

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 7:13-20**  
**“Which Way Is Life?”**

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(Connection Sunday, Trinity Sunday)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**



## WHICH WAY IS LIFE?

*“You will know them by their fruits.”*

Jesus offers a ethical outcome test for those who claim to speak for God.

M A T T H E W 7 : 1 6 , 2 0

**I**n his novel *A Painted House*, John Grisham describes a pious Sunday school teacher eulogizing a character named Jerry Sisco at his funeral. He was a mean guy who’d been killed in a back alley fight after picking on one person too many. In the words of the little boy who’d seen the fight with his friend Dewayne:

"She made Jerry sound like a Christian, an innocent victim. I glanced at Dewayne, who had an eye on me.... As Baptists, we'd been taught from the cradle that the only way... to heaven was by believing in Jesus and trying to follow his example in living a clean and moral Christian life. And anyone who did not accept Jesus and live a Christian life simply went to hell. That's where Jerry Sisco was, and we all knew it."<sup>1</sup>

I understand the polite reticence of Grisham’s Sunday School teacher; burying the overtly wicked with the family sitting on the front row is a tough job- as I know well. My strategy has been to tell the truth about the person– often to the shock of the audience, then to tell the truth about Jesus Christ and how far he went to save the wicked who turn to him, then leave the verdict to God. It’s unsettling to walk away from a grave with unresolved questions, but it’s the right thing to do with scoundrels.

My first funeral in Charleston, less than a week after I arrived in June of ‘94, was of an inactive church member with an active cocaine habit and who took a certain notorious female down to the marina to show her his sailboat. Apparently– to impress her with manly bravado- he sought to swim under the dock to get to his boat and never surfaced till the divers brought him up. What would you say at his funeral? A dropout, a criminal, an immoral and foolish man.

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<sup>1</sup> John Grisham, *A Painted House* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001), 85-86.

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At my second funeral a week later the dead man’s daughter glided down the aisle flanked by two large men wearing uniforms and SCDC badges. She arrived from Columbia in the back of a cruiser wearing orange as the new black plus hand and leg shackles. When the pre-recorded Prelude ended, the sound of clanking chains accompanied her down the aisle as she was ushered in last, and I thought to myself, “Pastor Phil, this is a tough town!”

When the crowd stopped looking at her row by row, they looked at me. I could hear their thoughts, “And now, Mr. Preacher, what do you have to say?” So what did I do? I read from the Bible; I told the truth about the man in the box and his daughter in irons; I bragged on Jesus, and I pointed to the narrow gate just off the broad way many of them had been traveling. It was a rough bunch, but there was soon a stillness and concentration in the room I have learned to identify as the presence of the Spirit, and it gave me encouragement to stay lovingly close to the truth. It was gospel; it was good news, not just good advice. They knew it, and I knew it.

When the service ended at the funeral home, I shook the hand of the young woman in orange, and she thanked me. To such broken people I often find myself saying, “You are not a throw-away person. No matter what’s happened to you or what you may have done, there’s hope for you in Jesus Christ and with his people.”

She didn’t go to the grave side; she had to be back in time for the evening count. Sometimes I wonder what happened to her. Did he ever find and take the narrow gate offered her that sad day?

In her eulogy, Grisham’s Sunday school lady aimed at kindness and hope— both virtues, but her student and his friend DeWayne were— I fear— closer to the truth if Scripture is our standard, though such ultimate verdicts are not ours because we don’t have the full story, only God does. But if there are— as Jesus promised— trees to be *cut down and thrown into the fire*, we are not the timber cruisers and lumberjacks, and at the end there will be surprises enough for us all. But still, choices matter and Scripture is clear. How we do or do not respond to the options and grace God offers determines life now and destiny later. The choice is a forced one. To not decide is to already have decided. There are only two gates— narrow and wide, which lead to two paths— hard and easy, and finally only two destinies— life eternal or eternal destruction, and along the way all choose and must keep doing so.<sup>2</sup> When others do me wrong, will I choose the narrow gate of forgiveness? When life delivers

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<sup>2</sup> On ancient Jewish two-ways teaching and the rhetoric of hyperbole to clarify moral choices, see Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon On The Mount* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1999), 162-165.

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disappointment, will I choose the narrow gate of hope? When I want to quit because the path is long and hard, will I choose the narrow gate of faithfulness? I will if I see Jesus just ahead and calling me forward, and in this way I am changed along the way.

There is no third option, no moderate middle way. God’s grace is that the narrow gate is always available as an off ramp from the great wide way, all the way to the end of the road. But if the wide way is all you know, you may drive right by the last opportunity just before your great collision with death. So, will it be the narrow, hard way of Jesus, the morally and spiritually arduous trek that finally leads to heaven after death and after that life in God’s new world?<sup>3</sup> Or will it be the broad gate and the wide, popular way of ease and indulgence that leads to destruction?

Modern, American, watered-down, therapeutic, me-first, no pain, all inclusive, broad-minded Christianity is simply not true, no matter how popular it is. Wrong gate, wrong road, dead end. And those who promote it as a way to make the faith more like the fads of consumer culture are among the false prophets Jesus warned about. Their message does not create good fruit but rotten fruit that makes people spiritually sick. You know the titles of the books: Three ways to happiness, Four ways to success with Jesus, Nine insider secrets to worry free living, Forty-seven keys to having it all and Jesus too if you just work our workbook, memorize the slogans and buy the DVD’s, but our Savior will not be reduced to a self-help technique for positive life-enhancement. Jesus is not into a better version of the old you. That person has to die. His gift is *a new you*, with *born again* as a powerful word picture.

Jesus gives not a technique but himself in his awesome fullness and total demand. He is God enfleshed as man all the way from his conception through his cross and resurrection and ascension. This means that we are— for all our frailties and treacheries— fully redeemable. And how do I know this? Because the risen flesh of the resurrected Jesus still bears the marks of the cross and spear as he sits at the Father’s right hand as co-regent. And if he has been bodily raised and given marvelous new powers, then the same is possible for us since we also have human bodies. If one apple has turned red, can the others remain forever green? If one dead tree blossoms again, what about all the others? I do not want to be a disembodied

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<sup>3</sup> On classic Christianity’s understanding of a two stage post mortem existence (1. heaven after death as a blessed interim, followed by 2. the kingdom of God on a transformed earth at the end of the age and the resurrection of the dead after the pattern of Jesus), see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008).

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soul in heaven forever; I want to rule and reign with Christ in a world transformed and in a glorious resurrection body just like his. I want the fullness of salvation, not just this trimmed down *go to heaven only* version that's so popular here in escapist, rapture-crazy America. It's how the Creed ends, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." New body, new world, the joy of God's forever kingdom, and it's going to be right here! And if this is our glorious future, then it makes the narrow gate and the hard way with Jesus a good deal now because it leads to life, and all along the way there are previews and appetizers and teasers as to what's ahead! To line up with the deepest grain of the universe and thus to live cross-grained to this crazy, cruel world is our calling as Christians. We are God's minority report.

Following Jesus through the narrow gate and along the hard path is a face-to-face and heart-to-heart and mind-to-mind transforming relationship, not a series of *how-to* lectures we implement apart from him. We read his four biographies so we can know his ways and spot him when he shows up in our lives in surprising ways. "Hey, it's him again!" The gospels describe the one we're dealing with, and I don't find that any of the disciples used him to design a pleasant lifestyle. Jesus is not a decorator or a stylist or a broker or consultant or publicist! He's a trail boss and a trail blazer and a Marine drill sergeant giving orders and a wise surgeon setting things right and a spiritual warrior against evil and a truth-teller to the ignorant and a mercy-shower to the crushed and a friend who will live and die for you and finally bring you with him into a new world that is already on the way, God's kingdom— which is earth and all we've ever know utterly transformed. He will care for you at death and at the end of the age clothe you in the finest and most amazing new garment: a resurrection body like his own and fit for the new heavens and new earth. He is the fully alive Jesus, and to those who follow him he is Master and Savior and Rabbi. Why not follow such deep goodness along with others and see where it leads? He says it leads to Life with a Capital L, and I aim to verify it now and later. My life is not as I planned, but what I planned and dreamed is so much smaller and more manageable than this. Life with Jesus and his friends is messy and unpredictable and very lively!

"So, Pastor Phil, are you telling us if we choose the narrow gate and the hard way that all along the path we still have to discern who and who is not telling us the truth?" Yes. That's it exactly. You don't check your brain at the gate, and you can leave the hard way for the easy way any time you chose to follow another voice, and there is no eternal security until you are secure in eternity.<sup>4</sup> Our only security is that

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<sup>4</sup> See Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 160.

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**Matthew 7:13-20** ..... 7

Jesus Christ is alive and available; he is always faithful and strong, even when we are not. The narrow gate and the hard way is a fresh choice every day and at every critical moment. It's finally not about getting it right and keeping score; it's about choosing Jesus and following him over and over and over.

So here's a rule of thumb: if it's easy and smooth, it's probably not him. Neither path is pain free; it just depends on the kind of pain you want and in whose company you wish to travel. Will you walk through life with Jesus at his pace and with his priorities, or will you seek another teacher, one more suited to current tastes and inclinations? Will it be the pain of continual character transformation in the right direction— what we call repentance, or will it be the pain of character deformation in the wrong direction so that at the end you are reduced to what once might have become a full human being, a shade and a shell.

This is not fire and brimstone; I do not hurl thunder bolts and belch sulphur fumes. I am a fellow pilgrim; these are not the threats of an angry minister. This is mapmaking for your life. This is the GPS of the kingdom of God. "Enter life now," he invites us, "come walk with me; in my company you will be changed and readied for the life that is life indeed. But remember, it's one at a time; the gate is narrow for a reason. You must choose me, not the crowd."

So Jesus issued a command that's also an invitation, "Enter by the narrow gate." In his world all cities had walls of different heights and gates of differing widths, some quite narrow in order for his words to be valid. It's another way of saying, "Follow me," since Jesus himself is the narrow gate; he is the way in and the path forward. He's speaking of himself in word pictures. And if there is in you— as in me— a deep yearning for life in all its fullness and goodness, even if it means some pain and self-denial now, it's what I want. I tried the wide way as a foolish young man. I have seen how ugly and shallow and twisted life becomes the longer people stay on the false path. It is not good, and it is not good for people, and I'm glad I responded to his call and turned to the narrow gate before too much damage was done to myself or others. After about a year of repentance and making restitution and seeking forgiveness where appropriate, my conscience was cleared. A nineteen year old idiot of a frat guy may be understandable in this culture where it's hard to figure out what it is to be man, but a fifty year old on the same path is nothing but pitiful, and likely with a trail of human wreckage behind him, and they are everywhere.

The Sermon on the Mount as retold by Matthew is clear. Jesus is not hesitant

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about defining life in stark polarities and radical extremes as if there was no middle way, no third place of non-commitment abiding high above the options and looking for a better deal. Not to commit is to choose the other way; to abstain when the vote is called is also to decide. Narrow or wide are the gates; hard is the way for the few, and easy the path of the many. You can coast your way to destruction because the downhill grade is so slight as to escape notice, but to reach the heavenly city you must climb and exert the efforts that grace energizes. It is arduous, and in this journey you burn grace like a 747 burns jet fuel. One path ends in life abundant in the kingdom of God, the other in the perpetual destruction of a realm where God is forever absent.<sup>5</sup> Comfortable, non-demanding Christianity is a big, fat lie. Jesus came to save us, not coddle us. It's not a trip to Disney; it's following One who's proved himself utterly trustworthy and is up-front and honest about the narrow gate and the hard path.

This world, as presently constructed, is not our friend, and if you uncritically surrender yourself to the obsessions of American culture, you soon drift far from the life Christ offers through the narrow gate and the hard way. Wealth and beauty and power and casual intimacies and fame and sports and entertainment and gambling and convenience and addictions and good feelings and *me-ism* are the top gods and goddesses in the new American pantheon, and each is crying out for your worship and loyalty. "Follow me," is their cry. "Enjoy yourself," is their invitation. Hedonism and moral anarchy are on the rise; convenience and pragmatism rule the day. But it's still a narrow gate, isn't it? so don't give your loyalty to any of our culture's mini-gods. See them and their empty promises for what they are. Dead ends.<sup>6</sup>

It should not surprise us that the wide easy way is ever popular. The ecosystem of our culture is morphing in the direction of less moral boundaries and more tolerance for all individual choices. More things are acceptable, less things wrong; indeed, the very idea of moral rights and wrongs is undermined and reduced to personal opinion, to preference with no external referent, no appeal to authority

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<sup>5</sup> See the U.M. Confession of Faith, Article XII: The Judgment and the Future State, "We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to *endless condemnation*" (*ital. ad.*, BOD 2012: 74).

<sup>6</sup> For a vivid and sobering analysis of the second commandment against idolatry, see Chris Hedges, *Losing Moses On The Freeway* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2005), Chapter 2, "Idols," 39-52.

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beyond the sovereign self. In my life we've gone from commandments in stone to guidelines on paper to suggestions from therapists to *whatever makes me feel good* as traditional sources of moral guidance have lost credibility with many of our fellow citizens. About all we can say now is, "That's inappropriate," and how weak is that? Scripture, the moral precedent of tradition, and natural law are no less true, just much less attractive. The moral equivalence of same sex relationships, of casual hookups between the unmarried, of children outside marriage, of serial divorce, of polygamy, of doctor assisted suicide are all up substantially in the years since 2001, as is the moral approval of gambling, and all for the same underlying reason. The wide easy path is the universal human default position, and when restraints are dismantled and permission tacitly granted, this is what people choose. And why are we surprised? Have we forgotten our doctrine of original sin and its sobering assessment that our common human nature this side of Eden is warped and corrupted and full of a taste for rebellion and moral autonomy? We don't want anyone telling us what to do.<sup>7</sup> So we redesign moral systems to justify current behavior. It's who we are apart from God restraining grace and who we stay apart from God's amazing grace.

In the last two weeks two important studies, one by the Pew Research Center,<sup>8</sup> the other by The Gallup Poll,<sup>9</sup> have come out and are mutually reinforcing. Both are worth reading, as are the commentaries that now flood the internet. The bottom line is that the grip of the church on the national character is loosening as the generations shift. Churches with a clear sense of identity that have maintained their doctrines, disciplines, and biblical moral boundaries are more than holding their own and even growing; the rest of us mainline progressives who for a hundred years saw the culture

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<sup>7</sup> See the U.M. Articles of Religion, Article VII: Of Original or Birth Sin, "Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually" (*BOD 2012*: 65).

<sup>8</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape," [www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape). For a commentary, see Matthew S. Vos, "A World Of Our Own Making," [www.whitehorseinn.org/blog/entry/blog/2015/05/20](http://www.whitehorseinn.org/blog/entry/blog/2015/05/20).

<sup>9</sup> See Frank Newport, "Americans Continue to Shift Left on Key Moral Issues," [www.gallup.com/poll/183413/americans-continue-shift-left-key-moral-issues](http://www.gallup.com/poll/183413/americans-continue-shift-left-key-moral-issues); Lydia Saad, "Four Moral Issues Sharply Divide Americans," [www.gallup.com/poll/137357/four-moral-issues-sharply-divide-americans](http://www.gallup.com/poll/137357/four-moral-issues-sharply-divide-americans).

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as our playground are in steep decline. There will be lots of hand-wringing as these reports are processed, lots of blaming and moaning, but that is to misunderstand the times and their opportunities. Why should we be surprised that the broad and wide and easy and hedonistic and self-indulgent path is so popular and resurgent? When police quit policing in Baltimore, murders go up. And when a common moral consensus built up over centuries is frittered away and lost in a single generation, guess what? Welcome to the new America where we are now intolerant bigots! But Jesus described it a different way, “Enter by the narrow gate, and stay on the hard way because it leads to life, now and later. Don’t be one of the many; be one of the few.”

Our Christian way, unpopular as it’s now becoming, is good for people and good for families. Self-control is a premier virtue said Paul and put it at the end of his list for emphasis. I welcome the new world, not because it’s better for people and especially children- which it is not, but for the occasion it gives us to clarify our classic Christian identity and to offer our world a clear alternative path, “Enter by the narrow gate.” Let the world be the world on its own fluid secular terms, and let the church be the church on God’s terms as written in Scripture and personalized in Jesus, and let us have many interesting discussions and debates across the great divide as we now live out this faith in a decidedly less-friendly environment than we have been used to recently. But Jesus Christ is still the most magnetic and attractive and dangerous person who ever lived, and if we are not following him ourselves through the narrow gate and on the hard path, how can we offer his benefits to others? Cultural Christianity and nominal faith is in for a hard time as the lines become increasingly clarified as to who is with us and who is not. We are being interrogated by an emboldened secularism, and how shall we respond? Could they be God’s lash to wake up a sleepy church and expose our laxity in public?

If you want to know that the church teaches about joining the way of Jesus, look no further than the baptismal service in our hymnal. The first of the baptismal vows is explicit that we are fighting a battle on three fronts.<sup>10</sup> This vow is fundamental because it tells us how the world is constructed and helps explain our struggle. The first phrase is, “Do you renounce *the spiritual forces of wickedness*” (meaning the personal evil of Satan and his angels)? Many of our struggles are with powers we cannot see that work behind the scenes arranging temptations, orchestrating deceptions, and delighting in all the human pain and degradation they

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<sup>10</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34.

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can cause, and Jesus regularly sent them packing; he never met a demon he liked! The question asks, Do you acknowledge, and will you renounce all loyalties to the squatter kingdom, the one run by the Evil One and his underlings? That means no occult involvement, no playing around with the esoteric, no seeking of power or revelation apart from the Scriptures and prayer and the gifts of the Spirit and the wise counsel of other Christians. No potions and magic crystals or secret vows. You do not want, once you've been extracted, to re-entangle yourself with *the spiritual forces of wickedness*. Be curious about the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. Learn about supernatural within the faith, not the counterfeits outside.

Secondly, another phrase, "Do you reject the evil powers *of this world* (meaning the fallen world and polluted waters in which we all swim)? The word *wickedness* is found in the first vow, the word *evil* in the second, so the church is not squeamish about naming such. Such strong vocabulary is invaluable. Something is wrong with us and our world, and the church tells us what it is. "Do you reject the evil powers of this world?" So the battle is not only *up there* but also *out there* in the world around us and in which we are embedded and all— as it were— under the influence. You live in a war zone with real casualties. The battle reports are the front pages of every newspaper and in every broadcast and around your family table. Human foolishness and tragedy and evil is unending, and there is no human fix this side of God's kingdom. The church sits lightly in all political arrangements and is skeptical of all utopias except one, and it is not within history but at its end.

Finally we move to the heart level of the struggle, the inner world you know best. The third phrase reads: "And do *you* repent of *your* sin?" meaning the deep root and rotten fruit of rebellion against God *in my heart*. No wonder it's hard. Look at what's arrayed against us! Multi-level resistance to God. *Up there, out there, and in here*, any one of which can take you out. How blunt and realistic is this faith in its sacramental formulations! These are not modern questions; they go back to the early church and its formation of converts for baptism. They were up against the old paganism, and we are now up against the new, and we are not without resources. And if you don't have a strategy for battle on all three levels, you're simply not prepared to live effectively as a disciple or to understand the forces at work in our world. You need to know the basics of spiritual warfare, something about the deforming pressures of culture and alternative worldviews, and something about your own habits of heart and mind that make you allergic to serious obedience to God.

This is why things are the way they are. This is the interrelated complexity of

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our fallen world and the beings— human and angelic— who inhabit it. The church gives us a layered map and asks us to say a firm No to all the distortions of a fallen creation and a big Yes to Jesus and his new and narrow way. I’ve watched believers flit from one church or preacher or book or event to the next, all the while asking, “Can someone make it fun and easier, more like an afternoon talk show?” and if you get a *Yes*, guess what? They’re lying. Comfortable Christianity is a big, fat lie. *Narrow* is not comfortable; *hard* is not comfortable. *Wide* and *easy* are comfortable, and Jesus told us not to go that route because of where it ends and what happens to people along the way. I am so tempted to make it easy and smooth and palatable and stylish and modern and successful and part-time. In other words, like other preachers, I am tempted to be a false prophet, to give you what you want. You ought to fire me!

Not only which gate you choose but who you listen to along the way matters greatly because, according to Jesus, there are also two kinds of prophets. True teachers walk the talk and point to the narrow gate and the hard path; they live under the same discipline and standards they offer others. If it’s a privilege, they go last; if a responsibility, they go first. They are outwardly what they are inwardly, sheep of Christ and shepherds of his people. They do not resist those who wish to examine the root and fruit of their lives. And when wrong, they humbly fix it.

False prophets, on the other hand, take the broad way and recommend the easy way to others. They resist accountability. They’re always rounding out the edges Jesus left sharp, leaving people feeling good as they dish out the Sunday dose of spiritual Valium which removes anxiety and assures all of their secure status as they ride to heaven on a first class ticket. It’s an easy, civic club version of church our spiritual ancestors would not recognize. John Wesley, I’m told, is not happy with his offspring! The pressure to make this gospel easy and non-demanding and reduce it to another form of pop-psychology self-help is ever present. In a world that demands to be entertained and given tips, ours is a hard message. Some even call it narrow.

Our lives are finally of a single piece; we are one person. The political connivance we’ve come up with of dividing between public life and private is an illusion. Corruption in one area always leaks into others because we have one soul and one mind and one body and one set of habits and dispositions. There is a thread of continuity between what we think and believe, what we choose, who we listen to, what we value, how we behave, and where we end up. It’s outlined in a proverb I first found it in the book *The Seven Habits Of Highly Effective People* by Steven

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Covey, but it was written a hundred years ago by the Scottish author Samuel Smiles.<sup>11</sup> It has stuck with me because of the way the phrases are linked in a chain. And when, in pastoral conversation, someone looks bewildered and asks, “How did I end up here?” I often quote it and help them trace the path from where they started to where they’ve now arrived. It’s a useful diagnostic tool because it provides a moral map of sorts. And here it is: “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”<sup>12</sup> And when I ask them, “When did you first take the wide and easy path?” the stories they recite are riveting. They know exactly when and where it started. And the devil is always near.

The goal is to get off the road of destruction and enter the narrow gate of Jesus that leads to life. Change highways. Get a new map. Learn his ways and means. Let us walk with you as we sing, “Oh, who will come and go with me, I am bound for the promised land?” If it’s not a battle, it’s not the real thing. If it’s not hard, then it’s hollow. Easy, wide, comfortable, attractive, smooth, low demand and popular are the wrong set of adjectives if you are looking for a way to the new life Jesus offers.

In an old *Peanuts* comic strip it’s the first day of school. Students are told to write an essay about returning to class. Lucy writes, "Vacations are nice, but it's good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education, and I look forward to a year of expanding knowledge."

The teacher complimented Lucy’s fine work. In the final frame, Lucy leans over and whispers to Charlie Brown, "After a while you learn what sells."<sup>13</sup>

If it sells in this culture, beware. If it depends on technique and not character, beware. If it appeals to your dreams of ease, beware. If it appeals to your prejudices, beware. If it’s about the power of privilege and not the power to serve, beware. If it ignores the poor, beware. If it leaves you in your comfort zone, beware. I frankly do not trust the spiritual appetite of the American public because it tends to junk food and quick fix and the broad way that makes it easy to ride from one spiritual fad and false prophet to the next. Comfortable Christianity is a big lie, and I have declared war on it. A one man war. Guaranteed to lose! But it may keep me on the right path.

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<sup>11</sup> Citation at [www.mercuryworld.blogspot.com](http://www.mercuryworld.blogspot.com).

<sup>12</sup> (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 46.

<sup>13</sup> "To Illustrate: Truth," *Leadership*, Spring 1993, 48.

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“You will know them by their fruits,” is something Jesus said twice for emphasis, once at the beginning and once at the end of his parable of the two trees in verses 16 through 20. This is the crucial test of who to listen to. Root determines fruit; actions reveal character. Grapes and figs does not come from thorns and thistles. Good fruit is about love and character. It’s about following Jesus and obeying his teaching so we become a new kind of people. Do we love our enemies? Do we practice the disciplines of giving and fasting and praying? Are we quick to criticize and judge? Do we shun immorality? Is our speech simple and honest? Are we peacemakers? Are we quick to apologize and make restitution, and do we prize unity? Do we hold grudges? Are we happy to be different for Jesus’ sake? Do we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep? Do we love God’s book and God’s people? Is Sunday a day for worship, or just where you go when there’s nothing better to do? John Oxenham wrote a poem about the choices we make deliberately or by neglect:

"To every man there openeth  
A way, and ways and a way.  
And the high soul climbs the high way  
And the low soul climbs the low,  
And in between, on the misty flats,  
The rest drift to and fro.  
But to every man there openeth  
A high way and a low;  
And every man decideth  
Which way his soul shall go."<sup>14</sup>

### CONCLUSION

So how shall we end? With a series of warnings:

Beware of those who would legitimize immorality of any sort within the church under the banner of tolerance. It’s no accident that the first three vices in Paul’s list address this issue, “Now the works of the fallen nature are plain: *immorality, impurity licentiousness,*” and that the *love* that opens the list of the Spirit’s fruits is completed in the last which is *self-control*. The church is not prudish; we deal with the

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Wells, ed., *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 250.

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casualties and know what is good for God’s people.

Beware of those who preach the grace of an indulgent heavenly Father and never a life of holiness and the reality of judgment. Beware of those who trade in miracles. Beware of those who say the age of miracles is past.

Beware of those who blame Satan for everything. Beware of those who do not acknowledge the Evil One at all. Beware of those in whom you sense a need to control others rather than release them into mature freedom.

Beware of media religion which lessens your loyalty to a local church. Beware of those more concerned with institutional loyalty than with the cries of a lost world.

Beware of those who put humanity at the center instead of God. Beware of those who pound on the Bible more than read and obey it. Beware of anyone who minimizes and marginalizes the importance of Jesus Christ. Beware of anyone with charts and timetables about the end because they breed fear and not hope.

Beware of anyone who claims to be a prophet; the real ones don’t need titles; when they speak, your heart trembles. Beware of anyone who claims new revelation not in accord with Scripture and the classic Trinitarian faith.

Being sincere is not enough. Too many are sincerely ignorant and easily led astray by false prophets who at first glance seem innocent; only later do their claws and fangs appear. *Beware* is a shortened form of *be aware* or *be wary*. It was one of Jesus’ favorite commands. Be wary of anyone who offers comfortable Christianity.

I think I’m right because I’ve stayed close to the text and tried to be an astute observer of church history and contemporary culture, but I’m willing to be corrected. You see, I am no prophet. I don’t have to bat a thousand; lots of my words fall to the ground and stay here. *Thus saith Pastor Phil* is not the same as *Thus saith the Lord*. This sermon did not come from a dream or vision but from the study of Scripture using the tools of scholarship and the reading of my theological betters for insight. I am no prophet. I’m a pastor with a year-by-year assignment. I live at ground level, and I think comfortable Christianity is a big, fat lie. Much of the world has already written us off as too trivial to bother with. We have to recover something better, and only God can renew his people and give us a fresh hunger for Jesus the Lord. Which way is life? You already know, “Enter by the narrow gate.”

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