeed, Jesus wants us to recognize that this is not just one more rule, but a summary statement of *all* God’s rules: “for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Jesus’ ability to summarize the law this way is important, since it demonstrates that the Law is a coherent, unified whole, rather than a scattered list of arbitrary regulations. Clearly, the Golden Rule is a restatement and an exposition of the obligation of the Second Table of the Law to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18).⁵ Regarding the First Table of the Law to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5), Lenski helpfully reminds us that the immediate comparison from the previous verse to the goodness and generosity of “our Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:11) frames the Golden Rule within the terms of a right understanding of God.⁶ By the Golden Rule, Jesus gives us a snapshot *picture* of the law that is worth a thousand *commentaries* on the law.

R. T. France provides an important background detail from Jewish teaching from this period of time that fills out the significance of Jesus’ summary of the Law:

The famous summary of the law by R. Hillel (*b. Šabb.* 31a) provides an instructive parallel. Challenged by a Gentile to “teach me the whole Torah while I am standing on one leg” (a challenge curtly refused by Hillel’s rival Shammai), Hillel reputedly replied: “Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you. This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.” The setting is roughly contemporary with that of Jesus, and the question in effect the same as that put to Jesus in 22:36. Hillel, like Jesus (and unlike Shammai), accepts the possibility of putting the law in a nutshell, and his comment, “This is the whole Torah,” is strikingly similar to Jesus’ saying here. Moreover, his summary is on the same lines as Jesus’ summary here (and indeed the call to “love your neighbor as yourself” in 22:39), but with the interesting difference that Hillel’s formula is negative where Jesus’ is positive....Jesus’ positive version of the formula, even if not unprecedented, represents a more demanding interpretation of love of one’s neighbor than was normal among other teachers of the time.⁷

Not only is Jesus willing to summarize the law in this way, but he also expresses this summary positively, in a way does not merely prohibit us from harm, but drives us toward doing good to our neighbor. If the requirement is to do for others how we wish that they would do for us, Calvin shows us just how *far* that should drive us in our quest to do good for our neighbor: “since every man shows himself to be a skillful teacher of justice for his own advantage, how comes it, that the

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 363–64.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 176.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 296.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 283–84.

same knowledge does not readily occur to him, when the profit or loss of another is at stake, but because we wish to be wise for ourselves only, and no man cares about his neighbors?”⁸

Destruction (Matt. 7:13)

Many commentators see v. 12 as the conclusion to Jesus’ extended ethical teaching that reaches back in some ways all the way to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, but especially to Jesus’ statement about his intention to fulfill the “Law and the Prophets” back in Matthew 5:17.⁹ As France observes, “What follows is a series of four short sketches which underline the importance of an existential response to what has been heard and warn of the consequences of failing to respond.”¹⁰ Headlining this new section is Jesus’ warnings about the two different gates (wide vs. narrow) and ways (easy vs. hard). The reason to consider v. 12 with vv. 13–14 is to see the connection between Jesus’ final words of ethical teaching (as summarized in the Golden Rule) and his first words of exhortation and application.

Jesus begins with a well-known theme from the Old Testament and wider Jewish literature: the “two ways” (e.g., Deut. 30:19; Ps. 1; Prov. 9 Jer. 21:8).¹¹ Here, Jesus says, “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” (v. 13). There is some debate about whether the relationship of the two gates and the two ways. Some believe that the gate comes first, representing initial faith, while the way comes second, representing a life of obedience to Jesus. Others reverse the imagery, so that the way comes first, representing a life lived pursuing the kingdom, where the gate represents the final entrance into heaven. Still others see merely stylistic differences between “gate” and “way.” Of these, I think the first option best, to see Jesus as speaking about initial faith as the gate, with a life of obedience as a way.¹²

What, then, is the significance of the wideness of the gate, and the ease of the path in the first option that Jesus criticizes in v. 13? Lenski explains this well:

Jesus does not say what makes the one portal narrow and the other wide. Of course, both passageways are like in their portals. He states only to what they lead and leaves it to us to deduce why the one is necessarily narrow, and the other most naturally broad. Contrition, faith, and a Christian life are like a narrow portal and passage. We cannot ride into it with our sins, self-righteousness, false notions, vices, and follies. We could not even get them

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:355.

⁹ e.g., Hagner writes, “We are at a major turning point in the sermon; no more ethical teaching is given. What follows are warnings and a concluding parable, all involving, as in the present passage, the use of strong contrasts.” (Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 178.)

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 285.

¹¹ Within wider Jewish literature, Carson also cites Sirach 21:11–14; 2 Esdras 7:6–14; *Testament of Asher* 1:3, 5; *Rule of the Community* (1 QS) 3:20ff. (Carson, “Matthew,” 225.)

¹² For an extensive consideration of these options, along with what I believe to be persuasive reasons for taking this interpretive position, see Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 367–69.

through the portal. The broad portal and the spacious passage are different. There we may cart in anything we please. More than abundant room invites us to do so.¹³

Although this gate is wide and this path is easy, Jesus warns us that they lead “to destruction” (v. 13b). These dangers are real even if many journey through life on this way. As Carson observes, “Democratic decisions do not determine truth and righteousness in the kingdom.”¹⁴ Thus, Jesus warns us, “Enter by the narrow gate” (v. 13a).

Deliverance (Matt. 7:14)

In v. 14, Jesus gives us the contrasting description of the narrow gate and the hard way: “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (v. 14). While the gate is narrow and the way is hard, even so this is the only pathway that leads to “life.” Regardless of how promising the other option may seem, its end is destruction. By these contrasts, Jesus echoes similar paradoxical sentiments to the Beatitudes with which he opened this Sermon (Matt. 5:3–12). Hendriksen writes:

It should be noted that Jesus has already, by way of implication, pictured entrance into his kingdom as being both inviting and difficult, that is, as attended by circumstances both favorable and unfavorable. Favorable, for those who enter are signally blessed. They are the possessors of the kingdom they have entered, are comforted, inherit the earth, shall be fully satisfied, etc. Unfavorable, in the sense that they will be persecuted, insulted, and slandered; and that they are burdened with heavy obligations; for example, they must practice a righteousness that excels that of the scribes and Pharisees; must love even their enemies and pray for their persecutors; must not be hypercritical but must nevertheless be discriminating, etc. Such things are “unfavorable” in the sense that they clash with men’s natural tendencies.¹⁵

For this reason, Jesus urges us to find the narrow gate. As Lenski observes, “The wide portal need not be found. It stands wide open in the sight of all men and is easily drifted into. The narrow portal, however, is found.”¹⁶

Once again, Jesus is hinting—but not explicitly declaring—his own role in all this. *He* is the One who must be found if we are to have life. *He* is the *door* by whom we must enter, and through whom we will be saved (John 10:9). *He* is the *way*, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), so that no one comes to the Father except through him. Apart from him, we have nothing but destruction. Through him, we find life.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 297.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 225.

¹⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 366–67.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 298.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the Golden Rule in v. 12 connect with what Jesus has taught previously in the Sermon on the Mount? How does the Golden Rule summarize the Second Table of the Law (“Love your neighbor as yourself”; Lev. 19:18)? How does the Golden Rule summarize the First Table of the Law (“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength”; Deut. 6:5)? How does Jesus characterize the ethical center of the Law?
2. In v. 13, what makes the wide gate so wide? What makes the easy way so easy? What factors cause so many to enter by this gate, and to travel down this way? Why, then, does this road ultimately lead to destruction? In your own life, what kind of bulky baggage do you find yourself trying to bring along with you on this journey? Why does the prospect of carrying this baggage make the wide gate and easy way so appealing to you personally?
3. In v. 14, what makes the narrow gate so narrow? What makes the hard way so hard? Why is the narrow gate and hard way so difficult to find? Why, though, does Jesus insist that this narrow gate and hard way alone are the pathway to the deliverance of salvation? In your own life, what parts of your bulky baggage are difficult to give up in order to pass through the narrow gate, and to travel down the hard road?
4. How is Jesus the narrow gate (John 10:9)? How is Jesus the way to life (John 14:6)? What makes the hard way of Jesus such good news for laboring and heavy-laden people (Matt. 11:28)? How can Jesus’ yoke be both hard, and yet also gentle, lowly, restful, easy, and light (Matt. 11:29–30)? When push comes to shove, do you end up clinging to your bulky baggage, or are you willing to leave it behind in order to find life in Jesus alone?