

THE DAY MIKE DELCAVO MADE THE RIGHT TURN
Matthew 7:13-14

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It was a pleasant, but cool, day in Riverside, California – 45 degrees, a slight breeze, slightly overcast. Mike Delcavo and his teammates on the cross-country team from Western State College had traveled all the way from Gunnison, Colorado to Riverside, California in hopes of coming home with the Division II NCAA Cross-Country National Championship. Their hopes were based upon a solid history – for the past 14 years Western State had finished first, second or third in the finals. They were, to be sure, a real national contender. The team consisted of seven guys and seven girls.

The year had gone well for Mike Delcavo. He was an Academic All-American and needed only to finish in the top 25 to be named an All-American. His coach, Scott Groom, told me personally that Delcavo was a solid athlete.

They had practiced the 10-K run the day before. A beautiful golf course in Riverside was the setting for this all important national championship. Lush fairways, carpet-like greens, and pristine white sand traps – a perfect setting for the national championship.

The gun sounded. The runners were off, and all was going as planned for Delcavo. He was in the middle of the pack – the front of the middle. He was about to make his move. He was, in his own words, “well within striking distance” when he realized that everyone in front of him had gone the wrong way. He excelled on steep climbs and he remembered the hill on the course where he was going to “make his move.” He turned the corner only to watch as the entire front of the pack went around the hill instead of up it.

He realized that the pack was going the wrong way.

I was so fascinated by his story, printed in many publications including Sports Illustrated, December 27, 1993, that I tracked Mike Delcavo down. I finally found him in Boulder, Colorado, and I asked him on the telephone about this bizarre turn of events at the national championships.

He simply stated, “No one in front of me was going the right way. I shouted, ‘Come back. This way – this way. You’re all going the wrong way.’ But no one listened. They were following the pack.”

Everyone else was blindly following the leader. They veered to the right when they should have veered left.

His mind was racing, as well as his feet. “Should I have followed the pack even when I knew they were headed the wrong way? Will I be the National Champion by default?”

But Mike Delcavo stayed the course. He went the long, lonely route, while the rest of the pack took a self-made shortcut.

His grandmother, Frances Delcavo, waited on the course and was surprised that her usually fast-footed family member was performing so poorly in the race. By now, he had fallen to 123rd place.

“Grandma, the rest took a shortcut,” he said, as he ran by, breathlessly. “I went the right way.”

The officials – would they have egg on their face? What would they do?

It was an astonishing decision. The National Championship officials decided they would change the official course to the abbreviated course taken by the front pack of runners. Delcavo finished more than six minutes behind the front runner, and his team had to settle for third place. They would have been that National Champions if the official course had been maintained.

At the awards ceremony, the officials tried to cover up the chaotic circus by giving Delcavo the silent treatment. They did not so much as mention that they had altered the course in hindsight.

That’s when Grandma Delcavo called the TV station, the newspapers, and all turmoil broke loose.

The team made the trip home in silent dismay.

“Mike, be honest. If you had to do it over again would you have taken the shortcut?” I posed the question via telephone October 21, 1997.

“No, sir. I would go the right way again.”

Jesus sees the crowds. He goes up a hill. He sits down – as teachers of old – and begins to instruct. Here, in this hill country, to the north and the west of the Sea of Galilee, anxious disciples sit around their Master and learn what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God.

Here in chapter 7, verse 13, Jesus begins to contrast two ways – two kinds of fruit, two kinds of followers, and the two kinds of builders. In each case, there is a sharp distinction drawn between true discipleship and mere religious activity. Jesus brings His sermon to a close with a clear call for action.

What is immediately striking about verses 13 and 14 is the absolute nature of the choice before us. Instead of giving us a plethora of possibilities, Jesus says there is but one choice – with two options from which we might choose.

The first thing I want us to notice is that

I. THERE ARE TWO WAYS.

The image of standing at the road of decision is an ancient one from the scriptures of Israel. We think about Abraham and Lot who, at their moment of departure, stood looking over the land. Abraham said to Lot, "Choose which way you will go, and I will go the opposite direction." Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the valley of the Jordan was well watered, lush and green. He decided to go that way – the most pleasing way to the eyes. It, of course, led him to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah and, ultimately, to the destruction of his family – his wife being turned into a pillar of salt.

I think not only of Lot and his choosing the easy way – I think also about Joshua who stood before the people and declared, **"If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourself today whom you will serve – whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the river, or the gods of the Ammorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."** The people shout in unison, "We will serve the Lord our God, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and did these great things in our sight."

We think, also, of the psalmist who, in the very first psalm, compares the way of the righteous who delight in God's law, bear fruit and prosper, with the way of the wicked who are driven like dust before the wind and perish.

In Matthew one way is easy – one way is broad, spacious and roomy. The other seems to be narrow and confining. It has boundaries that are clearly marked. The broad way seems to offer so much more, so much more freedom.

C. S. Lewis, famed Christian writer and great intellect, described in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* how as a schoolboy of 13 he began to broaden his mind. "I was soon, in the famous words, altering 'I believe' to 'one does feel.' And, oh the relief of it. From the tyrannous noon of revelation I passed into the cool evening twilight of higher thought where there was nothing to be obeyed and nothing to be believed, except what was either comforting or exciting."

But the narrow way is God's way of revelation. And His revealed truth in His Word imposes a limitation on what we may believe and how we may act. And, in a real sense, that is hard.

The broad way seems to offer so much — tolerance, permissiveness, no curbs, no boundaries, either of thought or conduct. Travelers on this road may follow their own inclinations – that is the desires of the human heart and its fallenness, superficiality, self-love, hypocrisy, mechanical religion, false ambition, censoriousness. These things do not have to be learned or cultivated. No effort is required to practice them. The broad way is easy. You can just be who you are in Adam and not try to live as a brother or sister of Christ.

There is no doubt about it – trying to walk a Christ-like life is the greatest, most difficult endeavor any human being can ever undertake. God's way is not spacious, it's confining. Poverty of spirit does not come easily. Prayer does not come easy. Righteousness is not easy. Transformed, God-centered attitudes are not easily achieved. It's not easy to love the unlovable, to forgive those who really, honestly, deserve no forgiveness. In fact, apart from the Gospel, apart from God's grace, all of these things are impossible by our own efforts.

Jesus says there are two options. There is the narrow gate, and the way is small. Or, there is a broad gate, and the way is wide. Every one of us comes to that moment in life – which way are we going to go? Are we going to go God’s way, or are we going to walk the world’s way?

Some of you are at that moment of decision today. The Holy Spirit has been pleading with your heart, yet God gives you the choice to go His way or to go your own way.

That moment comes to us at different points in life. It came to me when I was a freshman in high school. It was there in high school that I clearly realized that there were two ways that I could go. I could live in such a way that would make my parents and my grandparents proud – that would honor my heritage of faith, a faith that says, “Thus sayeth the Lord. These are the commandments of the Almighty that we will keep.” Or, very easily, I could have joined many other of my friends who decided to walk in their own way – a way of disobedience, a way that was dishonoring to the things that God had taught.

Those clear choices faced me every day. I could choose to drink, or I could choose to not drink as a high school student. I could choose to save myself sexually for marriage, or I could choose to become sexually involved before marriage, as so many of the high school students were doing. I could choose to copy the homework of others and to cheat on tests, or I could choose to do my own work and accept my own grades, whatever they might be. I could choose to associate only with those who bring popularity to me, or I could reach out in the courage of Christ Jesus and sit in the lunchroom and other places with those whom the other high school students were shunning.

Oh, there were clearly two ways to travel. One way was broad. The other was narrow. One was the way most traveled. The other had barely a path trodden upon it.

Every time we insist on doing our own thing, having our own way, ignoring all that is orderly and righteous, all that is lawful – we find ourselves in a mess.

Have you heard about Larry Walters? If you have, you know both that his story is true and yet it is very hard to believe. Larry was a truck driver, but his lifelong dream was to fly. When he graduated from high school, he joined the Air Force in hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, poor eyesight disqualified him. So, when he finally left the service, he had to satisfy himself with watching others fly the fighter jets that crisscrossed the skies over his backyard. As he sat there in his lawn chair, he dreamed about the magic of flying.

One day Larry Walters got an idea. He went down to the local Army-Navy surplus store and bought a tank of helium and 45 weather balloons. These were not your brightly colored party balloons – these were heavy duty spheres, measuring more than four feet across when fully inflated. Back in his yard, Larry used straps to attach the balloons to his lawn chair – the kind you might have in your own backyard. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep and inflated the balloons with helium. Then he packed some sandwiches and drinks and loaded a BB gun, figuring he would pop a few of those balloons when it was time to return to earth.

His preparations were complete. Larry Walters sat in his chair and cut the anchoring cord. His plan was to lazily float up and then back down to *terra firma*, but things didn't quite work out that way. When Larry cut the cord, he didn't float up lazily. He shot up as if fired from a cannon. Nor did he only go up a couple of hundred feet. He climbed and climbed, until he leveled off at 11,000 feet. At that height he could hardly risk deflating any of the balloons, lest he imbalance the load and really experience flying. So he stayed up there, sailing around for 14 hours, totally at a loss as to how to get down.

Eventually, Larry drifted into the approach corridor of the Los Angeles International Airport. Wouldn't you love to have been there? A PanAm pilot radioed the tower about passing a guy in a lawn chair at 11,000 feet with a gun in his lap. Los Angeles International Airport is right on the ocean, and at nightfall the winds on the coast begin to change. So, as dusk fell, Larry began drifting out to sea. At one point, the Navy dispatched a helicopter to rescue him. But the rescue team had a hard time getting to him, because the draft from the rotor kept pushing his homemade contraption farther and farther away. Eventually they were able to hover over him and drop a rescue line with which they gradually hauled him back to earth. As soon as Larry hit the ground, he was arrested. But as he was being led away in handcuffs, a television reporter called out, "Mr. Walters, why did you do it?" Larry stopped, eyed the man, and then replied nonchalantly, "A man can't just sit around."

What was true for Larry Walters is also true for you – and it's true for me.

When we insist on going our own way instead of God's way – when we insist on just filling the balloons and let them sail wherever the wind might blow, instead of cautiously measuring and calculating – we find ourselves adrift, in danger.

I want you to notice that not only are there only two options and really one choice, but

II. THE WAY OF THE MAJORITY IS SELDOM, EVER, THE RIGHT WAY.

You saw what Jesus said. Jesus made it clear. There are many who go the broad way, and there are few who choose to travel the narrow way. Put simply, God's way cannot be discovered by appeal to majority opinion, for the majority is on the road that leads to destruction.

As Paul has said, and it is true, "Let God be true and every man be a liar, if need be."

Just like the majority of runners in Delcavo's NCAA Division II Cross-Country National Championship race, the majority usually choose to go the wrong way. The great majority of the runners were blindly following the leaders of the pack – not thinking for themselves, not asking if this was the course upon which they had practiced. Rather, they were just blindly placing their feet in the tracks of their predecessors. It was a rare Mike Delcavo who decided that even if the majority were going to go the wrong way, he had practiced the right way, he knew the course, he was looking for the steep hill – and he would veer to the left even though the majority veered to the right.

The broad way is an easy road that is a busy thoroughfare, thronged by pedestrians of every kind. It is the narrow and hard way which leads to life, but it seems to be comparatively deserted. Jesus

seems to have anticipated that His followers would be a despised minority movement. He saw multitudes on the broad road, laughing and carefree, with apparently no thought for the dreadful end to which they were heading. On the narrow road, there is just a happy band of pilgrims, hand-in-hand, backs turned upon sin, faces set toward the Celestial City, singing songs of expectation, marching to the Promised Land.

Several years ago, a group of psychologists rediscovered the dramatic power of societal pressure. In an experiment, they invited ten teenagers into a room where three charts were displayed. Each chart had three lines of different lengths. The group members were asked to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on each chart. One teen in each group did not know that the other nine teens had been instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the second longest line. The lone teen frequently looked somewhat confused but cast a wrong vote with the other nine students. Data revealed that 75 percent of the teens allowed peer pressure to override their own better judgment. We all need the affirmation to choose what is right rather than what is popular.

Almost all of us are prone to do what others are doing, to believe what others are believing, to accept without question the testimony of prominent people. Peer pressure can be such an amazingly powerful force.

It is the continual message of this, Jesus' greatest sermon – the Sermon on the Mount – that true disciples of Jesus will not play to the galleries nor form their values according to the passing approval of faddish whims. The Beatitudes tell us that it is God's approval, alone, which is of ultimate importance. In Matthew 6, Jesus condemns that form of hypocrisy that practices piety to win the approval of men. And now, in Matthew 7, He tells us the way to life is narrow. It's not as popular as the way to destruction.

III. THERE ARE TWO DESTINATIONS.

We already see this, foreshadowed in Psalm 1, where prospering and perishing are the two alternatives. Moses made it still clearer. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil, blessing and a curse. Therefore, choose life." In a similar fashion, Jesus taught that the easy way, entered by the wide gate, leads to destruction.

You see, the two paths are not ends in themselves, but have eternal significance beyond themselves. The one ends in destruction; the other in life. Ironically, it is the spacious and popular path that leads to destruction. The confined and relatively unpopular one leads to life. The tragedy is that otherwise reasonable men and women become so overwhelmed with the spaciousness and popularity of their path that they take little thought as to its destination. Should someone declare to them that it is the path to destruction, they will deny it, argue that they are no worse than most others on the same road, and, in any case, God will not permit destruction of so many.

In all honesty this morning, I have to say to you that Scripture in no way encourages such optimism. Jesus, Himself, insists that only the narrow way leads to life. These are the words of Jesus. How can you discount them? How can you say they do not communicate what they so clearly declare? Only the path that seems confining explodes in the end into vitality and the consummation of the glorious Kingdom of God.

Every time I ponder Mike Delcavo's race, it seems unbelievable to me that the officials of the NCAA Division II Cross-Country National Championship would actually simply decide that because the majority went the wrong way that they are now going to declare that the wrong way is the right way – seemingly changing the rules in the middle of the game to suit the majority.

But Jesus says, on that final and ultimate judgment, there will be no changing the course or altering the requirements. The standards of righteousness will be maintained. Clearly, Jesus, in these two small verses in this, His most famous sermon, says that there are only two ways -- hard and easy – there's no middle way. There are only two gates – broad and narrow – there is no other gate. Trodden by two crowds – large and small – there is no neutral group. Ending up at two destinations – destruction and life – there is no third alternative.

I know such absolutes are not popular today. Every opinion poll has “Yes” and “No,” but also, “I haven't made up my mind yet” or “Don't know.” Men and women are lovers of Aristotle and his golden mean – to be in *via media*, the middle way. To deviate from the middle is to risk being dubbed an extremist or fanatic. Everybody resents being faced with the necessity of a choice. But I tell you today, Jesus would not allow us to escape the choice.

Some of you here today need to choose the narrow way. You need to choose Christ. You need to choose to be recommitted to your church family, recommitted to Bible Study, recommitted to worshipping with God's people. Some of you need to be encouraged today to stay the course on the narrow road, because the broad way is ever so tempting.

Won't you choose Christ today? Won't you choose life today? Won't you choose the narrow way? In fact, so much unlike Delcavo's and the awards ceremonies at the Division II national championships, while the officials shunned Delcavo and honored the majority, who'd gone the wrong way, we learn that on God's great day, it is the small minority who went the right way who will be rewarded for their righteousness in Christ Jesus.