

A Jesus Person... Chooses Wisely

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Preacher: Brian King

- [0 : 0 0] When I first asked Irene to read the Bible this Sunday, I joked with her that since she had to only read two verses, so my sermon would probably be only two minutes.
- I'm afraid to disappoint all of you who are hoping for an early end to the service today, but I think my sermon will be longer than two minutes. But let's ask God now for his help to make sense of these two verses.
- Father, we just ask again for your help. Lord, please would you speak to us clearly and directly to our hearts. Help us, Lord, to ensure, Lord, that we are truly listening to you.
- Help us to focus, help us not to get distracted now, but indeed just allow our hearts to be soft so that your Holy Spirit will be working in us. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.
- In life, we always have to make choices, don't we? So imagine it's your birthday and your friend has taken you out for a meal at your favourite expensive restaurant with appropriate social distancing measures in place, of course.
- [1 : 0 3] And you're looking at the menu and you see your two absolute favourite dishes on there, but you just can't decide. And no, you can't order both without bankrupting your friend and ruining the friendship.
- Or you're at the cinema and the movie that you and your girlfriend were planning to watch isn't showing anymore. And you're left with only two choices, the romantic comedy and the latest remake of Rambo.
- And of course, if you're in the voting booth where there are only two logos on your ballot paper, you have to make a choice of which one you're going to give a tick to or rather a bangkah.
- And often, we have to make what we call binary choices. The dictionary tells me that a binary choice is a choice between two alternatives, often mutually exclusive.
- So either you watch Rambo 10 or How to Lose Your Girlfriend in 10 Days, the sequel. It's one or the other, so choose wisely if you want to have a girlfriend still at the end of it.
- [2 : 0 5] Now, our world is increasingly uncomfortable with binaries. This is probably most obvious today in the world of gender. It used to be uncontroversial to say that someone was either a boy or a girl.
- But now there are all these categories in between, gender fluid, gender queer, and so on. Many think of binaries now as inherently oppressive, as a way of separating and excluding and flattening legitimate differences.
- And you can kind of understand that. Imagine that you have to fill in some official form, and then there's a little section that asks you about your race. And it only gives you two options, Melayu dan lain-lain.
- And you feel a little offended, since lain-lain could cover so many things, whether that's Iban or Chinese or Galabit or Indian or Berawan or something else.

You know, surely our society is richer and more complex than this binary. And this is a reason why many people, especially those of us who are a little younger, also feel uncomfortable with Christianity.

[3 : 19] Christianity sounds like it's inherently binary, and therefore it's inherently oppressive. To say there is only one truth, Christianity, and everything else leads you away from that truth, sounds offensive to modern ears.

To say that there is only one way, as Jesus does in our Bible passage today, and that all other ways are off track, sounds intolerant.

Surely, as one bumper sticker puts it, God is too big for any one religion. Surely that sounds less intolerant. Well, if that's you today, the first thing I want to say is that Jesus understands your concerns.

There are times when Jesus rejected binaries too. In Matthew 22, a group called the Sadducees, who don't believe in resurrection, came to Jesus.

They were against Jesus, and they tried to trap Him. And so they asked Him a question. If a widow remarries up to seven times in this life, since her husbands keep dying, who is she going to be married to when she gets to heaven?

[4 : 36] They were trying to force Jesus into making one of two choices. Either He's forced to say that the woman will have multiple husbands in heaven, which would be nonsense to everyone during that time, or else He's forced to say that actually there is no life after death.

But Jesus rejects this binary. He says, Hey, have you considered another option that people will not be married in heaven? And actually, He goes on to argue His case even more, but we're not going to talk about that today.

But you can see that He encourages complexity of thought. More significantly, Jesus shows that the good news of Christianity itself and its implications often breaks down binary thinking.

After all, let's think about Jesus Himself. Is He fully God? Yes. Is He fully man? Yes. If either is not true, we cannot be saved.

When the Apostle Paul was filled against Jesus and persecuting His followers, this is what he couldn't grasp. He was working with binaries.

[5 : 49] Either you're a true believer and follow the God of Abraham, or you are a blasphemer and follow Jesus of Nazareth. Only when he sees the light, literally speaking, does he realize that Jesus has broken down this binary.

And that following the God of Abraham means following Jesus of Nazareth. And that completely transformed his life. And think of how the Gospel reorients our collective identity.

Here is Galatians 3 verse 28 on the screen. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one.

In Christ Jesus. In Christ, these binary oppositions, Jew and Gentile, male and female, and so on, are transformed.

One is no longer superior to the other. Jesus radically transcends them. And so the first thing I want to say today is that Jesus isn't necessarily a purely binary thinker.

[7 : 01] He often transcends them, sometimes in surprising ways. And if so, that it would be wrong to dismiss Jesus simply on the grounds that he is always forcing oppressive binaries on us.

You know, that's just too simplistic a conclusion. But that doesn't mean that Jesus never deals with binaries. After all, as we just said, that is exactly what he is doing in today's passage, you might wonder, why does he do that?

Well, because while there are some situations and conditions where a binary is not called for, there are other situations and conditions that do.

when we approach an intersection in a car and we see a big truck speeding towards an intersection, we have a binary choice to make.

Either we step on our brakes or we don't. It's one or the other. It's a life and death choice. And it isn't oppressive but loving to call attention to that binary choice.

[8 : 17] And that's what Jesus is doing. He not only transcends binaries but also presents binaries when they are for our good.

You see, to recap, what has Jesus been doing throughout the Sermon on the Mount? He's been getting Christians, first of all, to realize what is their nature and character. They are people who are blessed because they are kingdom people.

and then he shows them what it means to be kingdom people in everyday life. They are not to be like the Pharisees who might have thought that they were embracing God's culture but who were actually only concerned with outward behavior.

Instead, it's been showing them Jesus' culture, one that has deeper roots and emerges from the heart. But Jesus' culture can only come about when we invest in a healthy relationship with our Father.

And we're seeking his kingdom even while we enjoy his pardon. And perhaps you didn't realize this, but last week, Jesus has more or less finished up with the main body of the sermon.

[9 : 31] He's laid down the detail. And so from today onwards, he's going to turn to the disciples and the crowds listening in and he's going to say to them, so, what are you going to do about it?

After all, there is no point if I just speak, you listen, go home, and then that's it. There is no point, Jesus says, if you say, wow, Jesus, what a wonderful sermon it is.

It's the best sermon that I've ever heard. And then you go home and everything stays the same. What Jesus desires here is not so much praise, but practice.

Not just adoration, but action. Jesus' words aren't for entertainment, but has consequences. Which way will you choose, Jesus is asking.

From now to the end, which way will you live? This is the binary choice Jesus lays before us. And it's a matter of life and death, he says.

[10 : 39] In doing so, he is simply following a time-honored biblical tradition. In the Old Testament, Moses, giving his final speech to Israel, does the same thing.

I am setting you before you life and death, blessing and a curse, he declares in Deuteronomy 30, verses 19-20. Please choose life. Joshua, Moses' successor, does the same thing as soon as God's people are in the promised land.

Choose this day whom you will serve, he says. Or take the psalmist in Psalm 1, our call to worship this morning. There are two ways to live, he declares, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked.

And one is the way of life and the other is the way of destruction. Choose wisely. Even the book of Proverbs constantly sets before us two ways.

I've put a few examples on your outline. And now Jesus says, it's your turn. For the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus keeps presenting us with binaries.

[11 : 49] Today, it's two gates with two roads. Next week, it's two trees with two kinds of roots. In two weeks' time, it will be two houses with two different foundations.

Like it or not, like it or not, you've come to a fork in the road. It's one or the other. What would you choose? And so let's examine the binary choice that Jesus lays before us today.

Firstly, he says there are two gates, the wide and the narrow. Now, what is this narrow gate? I'll give you the short answer first, and then I'll give you the expanded answer.

In short, the gate is simply Jesus. He is the gate. Jesus himself explicitly calls himself the gate in John 10 verse 9.

I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe. There's only one entrance into the life of the kingdom here and now. His name is Jesus.

[12 : 59] He's the narrow gate. He's the only way in. That's the short answer. Now, the slightly expanded answer. If the gate is not a what but a who, how does that work?

What does it mean to go through Jesus the gate? Now, we find a big clue later on in Matthew 7 verse 21 where Jesus says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

And so, to enter via the narrow gate is to do God's will. And what is God's will for us first and foremost? The answer is to know God as your Father.

Now, how does that happen? By trusting Jesus. Look at John 6 verse 40. Jesus says, For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.

It is God's will for you and I to believe in Jesus. For the crowds listening in, whether then on the mountain or whether online this morning, this is God's will.

[14 : 17] Know Jesus, trust Jesus. Now, last week, I didn't draw attention to this, but did you notice just a few verses earlier in verse 11?

Jesus calls us evil? He pulls no punches. Because that's the very first step to knowing God as Father, acknowledging we are evil in his eyes.

Only then will we understand how generous he is to give us something totally undeserved. Only then will we realise how wonderful his gift is.

A gift box that contains the promises of forgiveness and pardon and adoption into his family. It's a gift box that comes wrapped up in the person of Jesus.

And God's will is for us to trust this Jesus as his gift to us. But that's not all there is to it. You see, Jesus is the gate, not the fence.

[15 : 22] And so we can't sit on the fence. When we trust him, we are getting off the fence and following him. That's what it means to trust someone.

Now, imagine you're going hiking with a friend. Your friend is pretty experienced, but you're not. And you're hiking through some serious jungle bushes, and you're beginning to get disorientated.

But your friend says, don't worry, come this way, this way. And he points at this really tiny path, which you can hardly even make out. And it looks like it will lead to nowhere or somewhere pretty dangerous.

And he starts walking through it. Now, at this point, what does it look like to trust your friend? Would it be to argue with him?

Would it be to say, no, no, no, follow me, let's go this way instead? Would it be to say, I trust you, but then you just stand there? No, it would be to follow him.

[16 : 23] You trust him to lead the way, and so you follow. God's will. And so, follow him.

And that means choosing to listen to the Sermon on the Mount. That means embracing Jesus' culture in your life.

That's the will of God. That's how you show you trust him. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.

But the faith that saves is the faith that trusts. And the faith that trusts is the faith that follows.

As Martin Lloyd Jones, the British preacher, puts it, it is unbiblical to divorce forgiveness of sin from the remainder of the Christian life.

[17 : 21] They go together. Or think of it another way. I think everyone here knows what Play-Doh is. We have some for our kids.

And the fun thing is, if you have these Play-Doh molds, you know, the ones that come in the shape, this one's a star, this one's a cow, this one's a heart, this one is an alligator, whatever.

And all you have to do is just press the Play-Doh into the mold, and that unformed lump begins to take the shape of a heart or a cow. It starts taking the shape of the mold.

And the narrow gate is a bit like this mold. In order to enter, you have to kind of squeeze through it. And as you do so, you can't help but begin to take the shape of Jesus.

To enter this gate is to begin to be molded. They can't be separated. And really, that's what it means to be a Christian. And so the white gate is whatever is opposite to that.

[18 : 26] It's anything that isn't Jesus. Now the thing about both gates is that they both say that they are the right entrance. You know, if you encounter the white gate, it wouldn't have a sign that says, sorry, wrong entrance, don't pass through.

In fact, the number of people using this particular gate will have you thinking that you're probably on the right track. More than that, the white gate might even sometimes call itself the Jesus gate.

And this Jesus gate will promise you an easy way, an easy life. This Jesus will never demand of you anything, or ever even ask you to sacrifice anything.

This Jesus promises you shortcuts and power and never says endurance and weakness is a gift. This Jesus never says love your enemies, deal with your anger and your lust, stop being judgmental.

This Jesus promises you the good life, but will never actually give you true life. Well, that's not the real Jesus. Jesus is the narrow gate.

[19 : 36] You know what that means? It means you can't take excess baggage with you. For not only is the gate narrow, so is the road. You see, we come now to our second binary.

Jesus says there are two ways, the broad and the narrow. Actually, although the NIV uses the word narrow to describe both the gate and the road, the Greek words are actually different.

And the Greek word used to describe the road is a word that is also associated with affliction. The road is going to be cramped and tight and uncomfortable and you are going to face challenges on it.

It will be difficult. And so you better travel light. You're not going to be able to take everything with you. You're going to have to give up some things. Now, the danger in what I'm about to say is that I could mistakenly paint the picture of the Christian life as completely horrible and joyless and burdensome.

So let me just say first of all, before we go on, is that if you truly know Jesus and become a Christian, you will never regret it. Jesus grants us forgiveness.

[20 : 54] He forgives the darkest things in our lives, the things we find difficult even to admit to ourselves, never mind others. Jesus grants us significance.

We are God's beloved children, those whom he delights in, those whom he wants to recreate in the image of the Son of God so as to reign with him.

And Jesus grants us freedom. We are free from having to earn God's favour or his love or trying to define purpose for ourselves.

We are free to live for him and for others, for we no longer strive for his approval, but live from his approval.

But choosing the way of Jesus will cost as well. After all, anything that's worthwhile will have a cost, wouldn't it? That's what gives it its value.

[21 : 55] Jesus makes that clear. No one could ever accuse him of false advertising. Now, what do we have to leave behind? We'll need to leave behind our sin and idolatry.

We're changing direction and so we're saying goodbye to certain things. That could be a certain habit. That could be a certain lifestyle. That could be a certain pattern of thinking.

That could even be a certain person. And that will cost you. It will sting. But just like medicine applied to your wound might initially sting, but ultimately heal, well, that's what Jesus will do.

And you know, those certain things, whatever they are, could come back into our lives. We might trip over them again. In fact, we probably will. After all, we can't get rid of them on our own.

Otherwise, we wouldn't need Jesus. And Jesus is more than willing to walk alongside us in that journey to help us to shed that excess baggage.

[23 : 04] But what Jesus says is this. You can't have him and hold on to those things tightly at the same time. You can't walk in two directions.

You need to walk away from these things and towards him. You need to choose. to leave behind our old self.

Jesus tells us later on in Matthew 16 that whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. That's the narrow way.

To deny yourself is equated with taking up your cross and make no mistake. That's painful. To say no to certain desires, to give up control of your life, that is hard.

The Christian leader J.C. Rao once said, it doesn't cost too much to be an outward Christian. Just come to church once or twice on Sunday, be reasonably moral during the week.

[24 : 13] It's cheap, it's easy, it requires little sacrifice. And if this is Christianity, he says, then Jesus got it wrong. He should have said, wide and broad is the way to heaven.

But he says, it does cost something to follow Jesus. There are battles to be fought, sacrifices to be made, a wilderness to pass through, aspirations to give up.

And in particular, we must let go of our love of ease. That, after all, characterizes the other way, doesn't it?

It's broad and easy. Everyone who travels there can bring their excess baggage. They don't have to leave anything behind. They don't have to count the cost of anything.

There's no need to drop certain friendships. There's no need to watch over the use of our mouths or our money. There's no need to feed our hearts with spiritual truths.

[25 : 20] There's no need to deliberately be inconvenienced, to go the extra mile for the sake of serving others. The broad way leaves you plenty of room to turn to the right or to the left.

But that's not the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus requires you to exercise intentional care. The way of Jesus requires you to expand energy, to struggle hard, even to feel like you're dying sometimes.

The way of Jesus requires you not to turn to the right or to the left, but to stay the course. The way of Jesus is costly.

And so it's no surprise that people do say no to Jesus. I have a friend who was an interested spiritual seeker for a long time.

He was a thinker, and once in a while over the years, I would have opportunity to share Jesus with him. And there was a time when it began to look like he was close to giving his life to Jesus.

[26 : 31] He looked like he understood the gospel, and he seemed satisfied with the answers I gave to one or two of his objections. And I got really excited. I thought, oh yes, he's getting close.

But then all of a sudden, he closed the door on Jesus. And it was pretty sudden to me. And so for a while, I just couldn't really understand why, given all his prior interests.

Maybe he didn't understand after all. But after a while, it became clearer to me. he had understood Jesus very well indeed.

And he understood, perhaps better than many Christians, what Jesus was asking him to do. He understood that Jesus was asking him to give up certain things in his lifestyle and the pursuit of his career above everything else.

And he couldn't do it. Now, I found that really hard. I really wanted him to become a Christian. And I was tempted to say, you know, oh, it's okay, you know, Jesus isn't so demanding actually.

[27 : 39] But I couldn't either. Because Jesus is too clear. Small is the gate, narrow is the road, and only a few find it.

And as a result, few travel on it. That's what makes being a Christian hard, isn't it? You are never going to find yourselves in a majority.

There are things that Jesus says that our culture doesn't want to hear. If you want to be popular all the time, don't become a Christian. Officially, 40% of Sarawakians identify themselves as Christians.

Although once the next census is done, I expect that figure to dip slightly. So it might seem we are pretty close to a majority. But how many of those 40% truly know Jesus personally?

How many of them know what it really means to be a Christian as defined by Jesus himself? Jesus offers these two verses as a challenge.

[28 : 47] If we say we love Jesus, but we have never ever sacrificed anything, never surrendered to him, never submitted to his will, if we have never ever done anything even close to that, that might mean we're on the broad road, not the narrow one.

We're not following the Jesus of the Bible. Those are tough words to hear. But Jesus wants to be crystal clear.

This is the truth about Jesus culture. It isn't for the indifferent slacker. But here's what we need to remember. The road you're on is the road Jesus himself walked.

The road you're on is the road Jesus himself walked. He's not asking you to travel a road he has never set foot on.

He's walked the road of loneliness, of betrayal, of heartache. He's been tempted, misunderstood, bereaved, attacked.

[30 : 03] He has taken up his cross and even more, he was crucified on one. And he not only suffered the physical agony of the cross, but the inward pain of bearing the penalty for our sin.

And that's the one big difference between his journey and ours. That's the one thing he suffered on this road so that we'll never have to.

We never have to worry about being punished on the day of judgment for our failings along the way. And so when you find this road incredibly hard and you stumble, you can get up again because here is the good news of Christianity.

God doesn't love you to the degree you are like Jesus. God loves you to the degree you are in Jesus. And that's 100% when you trust in him.

And that's why you will walk this road because Jesus walked this road before you ever did. And now that we're in Christ, we have gained both the responsibility and the privilege to walk the same path he did.

[31 : 25] Choose the narrow gate, choose Jesus, and you choose this road. But it is the right choice. Because let me give you the third binary.

Thirdly, Jesus says there are two destinations, destruction and life. Jesus knows the way is hard. And given that the other way is broad and easy, with plenty of company, who wouldn't be tempted to switch roads?

And so Jesus reminds us, actually, don't switch. Because look at where the other path is going. Destruction. Jesus is the most loving person in the entire universe.

And because he is so loving, he is not afraid to talk about this painful subject, and even use it as motivation for us to make the right choice.

The New Testament scholar Douglas Moore says that when the Bible speaks of destruction, it often refers to a situation of a person or object that has lost the essence of its nature and function.

[32 : 38] So think of ruined wineskins, wasted perfume, vanished beauty, lost souls. All these are biblical pictures of destruction.

It's the very opposite of abundant life. And Jesus doesn't want that for you. And so he says, what is the point of going the broad and easy way if that is the end point?

What is the point of traveling on a luxurious private jet when its end point is a spewing volcano? By contrast, the narrow road leads to life.

Life on the way of Jesus is hard now. Life on this road is filled with frustration and dissatisfaction. We cannot fully be who we were meant to be because sin is still present.

But when we get to the end of this road, we find true life. We finally become the person we were meant to be.

[33 : 46] Our potential is fulfilled. Our satisfaction is found. Our relationship with God reaches its highest point. That is life.

That's where the way of Jesus leads to. Sin is gone. Our joy is endless. And that is the good news of Christianity. That the way of destruction is not inevitable.

But we all need to make one decision. One decision. Jesus says there is a fork in the road. And by default, if we don't put any thought into it, our feet will just automatically pass through the white gate and travel the broad road.

That's our default setting. But Jesus says, now you know. There is a choice to be made. There are two gates, narrow and wide.

There is no third gate. There are two ways, narrow and broad. There is no third way. There are only two crowds, large and small.

[34 : 57] There is no third neutral group. And there are only two destinations, destruction and life. There is no third alternative. There is no room to sit on the fence.

So which would you choose? If you're not a Christian today, well, this is the choice Jesus puts before you. It's either him or not him.

And perhaps you need time to explore and consider that choice. that's why we have the Christianity Explored course that Irene talked about which will run again in the last quarter of the year.

Look out for more news about it. But you need to choose eventually. And Jesus invites you to enter the narrow gate. That's what Irene did.

But this passage is for Christians too. Because even as a Christian, you still need to make a decision every single day. You need to make the choice to choose Jesus and his way every day.

[36 : 05] Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, where your heart is, there your treasure will be also. And committing your heart involves a definite act of the will again and again.

And so ask yourself, have I committed myself to this way of life? Is Jesus' culture really my true culture, one that can be seen by others?

Does Jesus actually govern my actual decisions and practices? Is he really my treasure? You know, every single week, it's a good idea to look back and ask these questions.

For as Moses did centuries before Jesus, this is what he said, which is still as relevant for us today. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[37 : 31] So, every single day, choose life, choose Jesus, choose the path you won't regret.