

“Through the Narrow Door”

Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able (Luke 13:24).

In today’s reading from Luke we hear some of the sweetest promises in the Bible...but the path to these promises is not easy for us to walk. In fact, at first glance, this reading seems to create more questions than answers and, in many ways, these words from Jesus appear to challenge some of our most basic beliefs about grace and salvation. So, to truly understand the meaning of today’s reading and receive God’s promises we need to take a careful look at the context for these words; and, when we do this, we learn from the first verse of today’s text that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem.

This is a curious detail because if you look at a map of the Holy Land and you plot the course Jesus took from the beginning of His journey to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51 to the time he actually arrived on Palm Sunday, Jesus was geographically all over the place! So, when Luke tells us that Jesus was “journeying toward Jerusalem” in verse 22, it’s not so much a detail about His route, instead it is a critical comment on His purpose. Jesus was on His way to the Cross. That’s what this means! He is in the midst of a trip that will end in His suffering and death. He is on His way to do what He came to do for us, and it’s this journey to the Cross that provides the backdrop for the question that Jesus is suddenly asked in verse 23.

“Lord, will those who are saved be few?” From out of nowhere, an unidentified person asks Jesus a question about salvation. Luke doesn’t tell us the motivation for the inquiry, and we don’t know who this person is, but make no mistake, this is the question of a scorekeeper. Think about this: the kingdom of heaven is near; the Son of God is standing right in front of you; the promised Messiah has come to your town and instead of asking the obvious question, “Lord, will I be saved?” or, like the thief on the cross who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom” (Luke 23:42). This person is concerned about everybody else. This is not the question of the brokenhearted! This is not a question born of repentance! This is the question of a self-righteous man who is more worried about who’s in and who’s out than the reality of his own sin.

And it’s to this arrogant, audacious, self-righteous question that Jesus speaks and says, “Strive...Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:24). One of the most basic, fundamental tenants of the Christian faith is that we are not saved by our striving. In fact, in Ephesians Paul writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). And each week a preacher stands in this pulpit and preaches about what Christ has done for the forgiveness and salvation of sinners. We are saved not by making every effort, we are not saved by our striving, but by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone, as revealed to us in Scripture alone...*but that’s not what He seems to say here!* “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”

If we are to understand Jesus’ words in the light of the overwhelming message of the Bible which tells us that salvation is not based on us in any way, then we have to look at the purpose of Jesus’ words. You see, Jesus speaks these words to a man, and to a crowd, focused on their own good works. Jesus speaks these words to people who are clinging to and banking on their own righteousness. Jesus speaks these words to men and women who have put themselves at the center of their salvation story. *Jesus speaks these words to people just like us!* You see, by our sinful nature, we always keep score. By our sinful nature, we are driven to point to our own virtues, to hold up our own victories, and to bargain with God based on what we think we bring to the table. By our sinful nature, we are just like the people in today’s reading and it’s to us that Jesus speaks. And to us, Jesus says, “Strive!”

The words of verse 24 seem to go against everything we hold dear about the Gospel, and yet there's more happening here than meets the eye. The Greek verb for the word "strive" sounds a lot like our word "agonize" and in other parts of Scripture it is translated, "fight" or "struggle." In fact, it's a verb that Paul uses repeatedly in his epistles...*but he never uses it to describe our efforts toward salvation.* In I Timothy, Paul urges, "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (I Timothy 6:12). Again, to Timothy Paul says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7). And in Colossians Paul writes, "To this end I labor, struggling with all (God's) energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:29).

Jesus is not telling us that our salvation is based on our efforts. No! He is telling us to fight against our nature; to fight against the natural urge to rely on our evil hearts; to fight against the need to justify ourselves with our own works; to fight the inclination to bring anything with us except the righteousness of Christ with which we have been clothed in our Baptism (Galatians 3:27).

The truth is that the door to salvation *is* narrow! Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Like the person who questions Jesus in our reading, the devil, and the world, and our own sinful flesh lead us to believe that it's because of what we bring to the door that we will be admitted, but today Jesus says to us fight that temptation, turn from your sinful self-righteousness, repent and trust me with your life *because there is no other way!* And to emphasize the seriousness of that point Jesus continued, "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' (Luke 13:24-27).

This picture of judgment is harsh and it is terrifying and it's exactly what this inquiring person needed to hear! The person who approached Jesus was comfortable that his own righteousness was enough, that he had been good enough and worked hard enough to get himself into heaven and, in the context of this sinful motive – and for his ultimate good – Jesus shattered his illusions of self-made salvation. "In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but *you yourselves* cast out" (Luke 13:28).

The Jews of Jesus' day saw salvation as their birthright. To them, the fact that they were "children of Abraham" meant that heaven was automatically theirs, but in this exchange Jesus destroyed that thinking. And, after telling them that their self-righteous unbelief would keep them out of the Kingdom, Jesus continued by saying the unthinkable; that "And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (29-30). And, my friends, this is the sweetest promise of God that we could ever hear because He's talking about us!

We who once were far from God; we who were lost in our sin; we who once clung to our works; we have been brought into the Kingdom of God – not because we've done enough; not because of anything in us...but because Jesus walked the narrow way of the Cross and by the blood of Christ alone we have been saved. This is the way and the truth and the life that has been given to us and it is this great and gracious act of God that gives Jesus' words meaning to us today. My friends, the door to the Kingdom is narrow and it is exclusive and today, through Jesus Christ, it has been opened to us...and by faith in Christ alone we can walk in with full assurance that we who are the last and least, have been welcomed to the feast. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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