

Recognising the Way

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Date: 13 September 2026

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[0:00] Thanks very much, Sam. And yeah, really good to see you all this morning. I want to add my welcome as well to the ones you've heard already. It is really good to be together this morning. But yeah, we're back in Matthew.

We are in our penultimate sermon in the Sermon on the Mount. It's been a sort of mini series in Matthew that we have been doing. But I wonder, just as we start, I wonder if you have ever found yourself at a crossroads Have you ever reached a crossroads and found yourself faced with a decision?

So the decision that we make as we come to a crossroads is, should I carry on straight ahead? Or should I make a turn to the left or to the right?

Am I happy with my present course, the way I've been going? Should I carry on the way I've been going? Or should I make a change? Now, if you know me, you'll know that I love exploring and going to places I've never been before.

And when I'm out walking somewhere or running somewhere that I've never been before, sometimes another intriguing path crosses the way that I've been going. And I have a decision to make.

[1:18] Which is the better way to go? Should I stay on this path? Or should I go this other way? Now, Jesus is telling the listening crowds in this passage, in the Sermon on the Mount, that there are two roads in life.

Two roads. And everyone is either on one road or the other. Now, these two roads, they look very different.

And they'll take you to two very different places. You might take the high roads and I'll take the low roads. But you know, if you know the song, we'll both end up in Scotland.

And these two roads lead to two very different destinations. But Jesus wants us to know that one road is far better than the other.

He wants to show the listening crowds that there is a better way. He teaches that there is a crossroads lying in front of every person, a narrow trail which intersects the wide road that they find themselves on.

[2:30] You may carry on straight ahead or take the narrow road which leads to a destination which is better in every way. That way is much harder.

It is painful at times. But the destination is worth the difficulty. Now, we're also going to see in our passage that as you walk the narrow path, you'll find that it is a dangerous path.

And you'll encounter adversaries along the way. People who will seek to throw you off the road that leads to life. Unlike the two roads which are obvious to tell apart, these enemies are hidden.

They are wearing a disguise. But with careful and prayerful discernment, these enemies will become quite obvious. So we're going to look at this passage in two sections.

We're going to look at verses 13 and 14, first of all, recognizing the way. And then secondly, we're going to think about recognizing the wolves in verses 15 to 20.

[3:35] At first glance, these two sections, they appear random. They appear unconnected. But they both require us to use our power of recognition.

So that's how I'm connecting the two today. I think there is a connection here. So first of all, let's think about recognizing the way. Let's look a bit closer at what Jesus says about these two roads. If you look again at verse 13. Do you notice how binary they are? One gate is wide. The other is small.

One road is broad. The other is narrow. If you've got an ESV in front of you, the ESV translates the word narrow as hard.

The wide road is easy, but the narrow road is hard. The wide road leads to destruction, but the narrow road leads to life.

[4:34] Those who travel the wide roads are many, while those who find the narrow way are few. Now it's probably helpful to think about the gate as the way in and the road as the way on.

The way into God's kingdom is small, and the way through our earthly lives to an eternal future with God. That way is narrow.

Now let's just think a little bit more about these two ways. I think ACDC were right when they sang about the highway to hell.

The road to destruction is a highway. It is wide. It is fast. And there are many people traveling this road. But you don't need to be a hedonistic rock star to find yourself on this road.

By default, we all start our lives on this road. It is an easy road. It offers little resistance. Those who travel this road, they're like curling stones on the ice.

[5:46] They slide effortlessly with great momentum. But tragically, there are many people who are effortlessly coasting down this highway to eternal destruction.

Some blindly, they don't realize, but others with eyes wide open. But the road which leads to eternal life is narrow.

And this journey begins by entering through a narrow gate. A narrow gate. And because the gate is narrow, you have to go through it alone.

You can't fit through it with other people. You can't piggyback on the faith of others. You have to pass through this one alone. But once you're through the gate, and you find yourself on the narrow road, you will find yourself on the narrow road, rather.

And as we think about this narrow road, think less the cobbled streets in the old town of Edinburgh. We're not thinking about those. Think more a winding mountain path.

[6:56] If we think about the narrow road as a winding mountain path, then we can imagine that the way is hard. It is littered with trip hazards.

There are boulders on the path. There are steep inclines. There are loose, gravelly gullies down to your left and right-hand side. There's hazard everywhere. But, like, walking along a narrow mountain ridge, if you can imagine that, walking along a narrow mountain ridge, it is hazardous, but it is breathtaking.

It's painful, yet beautiful. It is tough, but it is exhilarating as you catch glimpses of your glorious mountaintop destination appearing through the clouds.

The narrow road is tough, but it is worth it because it leads to life. Sadly, many people prefer the highway and they ignore the motorway exit signs.

They refuse Jesus' offer of life. I've got a question for you then as we thought about those two roads. Which road are you on? You can only find yourself on one of these two roads.

[8:14] Which road are you on? Are you drifting along the wide road, asleep at the wheel, towards an eternity outside of God's blessing?

Towards an eternity of making full payment for your sinful life? Or maybe you're not asleep. Maybe your eyes are wide open and your foot is firmly on the accelerator.

You know that you don't possess the life that Jesus offers, but you're too stubborn to care. I think this passage tells us, wake up.

Recognize the road that you are on. Recognize where it is taking you. In verse 13, Jesus commands those who are listening carefully to turn from the wide road onto the narrow way with Jesus.

Jesus, I wonder, are you at a crossroads today? Is there an intriguing path crossing your way? Today, Jesus offers you a better road and a better destination.

[9:20] Don't ignore the motorway exit signs. Turn from the broad way onto the narrow way with Jesus. Don't be fooled though. The way with Jesus is often very difficult.

We will feel pressed down. We will experience pain on this road. We will be persecuted. We will be distressed. We will face all sorts of anxieties and depression.

But be encouraged. Jesus has told us that this is what we should expect from the narrow road. This is what he's telling us here in this passage. This is what you should expect from the narrow road.

And the good news as well is that Jesus has traveled this road ahead of us. Jesus has traveled this road ahead of us. He faced serious resistance.

Throughout his life and ministry. From the religious leaders who wanted to kill him. From people who were offended by his teaching. Resistance from his own family.

[10 : 24] Resistance from Satan who tried to tempt him to sin. But Jesus willingly walked the hardest path all the way to the cross.

To suffer the most horrendous death. To pay for our sins. Jesus walked the hardest path. To the cross. To forgive us.

And to guarantee life. For those who will follow the narrow road with him. Maybe you are on the narrow path. Maybe you would call yourself a Christian this morning.

I wonder. Are your eyes fully fixed on your destination? Or are the bright and shiny lights of the world distracting you?

Maybe this morning you are on the path. But you are feeling a bit flat. Maybe you plateaued in your faith a long time ago. It just isn't fun like it used to be.

[11 : 26] Maybe you are tired. Maybe you are tired of walking the narrow path. And those shiny lights look even more appealing than before. Maybe you feel it's just not worth following the narrow way anymore.

It's just too tough. I didn't expect it to be this hard. Wouldn't it be lovely to jump in the motorway for a bit? Take it easy for a bit.

Take a break from Jesus for a bit. Have some fun now. He will forgive us later on. I'll take my faith more seriously later in life. Do so at your peril.

For before you know, you will have drifted a long, long way down that slippery road. If you are a new student here this morning, it's great to have you.

If you're a new student, it will be no surprise to you that you have freedoms now like you have never known before. Freedom to do whatever you want, whenever you want, with whoever you want, with no one looking over your shoulder.

[12 : 37] I wonder then, are you going to persevere with the narrow path? Are you willing to make costly decisions for Jesus' sake and sometimes be the odd one out?

Will you gladly walk the narrow path of purity and strive for godliness? What life are you going to live at university?

Will you make your Christian identity known to others? Or will you keep it a secret? It might not look like it now, but the way with Jesus is a much better way.

Enter kingdom life through the small gate. Take the narrow path. Persevere with the narrow path. Fixing your gaze on your destination. The glorious dwelling place of God where all God's children will dwell with him for eternity.

Okay, next we're going to think about recognizing the wolves. So if you look again at verse 15.

Here, Jesus is warning his followers that as they walk this narrow road, sometimes they will encounter false teachers.

[13 : 54] These are teachers who will deliberately bend the truth of the Bible to lead people astray. False teachers have been an enduring problem from the church from its beginning back in the book of Acts up until now.

False teachers are infiltrators. They are liars. They are influential. And they teach the word of God for all the wrong reasons.

Jesus describes them as masters of fancy dress. They will come to you pretending to be sheep. But in actual fact, they are ferocious wolves.

You will not need to look for them. You won't need to look for these wolves. They are predators.

They will come to you. They will infiltrate your churches. They will look like true Christians.

They will sound like true Christians. They'll even smell like true Christians. But really, they are devourers of Christians. They destroy the faith of Christians.

[15 : 04] They throw them off the narrow road that leads to life. They throw them off the road by feeding them all sorts of dodgy doctrine. Or by tempting them with all the intoxicating things of the world.

And they are particularly dangerous for the church. So Jesus warns us. Watch out. But how on earth will we spot wolves hiding in our midst?

How will we tell the good voices from the bad voices? Well, like the good shepherd that he is, Jesus doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves. He tells us twice.

Verse 16 and in verse 20. You will recognize the false prophets by the fruit of their lives. So after describing the false teachers as wolves in sheep's clothing, in verse 16, Jesus describes them as fruit trees.

So if you try to pick grapes or figs from thorn bushes or thistles, you will only end up with scratches and stings. Jesus tells us grapes grow on the vine.

[16 : 20] Figs grow on the fig tree. Likewise, the fruit of righteousness grows in the life of a righteous person. The fruit of unrighteousness grows in the life of an unrighteous person.

A person whose heart has been transformed by Jesus and is continuing to be shaped by his word. They will yield righteous fruit.

Galatians tells us what some of these fruits are. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

These are the fruits which grow in a true Christian. Then in verses 17 and 18, Jesus teaches us the same thing, but from a slightly different angle.

He says here that good fruit grows on good trees. Bad fruit grows on bad trees. You won't find good apples on a diseased apple tree.

[17 : 34] In the same way, you won't find good fruit in a false teacher. A false teacher does not love God, but loves himself.

A false teacher doesn't know joy, only self-satisfaction. Instead of peace, they will experience anxiety and torment. They will be impatient with others.

They will be harsh with others. They will be rough with others. And they will seek to indulge every evil desire of their heart. Thus, by their fruit, you will recognize them, Jesus teaches us.

I think this is a call to have careful discernment. Jesus says, look at the fruit. Look at the way that they live. And it should become quite obvious who they really are.

But if you know anything about fruit trees, you will know that fruit takes time to grow. This means that we might not immediately observe the fruit of those who lead us and teach us.

[18 : 43] Sometimes it will take time before we observe their true colors. We probably won't spot their fruit while they preach or while they lead. Sometimes the words of a false teacher sound plausible.

Their words fly close to the truth. Their charisma will carry them a long way. Instead, observe these people in the pews after the service.

Observe these people in the tea and coffee time. How are they with other people? How are they with their family members? How do they treat vulnerable people?

How do they treat other leaders? With suspicion or trustingly? Do they actually love God's children? Is Christ being formed in their hearts?

These are the sorts of questions that we need to ask ourselves. Please don't freak out, though. Don't start viewing everyone with suspicion.

[19 : 46] Don't look at your neighbor and say, I wonder, I wonder. But I think this is a call for us to stay alert. And a really good way that we can do this is by keeping our Bibles open when we teach.

Check that our message, the speaker's message, lines up with God's message. Please ask us questions. Sometimes we get it wrong.

Do observe us. Do pray for us. Do raise concerns when you have genuine concerns. Use our safeguarding channels when appropriate.

And you can find details of who our safeguarding officers, who they are, on posters dotted around our walls in the church. But I think this also shows us the importance of coming to church on a Sunday.

Anyway, you cannot discern the fruit of someone if you only ever watch them online. Can't you trust the teaching of someone you've only ever listened to online?

[20 : 55] I'm not sure if you can. It's good to observe them in the pews. Now, again, if you are a new student here, as you begin your new life in the city of Edinburgh, it is really important for you to find a church.

A church which is going to teach you the truth from God's word. And as you visit churches in this city, and there are a lot of good ones here, ask yourself, are the leaders of this church going to encourage me to remain faithful to Jesus, or are they going to expect you to be faithful to them? Will they show me how to stay on the path of faith, or will they distract me with other things? How will you know if they are teaching the truth?

Well, weigh it up with what you see in the Bible. Does what they say agree with the rest of the Bible? Observing their fruit may take longer, but weighing up their message is a really good start. Far too often, Christians have taken ministry success for fruit. In every fallen Christian leader, or imploded church, there were early warning signs.

[22 : 24] There were red flags which were missed, or brushed under the carpet. There were men and women who demanded change in the hearts of their people, but who had long ago ceased being transformed into the image of Christ.

People said, don't worry about his anger problems. Don't worry about his impatience, or his roughness with others. Don't mind his drinking habits, because his teaching is drawing more and more people into our church.

Don't worry about his unhealthy love of power, or money, or his inappropriate remarks about women, because under his leadership, this church is booming, and it's reaching our city for Christ. If a leader is not continuing to be shaped by the word of God, he could well be a wolf.

Don't mistake ministry success for the fruit of righteousness being formed in somebody's hearts. Now, the good news for us, for God's people, is that God will not leave these false teachers unchecked.

[23 : 44] He says in verse 19, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. These false teachers, they pretended to be on the narrow road, but it turns out they were on the wide road all along.

And they will meet the end destined for them. God will throw them into the fire. But this is immensely good news for the flock, that our good shepherd Jesus, he won't leave us to fend for ourselves.

He won't leave us undefended from these wolves, but he will deal with the wolves. So, just as I finish up, let me recap some of the things that we've seen already.

It's really important that we recognize the road that we are on. We are all either on the narrow road, which leads to life, or the wide road, which leads to destruction.

Some people need to wake up and see the crossroad that lies in front of them. See that Jesus is offering you a much better way.

[25 : 07] One that leads to eternal life. And you can enter into his kingdom today by praying to him. And if that is you, please come and speak to one of us that you've seen up the front, and we would be glad to pray that with you.

Some people are badly bruised and need to be encouraged. They are on the road. Don't give up. Keep going. This is what the narrow road is supposed to look like. It's supposed to be tough. But keep your gaze fixed on Jesus' face as you do.

The destination is worth the difficulty. And on this narrow way, we need to be wary of the wolves. They are less easy to recognize, but we must ask God to protect us and give us good discernment. Why don't we pray? Heavenly Father, we thank you for this passage in Matthew. Thank you for Jesus' teaching here.

[26 : 16] Thank you for this clear instruction, this clear teaching that there are two roads that we might find ourselves in our lives.

Thank you that you show us where these two roads lead. You do not keep it a secret, Lord, but you want to show us that the narrow road with you is far, far better in every way.

Lord, we pray for those who are on the wide road this morning. Lord, we ask that you would please help them to wake up and recognize the way that they are heading.

Lord, please convince them of your better way that leads to life. Lord, we pray for those who are at a crossroads this morning, who are listening, who see that they are on the highway, who see this narrow path crossing their way.

Lord, we ask that you would please help them to boldly take the narrow road and walk faithfully with Jesus. Lord, we pray for those who are faithfully plodding along the narrow road.

[27 : 30] Help them to keep going. Protect them from stumbling. Give them exhilarating glimpses of their mountaintop destination. Keep their gaze fully fixed on Jesus' face, knowing that the destination is worth the difficulty.

Lord, give us eyes that are wide open to the wolves that come our way. Remind us to keep our Bibles open. Give us perception to see not just unrighteous fruit in these people, but would you help us to see more and more the good fruit that you are forming in your faithful ones.

Help us to give thanks for our leaders and remember to pray for them. Jesus, you are our good shepherd. So please protect us, fight for us, lead us to good pasture.
We thank you that you will deal with the wolves. And we pray all this in your name. Amen. Amen.
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