

MYTH 7

Only the Totally
Committed Need Apply



HOLD FAST

*For I say to you that unless your
righteousness surpasses that of the
scribes and Pharisees, you will not
enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:20

*Strive to enter through the narrow door;
for many, I tell you, will seek to enter
and will not be able.*

Luke 13:24

*I do not nullify the grace of God,
for if righteousness comes through
the Law, then Christ died needlessly.*

Galatians 2:21

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TRUTH
ONLY CHILDLIKE TRUST IS REQUIRED

One Light; many lamps. One God; many messengers. One God; many revelations. Any of these sound familiar? Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Mormonism, Unitarianism, Christianity. One God, yet so many voices, each saying, “Come this way.” Which one is right? My son-in-law was faced with that very question as a freshman in college when both a cult member and a Christian approached him. Each presented him with their faith’s beliefs and a pathway to God. Which evidence should be rejected and which accepted? Spending days and weeks laboriously studying both faiths, he was engaging in what Luke in his Gospel called “strive to enter by the narrow gate” until he came to the persuasion that what Christ said was true. The “striving” is in the effort to find the narrow gate versus following the masses on the broad road of a religious smorgasbord.

Even within the evangelical church today, there is a smorgasbord of differing beliefs regarding saving faith. Is it faith plus works, a faith that works, or faith alone that saves? Is it easy or difficult to be saved? You see, the striving to find the narrow gate is no less real than it is for those who face the differences between false religions

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and Christianity. The result is no less critical. Eternal life in each case hangs in the balance. There is One God and One Way and everything depends on finding Him.

All Ways Are Not Created Equal

Near the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus described two kinds of doors, which lead to different destinations. With crowds following Him, listening to His every word, Christ gathered His small band of intimate disciples for some personal instruction (5:1-2).¹ He began teaching with the promise that true contentment comes when lives are characterized by godliness (5:3-11).² Continuing, He presented two points: *first*, a new way of understanding God’s Word according to the spirit versus the Law (5:17-48) and, *second*, a distinctive way of living for those who are part of God’s family (6:1-7:12).³ This teaching was diametrically opposed to the teaching of Israel’s religious leaders, both in their misinterpretation and misapplication of the Law. Jesus’ words bring to light the correct way to think and live. Here, early in His ministry, Jesus established a dichotomy between His teaching and that of the religious leaders.

Speaking to the mixed audience, including both His disciples and the multitude, Christ ended the Sermon with four sets of contrasts: two gates (7:13-14), two trees (7:15-20), two professions (7:21-23), and two builders (7:24-27).⁴ In each stark contrast, Jesus issued a warning. He cautions us against following the crowd, listening to erroneous teaching, substituting works for faith, and building upon an unstable foundation. We could summarize Christ’s appeal in these four contrasts: (1) come through Me, (2) listen to Me, (3) trust in Me, (4) build on Me! In reality, it is all about Him!

In the first illustration, Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find

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it.” (7:13-14). Notice that only the narrow gate leads to life (7:14). This is similar to the Good Shepherd’s words in John 10:9, “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved.”⁵ Entrance to life eternal is through Him by simple faith (John 3:16; 6:47; 14:6). Everlasting life in heaven is not the only result of faith. A born-again person can begin to experience eternal life now. Abundant life (John 10:10b) in this present world is experienced by thinking and living as Jesus taught in the Sermon (Matt. 5:21–7:12). Living out biblical principles according to the spirit of the Law, rather than the letter of the Law, produces an abundant, contented life, which reflects Christlikeness (5:3-11).

On the other hand, most people try to enter eternal life through the wide gate. According to Jesus, the end is destruction. If the narrow gate is entered through simple faith in Christ, the wide gate must of necessity be entered by any other means, effort or some system of works. At the narrow gate, entrance is free; passage through the wide gate is earned. Few go through the narrow gate, while most go in by way of the wide gate. Why? The most obvious reason is that most people are convinced that they must earn God’s acceptance. However, the death of Jesus, as a payment for sin, demonstrated the absolute impossibility of salvation being earned by man (Gal. 2:21; Eph. 2:9). Eternal life is the final destination for those who cross the threshold through the narrow gate. Beyond the wide gate is eternal separation from God.

Does Narrow Mean Hard?

There are, however, many who understand Jesus’ use of the two gates of Matthew 7:13-14 in a different manner. In particular, they believe entrance into the kingdom is not by simple faith in Christ alone. A spokesman for this position, John MacArthur, writes, “entering the narrow gate is not easy.”⁶ Here, narrow is synonymous with hard. This position is supposedly supported in two ways.

First, believing that salvation is actually difficult to obtain, they

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interpret the imagery to mean that entrance through the small gate is not the result of simple faith but rather the result of a working faith.⁷ Because the gate is small, MacArthur says that this “implies that unless a person is looking diligently for the gate, he is not likely to know it is there.”⁸ In fact John Piper substitutes the word “nar-

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row” with “hard” in the translation of verse 14 and writes, “Jesus said that the way is *hard* that leads to life and few there be that find it” (italics added).⁹ Piper imposes that same imagery on verse 13 when Jesus addressed the broad way: “the gate is wide and the way is *easy* [rather than *broad*] that leads to destruction” (italics added).¹⁰ Both the wide “gate” and the “way” are considered

“easy.” Without effort or works, obtaining initial salvation is equated with “easy-believism.”¹¹ Initial salvation, they assert, is not easy and cannot be by simple faith alone. Entry by the narrow gate is by a costly, hardworking faith.

Explaining the imagery of Matthew 7, MacArthur writes, “The message of Jesus cannot be made to accommodate any kind of cheap grace or easy-believism. The kingdom is not for people who want Jesus without any change in their living. It is only for those who seek it with all their hearts, those who agonize to enter. Many who approach the gate turn away upon finding out the cost.”¹² Is it no wonder that MacArthur states that “Salvation is not easy.”¹³ From his perspective initial salvation requires costly works included within faith. As a result, the narrow “gate” and the “way” are “hard” to find. To put it plainly, good works must accompany initial faith or one’s faith is not valid.

However, this interpretation lacks support. In fact, other than holding a preconceived idea, there is no reason to suppose the de-

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scriptive term for the “wide” way is a synonym for “easy.” The word actually means broad, spacious, or roomy.¹⁴ To impose an “easy” connotation is foreign to the text. Rather, the “spacious” way accommodates the majority of people that enter via the wide way.

The emphasis of the passage is not whether entry is easy or hard, but whether it is *by the right means or not!* No matter how large or how small the gate, the issue is the number of people entering. Access through the narrow gate is impossible without God’s saving work. This is further explained following Christ’s encounter with the rich ruler, when they asked Jesus, “Then who can be saved?” (Luke 18:26). Jesus responded, “The things impossible with people are possible with God” (v. 27). However, all the world’s religions opt for more than simple faith or faith in Jesus at all, seeking access to the wide gate by means of works.

The “hard-gate-way” advocates are quick to explain the obvious allegation that arises from their working-faith view of salvation. John MacArthur, as a spokesman for that position, says, “Lest someone object that this is a salvation of human effort, remember it is only the enablement of divine grace that empowers a person to pass through the gate.”¹⁵ He claims that the works necessary to enter the narrow gate are actually God’s works and therefore are not the works of man. Repentance and surrender are the primary works of God supposedly granted at initial salvation. Contradicting this claim, see *Myth 8: No Regeneration without Rehabilitation* and *Myth 9: Surrender All to Be Saved*. Further, if additional works of God on behalf of men were required at initial salvation, wouldn’t this bring

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into question the finished work of Christ on the cross? Was Christ's sacrificial death sufficient or not? Make no mistake, no additional work of God is needed or required to be saved. Christ's work alone is adequate!

Second, there is an appeal to Luke 13:24, which says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door." Supporters say this striving implies "an agonizing, intense, purposeful struggle."¹⁶ Therefore, "entering the narrow gate is not easy."¹⁷ This viewpoint requires diligent work to go through the narrow gate in order to be saved, based on verse 23, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" But does the context support this claim?

Jesus said that "*many...will seek to enter and will not be able*" (italics added, v. 24). A mob is clamoring to enter through the small door.¹⁸ Finding the door does not seem to be the issue. However, the *means of entry* again is of vital importance. Indeed, the issue is not *whether* they diligently seek entrance, but *how* they seek entrance. The context paints a picture of a bottleneck at the entrance. In the next verses Jesus said that there is no response to their knocking or to their pleading (vv. 25-26). Indeed, those seeking entrance claim to know the head of the household, but he does not know them. As a result, they are headed for destruction (v. 27). Is this not a reminder of the two professions Jesus spoke of in Matthew 7:21-23? Many will claim not only to know Jesus but also to have ministered on His behalf. "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy...cast out demons, and...perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (7:22-23).

Those in this passage were striving to enter by relying on their works. But they too are denied entrance. Only simple faith, not "working faith," is the means of entry into salvation. It is obvious from the passage that the diligent efforts of the mob are of no avail. Rather the "striving" is to search to find salvation, the free gift in Christ, apart from works. The issue is to understand *how* to be known

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by the Lord (Matt. 7), the head of the household (Luke 13), and the Good Shepherd, who is the door of the sheepfold, who knows His sheep (John 10:14).

The shepherd-sheep relationship and entrance into life are by simple faith in Christ as Savior. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

Most of His listeners would wonder how they might measure up to, much less surpass, the religious leaders who studied and taught the Law. However, Jesus raises the bar to its highest level at the conclusion of this section saying, “Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). It is raised beyond reach. To enter the kingdom, they must be perfect, which goes

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far beyond merely surpassing the righteousness of the religious teachers. Perfect righteousness comes only from God and is given to those who trust His Son. The Sermon then turns to the section on right living (Matt. 6:1-7:12). Once through the gate and on the narrow path, following the spirit of the Law is vital to experiencing true contentment. No appeal to Luke 13 can support a working faith necessary for salvation, as supposed by some in Matthew 7. Rather than an earned entitlement, initial salvation is a free gift. It is only by the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Directions Please

For us to enter the narrow gate was very costly to God. It required the death of His Son to pay for our sin. However, admission is free to all those who trust Jesus as Savior. If free is easy,

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then initial salvation is certainly easy! The path is not the same as the gate. Coming to faith must be distinguished from walking by faith. Walking on the pathway leads to abundant life and requires obedience to God's Word. However, to confuse the entry with the pathway is a serious mistake with eternal ramifications.

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TRUTH

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Myth 7, NOTES

1. As the text concludes, we are informed that the multitudes either continued with or had caught up with the small band and they too had been listening intently to Jesus (7:28-29). They were “amazed at His teaching” and realized He had been “teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”
2. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words & Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 173.

Concerning the word, “blessed,” Pentecost writes, “The Greeks used this word to describe the condition of their gods, who were deemed to be satisfied because they had everything they desired and were free to enjoy everything they possessed without limitation.” The usual translation of “blessed” is “happy.” However, rather than a feeling, it seems the context conveys contentment or satisfaction—a state, rather than a feeling.

3. The two sets of teachings in which Jesus contrasts His teaching from that of the religious leaders follows:
Summary of Sermon-on-the-Mount teaching by Jesus concerning a different way of thinking about the Law (Matt. 5:17-48):

Verse	Text
5:17	<i>Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.</i>
5:20	<i>Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.</i>
5:21-22	<i>You have heard . . . but I say</i> — Murder
5:27-28	<i>You have heard . . . but I say</i> — Adultery
5:31-32	<i>It was said . . . but I say</i> — Divorce
5:33-34	<i>You have heard . . . But I say</i> — Oaths
5:43-44	<i>You have heard . . . But I say</i> — Love of Enemies
5:48	<i>You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.</i>

Summary of Sermon-on-the-Mount teaching by Jesus concerning a different way of practicing the Law (Matt. 6:1-7:12):

Verse	Text
6:1	<i>Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.</i>

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Verse	Text	
6:2-3	<i>Not . . . as the hypocrites . . . but when you</i>	—Giving
6:5-6	<i>Not . . . as the hypocrites . . . but when you</i>	—Praying
6:16-17	<i>Not . . . as the hypocrites . . . but when you</i>	—Fasting
6:19	<i>Do not lay up treasures</i>	—Money
6:25	<i>Do not be anxious</i>	—Anxiety
7:1	<i>Do not judge</i>	—Judging
7:12	<i>However you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.</i>	

4. Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), p. 1456.
5. Door (*thura*) and gate (*pule*) can be used interchangeably as they are in Acts 3:2, “at the door of the temple which is called Beautiful,” and Acts 3:10, “to set at the Beautiful Gate of the temple.”
6. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 182.
7. See *Myth 3: Faith Is a Tricky Word*.
8. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 182.
9. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), p. 289.
 Also, John MacArthur indicates the “narrow path as hard” (MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 184).
10. Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 301.
 Also, John MacArthur indicates the “broad way is certainly easier” (MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 184).
11. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 182.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
14. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 412.
15. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 183.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
17. *Ibid.*
18. It is noteworthy to observe that gate (*pule*) is used in Luke 13:24 as in Matthew 7:12, 14; while door (*thura*) is use in Luke 13:25 as in John 10:7, 9. Seemingly these two words can be used interchangeably.