

Introduction

I'd like to begin by reading from my favorite poem, *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost. In the first three stanzas, Frost writes about two roads that diverged in a yellow wood. He wanted to travel both but couldn't. So, he chose the one that was "**grassy and wanted wear.**" He then declares in the last stanza: "**I shall be telling this with a sigh
** Somewhere ages and ages hence: ** Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, ** I took the one less traveled by, ** And that has made all the difference.**" That last line is profound: "**I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.**"

It's the same with us. According to Jesus in Matthew 7:13-14, there are two roads, or "**ways**" as He calls them, before each of us. We must choose to travel one of those and which it is makes all difference, now and forever, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Road to Destruction

The first road, in verse 13, is one "**that leads to destruction.**" In days gone by, we frequently heard that there's a hell to shun. The word "**destruction**" here certainly encompasses that ultimate destiny.

The essence of hell will be relational, the shame and sorrow of never-ending separation from God. Those in hell will have resurrection bodies and live in a material world that He prepared for them. Except for Him sustaining it, it will be utterly devoid of God's influence – no common grace or restraining of evil. Those in hell, in other words, will be left completely to their own devices, which will be evil. Imagine the anger and lashing out in a totally godless society of self-consumed people. There will be no pity on others, no sacrificing for others, no rooting for others, and so on – only jealousy, rivalry, and insecurity instead. That's the ultimate fate of those on the road to "**destruction.**"

But we know from the larger context of verse 13, which is the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7, that Jesus also has in mind their

immediate fate – dehumanization. He states in 5:48 that God’s intention for human beings is that they be “**perfect.**” The Greek word translated “**perfect**” means “**functional.**” It connotes wellness of personality (being) and the wellness of life (behavior) that flows naturally from it. “**Destruction**” refers to dehumanization, which is the disintegration of that wellness right now on earth. People on the road to that, in other words, are, to one degree or another, spiritually and psychologically sick.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus implicitly identifies some of their attributes and acts: anger, malice, contempt, lust, divorce, manipulation, attack, resentment, retaliation, praise-seeking, materialism, anxiety, destructive criticism, and coercion. To one degree or another, they routinely display some combination of those attributes and acts, and others just as harmful, in their day-to-day lives.

The empirical evidence is overwhelming. People read gossip tabloids, look to lust, tailgate drivers who they think are going too slowly, respond to criticism with defensiveness and anger, readily divorce spouses, manipulate people to get their way, resent wrongdoers, make their good deeds known so people will praise them, envy those who outshine them, fret over their existence, and so on. Be attentive to the behaviors around you and the thoughts, feelings, and bodily habits from which they come. You’ll witness first-hand what dehumanization, the disintegration of personality and life, looks like if you do.

That then is one of the roads before each of us, in verse 13. It’s the one that “**leads to destruction,**” which is an immediate destiny now, dehumanization, and an ultimate destiny later, hell.

The Road to Life

But there’s a second road, in verse 14. It’s the one that “**leads to life.**” The word “**life**” here surely encompasses an ultimate destiny, what we call “**heaven.**” We need to think of that destiny in terms of God Himself. We know two things about Him, that He’s perfectly and infinitely good and perfectly and infinitely large or competent. With that

in mind, imagine what the ultimate life that such a God would plan for His people would be like. It would be one as good and as large as He is.

Think of it this way. Those on the road to life will one day be in possession of themselves as never before. With mind-blowing powers of consciousness and activity, they'll act upon and interact with Yahweh, angels, those who were also on the road to life, and the breath-taking environment and world of heaven itself. They will, as a result, have a life that is richer and deeper than we can begin to imagine. As perfectly good and competent persons, they'll move from one astonishing experience to another in a full life with God and others that never ends. John Hick sums this up well **"as limitlessly enhanced life, as a state of being more intensely alive in an experience which is both perfect fulfillment and yet also endless activity and newness. For beyond death we will not be less alive but more alive than we are now."** That is the ultimate destiny of those on the road to life.

But we know from the larger context of verse 14, the Sermon on the Mount, that the word **"life"** also refers to their immediate destiny. They're functional. They possess the wellness of personality and life that God intends. Jesus defined this wellness as **"fullness of joy"** and **"abundance of life."** In his classic book *A Testament of Devotions*, Thomas Kelly defined it in these terms: **"(It's) a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. He is at the Helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well."** Or to say it another way, wellness is a personality and life characterized by pervasive and habitual love, joy, and peace.

People on the road to life are experiencing the development not the disintegration of their personalities and lives. They aren't perfect and never will be but they're increasingly and substantially growing in that direction. Ten years ago, a friend of mine resented criticism.

Today, he receives criticism with gratitude and joy. He also sought the approval and praise of people. Today, he seeks only God's approval and praise. I've seen that change in him. He's on the road to life.

The Travelers

Now that we know what the two roads are, let's examine the travelers who are on them. Who is on which road is a complicated issue. So, I'll only tell you what I know for sure.

First, I know for sure that those who apprentice themselves to Jesus are on the road to life. Apprenticeship or as it's more commonly called, discipleship, is a definable and observable response. A person makes the decision to be with Jesus Him in order to become like Him and to learn and do all that He says. He then arranges all of his affairs, the totality of his life, around carrying out that decision as best as he can. Those who do that are disciples of Jesus and they're on the road to life.

A friend of mine visits me once a week to chat a bit. We do talk a little about politics and personal matters, but 90% of our chatting is about Jesus and His kingdom at hand. Why? It's because it's that around which his life and mine are arranged. I can state categorically that he is on the road to life, because he's a disciple of Jesus.

I know a second thing for sure. Those who reject Jesus are on the road to destruction. To reject Him means one of two things. First, one knows the person, words, and works of Jesus, but generally thinks, feels, and acts as if He doesn't exist. Or second, one could know the person, words, and works of Jesus, but chooses not to. He too, as a result, generally thinks, feels, and acts as if Jesus doesn't exist.

I'm the acquaintance of a professional couple who are in their mid-sixties. They're both third generation unbelievers who know almost nothing about Jesus. They could know though because I've tried to tell them several times. But they've shown no interest and continue to think, feel, and act as if Jesus doesn't exist. They've rejected Him, in other words, and are on the road to destruction because they have.

The Road Less Traveled

That raises a question. Why would anyone choose the road that leads to destruction instead of life? Most do. The words “**wide,**” “**broad,**” and “**many**” in verse 13 reveal that the road to destruction is “**the road more traveled.**” It is so for several reasons, the foundational of which what people call “**the high cost of discipleship.**”

Let’s be clear about something that Jesus Himself emphasized. It does cost us something to be disciples of His. He couched it in these terms. We must deny ourself, take up our cross, and follow Him. What that means as a practical matter is this. We must reject some things that are normally sought in human life and seek some things that are normally rejected. This rejecting and seeking occurs in the activities, experiences, and events of our day-to-day lives.

Consider, for instance, one of the intangibles that is highly valued and sought in sports. It’s the killer instinct, which one psychiatrist defines as the capacity to “**relentlessly and without inner prohibition or a sense of guilt keep the pressure on opponents while achieving victory.**” Sport psychologist Bruce Oglivie reports in that regard that almost every great athlete he has interviewed “**consistently emphasized that in order to be a winner you must retain the killer instinct.**” Disciples of Jesus, however, reject the killer instinct and seek instead what is normally rejected in sports, the ethic of agape love.

That illustrates what discipleship to Jesus requires. It’s rejecting some of what is normally sought in human life, and seeking some of what is normally rejected. Doing so may result in loss of one kind or another. Going back to sports, discipleship can put a constraint on athletes. It sometimes compels them to be “**less than they could be.**”

That’s just one example of the so called “**high cost of discipleship.**” There are countless others. So, after my attorney friend, David, became a disciple of Jesus, his secular wife gave him an ultimatum, “**Jesus or me.**” He chose Jesus and she divorced him.

That’s the *cost* of discipleship and it, along with the *nature* of

discipleship, arranging life around Jesus, makes something clear. Apprenticing one's self to Him is the most radical decision in life. Because it is, most people aren't going to make it, which explains why the road to destruction is **"the road more traveled."** Most are on it.

But according to verse 14, a **"few"** aren't. They're on the road to life instead. They are because they grasp two realities that most don't.

One is the low cost of discipleship. The value, the life of verse 14, far exceeds the cost. The gain far outweighs any loss. Ask my attorney friend David and he'll tell you. Having Jesus is more valuable than having a spouse. Discipleship to Him is the single greatest bargain in life. We're fools if we don't take it.

Those on the road to life grasp a second reality that most people don't – the high cost of non-discipleship. Imagine paying \$1 million for a Milky Way. Non-discipleship is like that. The cost far exceeds the value. The loss far outweighs the gain. Hear the wise words of Dallas Willard in that regard: **"Non-discipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the mist discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. It short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said He came to bring."**

If we have clarity (recognize the low cost of discipleship and the high cost of non-discipleship), it's a **"no brainer."** We'll take the road less traveled, the one that leads to life.

Conclusion

I close with an observation. You and I will eventually experience what Frost conveys in the last stanza of his poem. Someday **"ages and ages hence"** (maybe 100 or 1000 years from now) we'll reflect back on the two roads before us today. And we'll recognize then far more vividly than we do now that the one we chose **"has made all the difference"** to quote Frost. So let's choose wisely. Let's take the road less traveled.