

WHEN YOU COME TO A FORK IN THE ROAD, TAKE IT Matthew 7:13-14

INTRODUCTION:

Yogi Berra, arguably the greatest catcher in the history of baseball, grew up on The Hill in St. Louis, on the same block with Joe Garagiola and Jack Buck. Buck and Garagiola went on to become sportscasters, famous for their ability to use the English language to call a baseball game.

Yogi became famous for his use of the language, too.

- Referring to the bad visibility in left field in Yankee Stadium, Yogi said, "It gets late early out there."
- Speaking of a once trendy restaurant, Berra said, "Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded."
- When asked what he would do if he found a million dollars, Yogi said, "I'd find the fellow that lost it and if he was poor, I'd return it."
- And, he said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it."

There is actually a solid truth behind that puzzling piece of wisdom from old Yogi. When we come to a fork in the road of life, we have to go one way or the other. We can't just stand there scratching our heads forever, turn back and pretend the choice doesn't exist, or sit down and wait for someone else to come along and make the choice for us.

The reality is that we are constantly facing forks in the road of our lives because we are always facing changes in our lives.

- John F. Kennedy said, "Change is a law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future."
- Senator Everett M. Dirksen said, "Life is not a static thing. The only people who do not change...are incompetents in asylums, who can't, and those in cemeteries."
- The poet Shelley said, "Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;/ Naught may endure but mutability."
- Or, to sum up these sayings: we stand where we cannot remain.

Change is inevitable therefore choices are unavoidable. We cannot decide to avoid forks in the road but we can decide which path to take. Jesus spoke of that in the Sermon on the Mount. He said:

¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Jesus was preaching to a multitude that had gathered on a mountainside to hear him teach. I believe that he was telling them that they were at a fork in the road and that they would have to make a choice. Right then.

And quite honestly, folk, I believe we stand at a fork in the road. We, too, have a choice we must make and we must make it today.

Last year, when I had the opportunity to preach for the monthly Kingdom Builders' meeting in Ingraham, I preached on this same text. And I shared with the men some of the features of the two options that are set before us. I told them that these two options involve a choice of gates, a choice of roads and a choice of traveling companions.

I. THERE ARE TWO GATES

When I preached from this text for Kingdom Builders, I told them that for years, I think I had misunderstood the verbal picture Jesus was painting. I'm not real sure where I got my misunderstanding. Maybe we had pictures or flannel-graphs or filmstrips that depicted the image. Or perhaps it was just picturesque descriptions. But I certainly grew up with a pretty clear impression of what I thought Jesus was saying.

I thought that before us there were two gates. Above one was a sign that said "This Way To Heaven" and above the other was a sign that said "This Way to Hell". I often wondered why anybody would intentionally go through a doorway that said, "This Way To Hell."

I've come to realize that I had misunderstood the image Jesus was picturing. Like Yogi said on another occasion, "I've made a wrong mistake."

I've come to conclude that there are, indeed, two gates and above both gates there is a sign and both signs carry the same message: "This Way to Fulfillment". One sign is accurate and truthful and the other is a lie.

The lie comes to us in a couple of forms. On the one hand, Satan beckons us to the wide gate by telling us that we will have a great life if we indulge the flesh by satisfying its lusts and by feeding its appetites. I understood that, even as a youth, so I knew I was supposed to deny myself those worldly pleasures.

But what I hadn't grasped until more recently is that there is another appeal Satan uses when he beckons people to the wide gate. For some very sincere, very pious and very religious people, Satan still tempts them to come to the wide gate by the works of the flesh – with the lie that they can merit God's favor by their good deeds.

You see, I have come to realize that the appeal of the wide gate not only attracts the self-indulgent but also the self-righteous. After all, just think about it: this text comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the peril of self-righteousness is the major theme of that sermon.

While the self-indulgent believe that the way to fulfillment is to satisfy their appetites and cravings, the self-righteous believe that the way to fulfillment is to satisfy God. It is very important to them to satisfy or appease God lest He be angry with them. It is so important, in fact, that they will do anything on earth and everything humanly possible to satisfy God.

And that's the point: they will do anything **on earth** and everything **humanly possible** to satisfy God. But that's not what satisfies God. God is not pleased with our efforts at appeasement. In fact, He has said that when we are clothed in self-righteousness, our righteous acts are no better than filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The Flesh Gate is wide and it is open to the self-indulgent and the self-righteous. It is wide, obvious and beckoning. The second gate is the Faith Gate and it is narrow, obscure and unappealing.

When I say that it is narrow, I do not mean that it is religiously narrow – because if that were true, the Pharisees would be passing through it. The Pharisees were very religious yet Jesus confronted them constantly. The narrow gate is the gate of faith in Jesus Christ, alone. I love the way Edward Mote put it: *“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”*

As Jesus said in the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, the narrow way is the way of the broken, the mourning, the forgiving, the devoted, the transparent and the peacemakers - - and them, alone.

The Faith Gate is obscure. It is not flashy and not obvious. It does not seek recognition or attention. Sometimes, it is not even noticed. It is, therefore also unappealing.

Because the Faith Gate is not about looking good, many people are not attracted to it. Those who pass through the Faith Gate are not too concerned about what people will think. These are people whose hearts are characterized by humble brokenness.

There are two gates and you may choose through which you will pass. There are two gates and you must choose.

II. **THERE ARE TWO ROADS**

In Jesus' word picture, he describes two roadways over which we may travel. One is presented as a broad way and the other a narrow way.

I've already said that, as a child, I pictured two gates and one was marked as the way to hell while the other as the way to paradise. But the Bible doesn't say that.

As a youth, I also pictured these two roads rather clearly differentiated. One was a wide road, bathed in bright sunlight, well paved for easy travel and sloping slightly to make the walking almost effortless. The other, I envisioned as being narrow, winding, dimly lit, unpaved, rough and rugged so that travel is tricky and steeply uphill so that the walking is difficult.

That picture was so clearly in my mind that when I came back to this text while working on this sermon, I was struck by the simplicity of the sentences and I was more taken by what the Jesus didn't say than by what he did.

¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

He says one road is broad and the other is narrow. That's it. That is all Jesus says about the two ways! All that other stuff about the two roads is what we have added. I'm not saying it is all wrong but I am telling you that is not what Jesus said.

I want to suggest to you that the broad way, once again, is the way of self. Both self-indulgence and self-righteousness have this in common: they both begin and end with "self". Both are centered on self. Both seek self-fulfillment through effort: effort to appease one's appetites or efforts to appease one's God. Both lean on "the arm of flesh".

Self-indulgence believes that feeding the desires of the body, the cravings of the carnal nature, will bring satisfaction; that every itch ought to be scratched and every hunger fed.

Self-righteousness believes that religious exercises and doctrinal purity will satisfy God. And that satisfies self. Just the thought that one can do so much and be so good that he can satisfy an exacting and demanding God: oh the bliss!

The broad way is easy, in its own manner. The way of self-indulgence is very easy because it is the way of doing what comes naturally. The motto of the self-indulgent is "if it feels good, do it." That's easy!!

The way of the self-righteous is, in one sense, easy, too. They say, "Do your best;" "try harder." But at least they are still in control of their own destiny. Self-righteous people have a very difficult time leaving the "easy way" of trying to earn their salvation. The Pharisees had a very difficult

time leaving the security of the way of self-righteousness and casting their future in the nail-scarred hands of Jesus.

The other road is the way of the cross. **OUR CROSS!** We enter through the Faith Gate by means of the cross of Christ. But we walk the narrow way by means of our own cross. That is the way of surrender. It is the road of death to the motivation of self. It is the road of death to the satisfaction of self.

When one enters through the Faith Gate and walks the way of the cross, he will indeed find that it is a narrow way. In fact, as John H. Sammis put it, "*Trust and obey for there's **no other** way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.*" "No other way"? That's narrow!

And, although Jesus did not say it was a difficult road, it is. It is not easy to trust ourselves into the hands of another. That gives us a vulnerable and a helpless feeling and we don't like to be vulnerable and helpless. It is also a great blow to pride; it is the death-blow to pride to have to trust ourselves into the hands of another - - even if they are nail-scarred hands.

The way of the cross requires great discipline. But it is not the discipline of *works*; it is the discipline of *surrender*. And that is not easy.

III. THERE ARE TWO COMPANIES

Jesus said there are many who go in at the wide gate and who travel the broad way. Clearly, the wide gate and the broad way is the popular path.

It is not hard to understand why the way of self-indulgence is so popular. It is all about satisfying yourself. What could be more popular than that?

But the way of self-righteousness is also pretty popular. Note that in the same chapter, just a few lines later, in verses 21, 22 & 23, Jesus said:

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Did you pick up on that? "**Many** will say to me in that day..." On that day, **many** will say, "Lord, lord; I was a member of the Christian Church." "I was an elder." "I was a deacon." "I was a Sunday School teacher for twenty-five years." "I was a preacher." "I was a nice lady." "I was a good ole' boy." "Lord, Lord; I tried hard."

The way of self-righteousness is popular among those who are trying to impress God in order to compel Him to save them.

But the other way is narrow and the travelers are few. This is clearly the unpopular path. Few trust. Few are motivated by faith instead of by flesh. And few walk the way of the cross. Few risk letting go of the grip on their lives in order to surrender to Jesus' care. Through the narrow gate and on the narrow way pass an exclusive company: disciples of Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

May I share another Yogi-ism with you? Yogi Berra observed, *"You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going; because you might not get there."*

Yogi is right. We ought to carefully consider where we want to wind up before we decide what road we are going to travel.

Jesus told us that among the features of the choices set before us, there are two destinations. One destination is life and the other destination is destruction.

If you were about to fly out of an airport and were given the choice of boarding a plane that the airline told you was certainly going to crash or a different one that was certainly going to get you safely where you wanted to go, wouldn't you be foolish to choose the plane that you knew would crash?

Today you have the opportunity to make such an informed choice. You can choose to walk the road that leads to life or you can choose the one that leads to destruction. So which will you choose?

INVITATION: #602 – *"I Have Decided To Follow Jesus"*