

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 4

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS CHRIST] THE NARROW GATE and THE GREAT BANQUET

The parable of the narrow gate in Matthew 7:13-14
and the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24 are parables about
THE CONDITION FOR ENTERING GOD'S KINGDOM.

A. THE NARROW GATE

Read Matthew 7:13-14.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The story of the parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The story is presented in the form of an exhortation. The exhortation is directed to all people in the world. They are exhorted to enter the narrow gate and follow the narrow road or way, and not to enter the wide gate and not to follow the broad way. Both the narrow way and the broad way lead to definite destinations. This is a true-to-life reality.

The narrow gate. It reminds one of a turnstile, which admits one person at a time.

The narrow way. It resembles a difficult pass between two high cliffs, which hems the traveller in from both sides.

The wide gate. It is so wide that crowds of people together with all their baggage can enter through it at the same time. It is as if a sign above it says, "Welcome to as many as possible!"

The broad way. It resembles a wide and easy road travelling downwards with many excursions along the way. It is as if the signs along this road say, "Travel wherever you wish." and "Travel as fast as you can."

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of "the story" of the parable may consist of "the setting" and "the explanation or application" of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of this parable is contained in Matthew chapter 5-7.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes *the citizens of the kingdom of God*, their blessedness and their relation to the world (Matthew 5:1-16) and the righteousness which Jesus Christ, the King, on the one hand grants and on the other hand demands of them (Matthew 5:17 - 7:12). Finally, he urges all who are reached by his message, whether at the time it was delivered or later, to enter into the kingdom through the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14). If they have done so before, let them continue steadfastly on the way to which the gate admitted them. He especially warns them against the teachings of the false prophets and last of all he contrasts the two final destinations to which the two ways lead (Matthew 7:15-27).

(2) The story of this parable is contained in Matthew 7:13-14.

It has the form of an exhortation.

(3) The explanation or application of this parable.

It is actually contained in this exhortation.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail in the story of the parable.

Discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

Two gates and two ways. “The gate” represents the initial choice in life and “the way” represents the way a person lives thereafter. Thus, both the gate and the way are relevant details in the parable.

Two kinds of travellers. “The many” and “the few” are often found in the Bible and are certainly relevant details.

Two destinations. “Destruction” and “life” are also often found in the Bible and are very relevant details.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. *A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make.* Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the narrow gate in Matthew 7:13-14 teaches about “the condition for entering God’s kingdom”.

The main message of this parable is the following. “The initial choice a person makes in life determines the way he lives on earth as well as his final destination!” The two-fold exhortation to enter the narrow gate and not to enter the wide gate includes the two subordinate arguments. In the first place it is natural to prefer what is wide, broad and easy to access to what is narrow and constricted. In the second place it is also natural to follow the crowd rather than the few. Therefore, beware what you choose: which gate you enter and which road you follow!

Entering God’s kingdom on God’s condition is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom. No one will enter God’s kingdom on his own condition (his own keeping of the law, his good works and his own religion)! God’s condition to enter God’s kingdom is to enter via the narrow gate and thereafter to walk on the narrow way. From the Bible we know that “the narrow gate” can only refer to faith in Jesus Christ and his accomplished work of salvation (Luke

10:25-26; John 10:9; 14:6; Acts 4:12). From the context we know that “the narrow way” refers to the Sermon on the Mount. After a person has been saved by grace through faith, he should walk in the manner of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapter 5-7). The people of God’s kingdom enter through the narrow gate and thereafter walk along the narrow way. Thus, it begins with faith in Jesus Christ and is the most important decision one can ever make!

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does each of these passages compare to this parable?

(1) Which is first: the way or the gate?

Read Luke 13:23-30.

Do these two ways lead up to two gates at the end of these roads? Or do these two gates lead to two different ways of life? Does a person follow one of these ways in order to enter one of these gates? Or does he enter one of these gates in order to be admitted to one of these ways? The presentation that the ways come first and the gates come last has become quite popular among Christians and *Christian artists*.

Some Christians appeal to Luke 13:23-30 to prove that the way comes first and leads up to the gate. Jesus says, “Make every effort (along one or another way) to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.” However, the wording and the context of Luke 13:23-30 is definitely different than the wording and context of Matthew 7:13-14. In Matthew 7 he speaks of “a gate” (Greek: pulé) and “a way” (Greek: hodos), while in Luke 13 he speaks of neither, but only of “a door” (Greek: thura). In Matthew 7, Jesus speaks of entering God’s kingdom in its present form on earth and of the present life in God’s kingdom on earth. However, in Luke 13:23-30, he speaks of perseverance until the second coming and of entering God’s kingdom in its final (end-time) stage (cf. Matthew 25:10).

In Matthew 7, Jesus mentions both gates *before* mentioning both ways. The text stresses the close relation between the gate and the way. But it does not say “the gate *or* the way”, as if their order is reversible. The text clearly says “the gate *and* the way”, showing that the gate comes before the way!

By entering the gates in Matthew 7, Jesus is not thinking of death or his second coming, but of the most important choice a person can make right now in life. A person’s initial choice in life will determine the way he lives on earth as well as his final destiny! “The gate” represents the initial choice in life and “the way” represents the way a person lives after he has made the decision.

(2) How many people will eventually be saved?

Read Matthew 22:14; Romans 9:27.

Jesus says, “Many are called, *few* are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). Paul says, “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved” (Romans 9:27). Other passages in the Bible make it very clear that many people make the wrong initial choice in this life. They choose the wide gate and the broad road before they realise that it leads to their destruction.

Nevertheless, the Bible also makes it very clear that the number of “the few” who will eventually be saved (justified), will be very many! The number of saved people will be uncountable! “There before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9)!

(3) What are the two life-styles in this world?

Read John 8:34; Isaiah 57:20-21.

Many people think that the life-style of people who enter through the wide gate and travel along the broad way means unlimited freedom and happiness, while people who enter the narrow gate and travel along the narrow road, on which they are restricted by many laws and rules, would be absolutely boring and make them very unhappy!

People who think this only deceive themselves. In fact their so-called freedom and happiness is very superficial. The Bible clearly teaches that people who live in sin are “slaves of sin”! “The wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest and whose waves cast up mire and mud. There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked” (Isaiah 57:20-21). The people travelling along the broad way are in reality like prisoners in chains who do slave work for others.

Although entering by the narrow gate and travelling along the narrow way implies self-denial, difficulty and struggle, pain and hardship, especially because the sinful nature has not yet been completely conquered, Psalm 119:165 teaches, “Great peace have they who love your law (God’s revelation in the Bible), and nothing can make them stumble” (cf. 1 Peter 1:8-9).

The few who enter through the narrow gate are “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). They are “genuine and yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying and yet live on; beaten and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:8-10). Their light and momentary troubles are achieving for them an eternal glory that far outweighs all these difficulties (2 Corinthians 4:17; Romans 8:18)!

The few who enter through the narrow gate “have left everything to follow Jesus Christ”. Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel, will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:28-30)!

(4) What are the two destinations after life in this world?

Read Matthew 3:12; 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Revelation 14:9-11.

The two destinations are everlasting punishment or everlasting life. The people who have chosen to enter through the wide gate and walk along the broad way are heading for destruction. “Destruction” (Greek: *apóleia*) does not mean “annihilation”, but it means “everlasting damnation and punishment” as in Matthew 25:46 (Greek: *kolasis*). The people who have chosen to enter through the narrow gate and walk along the narrow way, are on the way of life. The way of self-denial leads to abundant life in the present time and life with God in eternity. “Life” (Greek: *zōé*) refers to having salvation and fellowship with God in Christ now in this present time and in the future after the second coming of Christ life in the new heaven and new earth. And it includes all the many coloured blessings of God that result from fellowship with God.

6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.

Discuss. What are the main teachings or messages (lessons) of this parable? What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

(1) Conditions for entering God’s kingdom.

“Entering God’s kingdom” means the same as “getting saved”. Jesus teaches that getting saved is on the one hand very attractive and on the other hand not at all easy! The entrance gate is narrow and must be sought and found! The road that follows is narrow and feels constricted. The narrow gate represents the initial choice a person makes in this life. From man’s point of view it is “the initial conversion” and from God’s point of view it is “the justification”. The narrow or constricted road represents the Christian life-style after he chose to believe in Jesus Christ. From man’s point of view it is called “the daily conversion” and from God’s point of view it is called “sanctification”. Likewise, the wide gate represents “the unwillingness to convert” and the broad way represents “the life of self-indulgence”.

The narrow gate stands at the beginning of the road that leads to life. And the narrow road represents the road of life that passes between high cliffs and deep ravines, hemming one in from all sides. In order to enter the narrow gate, one must strip himself of many things, such as the consuming desire for earthly goods, an unforgiving spirit, selfishness and self-righteousness (cf. Hebrews 12:1). But even though one has already entered in through the narrow gate, whatever remains of one's old nature still rebels against laying aside its evil characteristics and habits. This old nature is not completely conquered and therefore throughout life until physical death there is a bitter struggle between the old and the new nature (Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:17). The narrow gate therefore represents "self-denial, taking up your cross and starting to follow Jesus Christ". And the narrow way therefore represents "continual self-denial, carrying your cross every day and following Jesus Christ every day" (Luke 9:23).

But the complete victory is assured, because this man found the narrow gate and has entered it. He has exchanged the way of sinners for the way of the righteous (Psalm 1). The conscious decision to enter the narrow gate represents "the initial conversion and justification". And travelling along the narrow way represents "the daily obedience and sanctification".

(2) Consequences of entering God's kingdom.

The Sermon on the Mount teaches that the entering God's kingdom is accompanied by circumstances and consequences that are both favourable and unfavourable. The favourable results are that those who enter God's kingdom are blessed: they inherit the earth, receive mercy, see God, etc. The unfavourable results are that those who enter God's kingdom will be persecuted and slandered. They are burdened with certain obligations: they must practise a righteousness that excels the righteousness of the Pharisees; they must love their enemies and pray for their persecutors; they must not be hypocritical and yet be discriminating, etc. Such things are *unfavourable*, because they clash with people's natural tendencies, such as half-heartedness in doing what is right, getting angry, lack of discipline with respect to the other sex, taking revenge, etc. (Matthew 5).

B. THE GREAT BANQUET

Read Luke 14:15-24.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

This story resembles that of the parable of the wedding banquet, but is not a parallel of that parable. Jesus often told parables. Sometimes he told the same parable in different situations, like the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18; Luke 15). Sometimes he told similar parables in different situations, like the parable of the wedding banquet and the parable of the great banquet. The wedding banquet was a feast given by a king in a wedding hall and the great banquet was a formal dinner given by a house owner in his house.

The first invitation. Verse 16 shows that apparently everybody accepted the first invitation to the banquet. There is no mention of anybody who declined.

The second invitation. Shortly before the beginning of the feast, the host sent a servant to call the invited people to come now, because all the preparations for the feast were completed. It was in response to this second invitation that the invited guests began to make all kinds of flimsy excuses. All these people had promised to come, but now went back on their earlier promises. In view of the enormous preparations that had been made for the feast, such cancellations of commitments were regarded as an inexcusable offence. It proved that those invited guests had been insincere! They had said "yes", when they meant "no".

Moreover, their excuses were shallow and pretended. Nobody would buy a field without seeing it first! And even if he had bought it before, then there would have been enough time to go and see it later. Likewise, nobody would buy an expensive yoke of oxen without trying them out first! And nobody who just got married had an excuse to stay away from such a delightful feast, even if he was exempted from all military, civil and religious duties during the first year of his marriage (Deuteronomy 24:5)!

The third invitation. The banquet was not called off. It was going to be held and at the time previously determined! So, in order that there will be no guests lacking, the servant is sent out to invite the underprivileged. He is even ordered to *bring* them, that is, to take them by the hand and lead them into the banquet hall, because some of them were maimed, cripple or blind.

Finally, he is ordered even to compel them to come, that is, to bring them in with the force of loving persuasion. This was necessary, because many guests felt completely unworthy! In this way, the banquet hall was completely filled, just as the host had intended!

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of this parable is found in Luke 14:1-15.

Jesus was eating in the house of a prominent Pharisee. He had just taught, saying, “When you give a banquet (dinner or formal dinner), do not invite your friends or brothers or family or rich neighbours, who might feel the obligation to return the favour and invite you in their turn.

When you prepare a festive banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they have nothing to repay you. You will be repaid at “the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14). This does not mean that we may never invite our friends and family members. But it does mean that it is a far greater blessing to invite the underprivileged people in our society.

One of the guests sitting at the table of the prominent Pharisee commented, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15). Jesus then told the parable of the great banquet in order to point out to him and to everybody else that what is important is not whether you get an invitation, but whether you respond to that invitation! Blessed is the one who accepts the invitation. Those who reject it cannot enter into God’s kingdom!

(2) The story of this parable is contained in Luke 14:16-24.

(3) The explanation or application of this parable is contained in Luke 14:24.

Whoever was invited and rejected the invitation, will never enter into God’s kingdom. Only those who respond and accept the invitation will enter into God’s kingdom.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Discuss. Which of the details of the story in this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes. The essential or relevant details must be determined from the context and the parallel passages in the Bible, because Jesus did not explain any of the details.

The great banquet. This is a relevant detail. Like the wedding banquet, the great banquet is a symbol for the kingdom of God in its final phase at the second coming of Christ (cf. Revelation 19:7). It represents the joy of living in the new heaven and new earth, where everyone there will exuberantly acknowledge the kingship (reign) of God in Christ. It is pictured as guests reclining together on couches at tables loaded with food in a spacious banquet hall flooded with light. And there is joyous communication with each other and with the host. Elements of this representation can be found in passages as Psalm 23:5; Isaiah 25:6; Matthew 8:11-12; 22:1-14; 26:29; Revelation 3:20; 19:9.

The question is, “To what extent should these elements be interpreted literally and to what extent figuratively”? The answer is, that symbolism predominates in the parables, which does not mean that what they symbolise is unreal. “The New Jerusalem” and “the new heaven and the new earth” are very real! The realities are much higher, richer and more beautiful than the literal meaning of the symbols! The blessedness and joy of the saved in the kingdom of God is very real! But it is useless to speculate about the meaning of details, when the Bible itself sheds little or no light on the meaning of those details.

The invitations. What is really important in all parables is to grasp the central point or main message, which Jesus Christ teaches. In this parable, it is the question, “Have I really accepted the invitation to enter God’s kingdom?” Does my life show that I have accepted the invitation and that I am actually on my way to that blessed experience, even enjoying a foretaste of that reality here and now?” Both the introduction (verse 15) and the conclusion (verse 24) of the parable point to this question! What is really important is not whether you have received an invitation, but whether you respond to that invitation in a way that God requires and expects.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24 teaches about “the condition for entering God’s kingdom.”

The main message of the parable is the following. “Refusal to accept God’s gracious invitation of salvation by grace through faith will result in being excluded from the blessings and joys of God’s kingdom in its final manifestation as the new heaven and new earth.”

Entering God’s kingdom on God’s condition is one of the basic characteristics in God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom respond and accept God’s invitation and they come when they are called. They do not resist when God’s servants take them by the hand and lead them in. And they do not continue to doubt God’s gracious invitation when the force of loving persuasion brings them in.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Discuss. How does this parable compare to the parables of the two sons, of the wicked tenants and of the wedding banquet in Matthew 21-22?

Notes. The parable of the great banquet, just as those three parables, teaches that the people, who remain unrepentant and unconverted, will not enter into the kingdom of God in its final manifestation at the second coming of Christ.

6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.

Discuss. What are the main teachings or messages (lessons) of this parable? What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

(1) The condition for entering God's kingdom is to accept and not to reject God's invitation.

The natural nation of Israel was God's covenant people during the Old Testament period, but many Jews have rejected the invitation of God. God's gracious invitation was repeated:

- first by the prophets of the Old Testament
- finally by the Messiah, Jesus Christ
- and his apostles.

That is why they (the unbelievers within the natural nation of Israel) will never even taste of the final great banquet, that is, they will never enter into God's kingdom in its final phase as the new heaven and the new earth! They will perish! Not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet" (Luke 14:24)

However, when the natural nation of Israel had rejected Jesus Christ, God's plan was not abandoned or frustrated!

- Throughout the Old Testament period, there have been genuine believers among the Jews (Isaiah 1:9; Romans 9:29) and among the Gentiles (Isaiah 56:3-8).
- Throughout the period of Christ's earthly ministry, there have been genuine believers among the Jews (his disciples) and the non-Jews (Acts 17:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10).
- And until the second coming of Christ "a remnant" of the natural nation of Israel will come to faith in Jesus Christ and will be saved (1 Kings 19:18; Isaiah 1:9; Isaiah 10:22; Matthew 22:14; Luke 5:31-32; Luke 13:1-5; Romans 9:27; Romans 11:5,11-24; cf. Matthew 24:34).

(2) The manner of bringing people into God's kingdom is by love and persuasion.

The servants had to *not only invite* the underprivileged into the banquet hall, but also *take them by the hand and bring them* into the banquet hall. Many of them could not walk due to their handicap. The application is that God's servants should take special care to bring the underprivileged and disabled people of the world into God's kingdom.

Thereafter the servant had to *compel* the people travelling on the roads and lanes to come into the banquet hall. The implication is that many people feel completely unworthy of entering. This has special reference to the people who were not originally invited, namely the Gentile nations. The fact that God not only repeated his invitation, but actually enlarged it to include the non-Jewish (Gentile) nations is very important. Already in the Old Testament the prophets knew that the kingdom of God would be extended to include the believers from the non-Jewish nations (Genesis 22:17-18; Isaiah 54:2-3; 56:3-8; 60:1-3; 65:1-3; Psalm 72; Daniel 2:34-35,44-45)! What the Old Testament prophets did not know was that it would happen through the preaching of the gospel concerning Jesus Christ (during the New Testament period) and that this would take place on complete equal footing with the natural nation of Israel (Ephesians 3:2-6)! This began to go into fulfilment at the first coming of Jesus Christ.

(3) People who hear or read this parable are urged to respond.

The main message of this parable is that one should respond to the invitation (the preaching of the gospel) and accept it in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Therefore, if you have never responded yet, accept Jesus Christ now!

C. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS AND LESSONS OF THE PARABLES ABOUT ENTERING GOD'S KINGDOM

Teach. The condition for entering God's kingdom is determined not by any man (or religion), but only by the God of the Bible.

(1) The parable of the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14).

God's condition for entering his kingdom is to enter by the narrow gate and to travel by the narrow way. *The narrow gate* represents the initial decision to convert and to believe in Jesus Christ. *The narrow way* represents the life of trust in and obedience to Jesus Christ and sanctification through the Holy Spirit, as described in the Sermon on the Mount.

(2) The parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14).

God's condition for entering his kingdom is to wear the robe consisting of the righteousness of Christ, which only God can and will give. *The wedding robe* signifies the righteousness of Jesus Christ which God imputes and imparts by grace to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ.

(3) The parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24).

God's condition for entering his kingdom is to accept God's invitation and not to reject it. Refusal to accept God's invitation of salvation by God's grace and your faith will result in being excluded from the blessings and joys of God's kingdom in its final phase as the new heaven and new earth.
