

Two Thoughts

Matthew 7:12-14

I have two thoughts this afternoon, which is to say, two parts to my sermon that are related but still rather distinct from each other. The first thought is really the conclusion of the sermon on the mount, per se, and the second is the first direct and specific application that Jesus then gives to his disciples. And both of these thoughts remind me of that category of difficult passages on which to preach, for they are both very familiar. Even proverbial. The words have become common expressions to everyone in our culture, Christian and non-Christian alike. The golden rule. And the straight and narrow.

I have mentioned in previous sermons the great danger of treating these proverbial exhortations as mere moralisms, for then they become a substitute for the gospel. They become contrary to the gospel when they masquerade as the whole of the gospel. In other words, if you were to stand before God when you die and if he were to ask you, “Why should I let you in my heaven?”, you cannot respond, “Because I tried to follow the golden rule.” Not if you want to get into heaven.

If you think that following the golden rule is what it means to be a Christian, then you have not received the gospel, for only the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The gospel is a promise, a gift of grace which you receive by faith. So you cannot be saved by observing the golden rule. And to give you a little introduction to the rest of the sermon, you can’t keep it either! You can’t be saved by observing the golden rule because you can’t keep the golden rule. Not perfectly! And if you think that have tried hard and done good enough, then the penetrating question is always appropriate, “How good is good enough?”

That’s my first thought this afternoon. And the second seems to give us pause as well, for it seems to deny the widespread success of the gospel.

v.14 “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Those are my two thoughts. The golden rule and the straight and narrow way. So now let’s look a little bit closer, beginning with verse 12, the golden rule. Where should I start? That’s an easy question. The subject of love. I will start today with the definition and application of love. This so-called golden rule is nothing less than that definition. Or perhaps more clearly,

I. THE OBJECTIVE OF LOVE.

The purpose, the goal, the end result of love. What happens when you love? What does it look like? Jesus is so very practical in his words,

v.12

Let me emphasize this call to love, from Jesus’ own words when he was asked which was the greatest commandment in the law,

Mat. 22:37 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Here in the sermon on the mount, Jesus has been expounding the law of God with applications of what it means to love your neighbor, and this golden rule is his conclusion. The climax of all that he teaches about the law. It is the law of love, and this is the objective, the working of love in your life. The goal of Jesus’ teaching is that you actually do to others as you would wish them

to do to you. You treat other people the way that you wish them to treat you.

But there is an obstacle to that goal. It is called sin. And, in fact, it is, I believe, the essence of sin, at least with respect to our relationships with one another. The problem is,

A. The sinfulness of being self-absorbed.

That is the consequence of the fall of man. That is the inevitable evidence of sin in fallen man. Love of self. Affection and attention given to the self. Worship of the self. Preoccupation with the self. Love of self, rather than love of God.

To quote Martyn Lloyd-Jones, as I have so often done in the sermon on the mount, “The whole thing can be brought down to one word, ‘self.’ Our Lord expresses it by saying that we should ‘love our neighbor as ourselves.’ But that is the one thing we do not do, and do not want to do, because we love self so much in a wrong way. We do not do unto others as we would wish them to do unto us, because the whole time we are thinking only about ourselves, and we never transfer our thought to the other person. That is, in other words, the condition of man in sin as the result of the fall. He is entirely self-centered. He thinks of nothing and no one but himself, he is concerned about nothing but his own well-being...Instinctively we are all self-centered...So the failure of man to live by, and to keep, the golden rule is due to the fact that he is self-centered. That, in turn, leads to self-satisfaction, self-protection, self-concern. Self is in the forefront the whole time, for man wants everything for himself.”

Today, amazingly, that pursuit of self-love is presented even to the Christian as a worthy goal and a godly aspiration. We are taught by the world of modern psychology to treasure the experience of self-love, identifying self-esteem as one of the

highest and most fundamental needs of man. Everywhere, so it seems, especially in the educational environment, self-esteem is promoted as the be-all and end-all of psychological wellness. Jesus says something quite different.

Mat. 16:24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

Taking up your cross means dying, dying to yourself. Losing your life.

Mat. 10:38 “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”

John Calvin defines the sum of the Christian life to be the denial of ourselves. He puts it this way, “We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him.”

In fact, the sinfulness of self-love comes to the forefront as a sign of the fullness of sin at the end of the age,

2 Tim. 3:1 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, 4 traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power.”

That terrible list began with the sin of those who became lovers of self. As it might best be put today, those who are self-

absorbed. Full of themselves. We used to simply call that pride. Self-love.

That's what stands in the way of the golden rule, and I have heard it said and taught by well-respected Christian teachers of ethics that before you can love others you must learn to love yourself. And that's not what you read in the Bible. What you read in the Bible is that you are to love your neighbor as if he were yourself. You are to do your neighbor what you would have done to yourself. For,

B. Love is focused upon others.

Beloved, that's the definition of love. That why self-love advocates don't succeed, its why their solution is worse than the problem. Because they teach you to be self-absorbed, as if that will stimulate the godliness of love for others. But it only stimulates your self-absorption!

And for people who struggle with what we might label as "low self-esteem," the solution isn't to be found in encouraging their self-absorption. The solution, as Calvin so well put it, is to 'forget yourself.' Again, to quote him, "Unless you give up all thought of self and, so to speak, get out of yourself, you will accomplish nothing here. For how can you perform those works which Paul teaches to be the works of love, unless you renounce yourself, and give yourself wholly to others."

Love is focused on others. That principle is at the very heart of the golden rule. More fully defined,

Phil. 2:3 "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

When I read that verse, I note the words "only" and "also" are not in the original Greek. The plain sense is, therefore, even clear, "Let each of you look not to his own interests, but to the interests of others." Isn't that what Jesus says here in Matthew 7 as well? Do to others, as an act of love, as the definition of love, do to others whatever you wish that they would do to you.

Now, having said all that, let me spend a moment on the whole subject of,

C. The law and the gospel.

This is the law, and in its most positive form. This is not a mere prohibition, nor some merely external duty or obligation. This is the whole tenor and nature of your life. That is the standard of the law which Jesus holds up before his disciples. And remember,

Mat. 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. 19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Then,

Mat. 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain

on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? 48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

So the law is the will of God for your life as a Christian. But without Christ, you are helpless, enslaved to your sin. So far from being the confidence by which people foolishly think they can earn their way to heaven, this golden rule should actually show you just how impossible it is to keep the law of God. None of us can stand before God and claim innocence. None of you can begin to conclude that you have kept this commandment. The law shows us our sin, and the characteristic sin of man is selfishness. So tonight, may this law lead you to repentance, to the godly sorrow of confession of sin. And where you have failed, flee to Christ that he might forgive you.

Then, go to God and ask for his mercy and grace that would enable you to stop loving yourself and begin love your neighbor, doing to your neighbor and for your neighbor that which you would define to be good if it were done to you.

This is a huge, life-dominating responsibility. In your own strength, you will fail. But in Christ, here is the evidence of the work of the grace of God in you, that you actually show forth in your life the fullness of this sort of love to one another. So beloved, you who have been born again, love one another! As Christians, there is simply no excuse to act toward others in any other way. The Scripture is consistent, and Peter says the very same thing.

1 Peter 1:22 "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love

one another fervently with a pure heart, 23 having been born again.”

That’s my first thought. The second, from verse 13-14, is,

II. THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL.

The invitation of the gospel. And to state the obvious, this is not the common, ordinary self-centered invitation of the gospel so often presented today. This is not the prosperity gospel, or the gospel of health and wealth. This is not the easy believism or the superficial spirituality of so much of organized religion. This is not the religious pluralism so prevalent in our own country, nor is this consistent with the inclusivism of modern day liberalism.

Some people may say that simply following your conscience is good enough in God’s sight, but Jesus doesn’t say that. Jesus says this,

v.13

According to Jesus, the gate is very narrow. And that means,

A. Many things must be left behind.

Indeed, the world must be left behind. And the things of the world. John would put it this way,

1 John 2:15 “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

James puts it this way,

James 4:4 “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever

therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

Paul puts it even more personally,

Phil. 3:7 “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

The point is this, the path to hell is open and wide. Lots of ways to get there, all of them focused upon the efforts of our own good works. Lots of different systems as a way to work that out. Lots of different religions. And they are all wrong. Deceptively wrong. With dangerous, deadly consequences. If you think that the call of the gospel means that you can work your way to God by some measure of your own goodness, then you are on the path to eternal destruction. In Jesus’ words, many are on that path! Many are deceived, thinking that by their own self-effort, by the exercise of their own self-advancement, they will get to heaven. It is the self-help gospel, and it is completely and entirely false.

These are Jesus’ words, quite contrary to any dependence upon self-help.

Luke 9:23 Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. 24 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it,

but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. 25 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?”

The way to eternal life is narrow. Jesus is the way. The only way. In his own words,

John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

So this is the narrow gate, the narrow way.

1 John 5:11 "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

Jesus continues in,

v.14

There again we see the narrow gate, this time with reference to the reality that,

B. Many difficult things must be endured.

The way is hard! It is not a prosperity gospel!

John 15:18 “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”

Paul describes the life of the Christian in these words,

2 Cor. 4:7 “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are

perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you."

The gate is narrow. The way is hard. Those who find it are few.

I don't take that to mean that there won't be very many Christians in heaven, or that our evangelistic efforts are doomed to failure. But I do take it to mean that there will be many who will be surprised on the day of judgment, thinking that they were on the road to life only to find themselves under God's eternal condemnation. Because they thought the way was easy, that the path was wide. They thought, perhaps, that all roads lead to heaven. Or that all religions lead to God. They thought, perhaps, that sincerity was sufficient, that their spiritual quest would become a successful journey.

Sadly, they will be surprised,
v.14

And, indeed, there will be,

C. An ultimate separation of people.

There will be those who find life. And there will be many who don't! That separation is also defined by the words of,

Heb. 9:27 "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

With all of that, let me end this afternoon with the call of the gospel. "Enter by the narrow gate." Jesus is that gate. So enter the kingdom of heaven by faith in Jesus Christ. And be sure that you are trusting for your salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone.

Acts 4:12 "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

You who already believe, let these words be for your encouragement, that your security is also in Jesus. You who have entered the kingdom through that narrow gate, through faith in Jesus, shall be kept and preserved in that kingdom by the same Jesus. Thus we have this encouragement from Jesus himself,

John 6:35 "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. 36 But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. 37 All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. 39 This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. 40 And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."