

# URGING A SINNER TO STRIVE

Hebrews 11.6

There is an excellent parallel between Churches engaged in the approach to evangelism called decisionism and what in the political realm is labeled socialism.<sup>1</sup> In both arenas, those on the receiving end of the promised benefits and blessings are pretty confident that their proper role is to sit passively. In contrast, the promised benefits and blessings are hand-carried to them.

Yet, just as the person with the empty belly and the hungry mouth is responsible, insofar as he is able, to pursue by whatever means his next meal, so is the lost sinner responsible before God to aggressively seek the Lord while He may be found, or, as the Lord Jesus said, to strive to enter in at the strait gate.

I once delivered to you a message from God's Word in which the Lord Jesus Christ most certainly did direct sinners to "strive to enter in at the strait gate." My text for that message from God's Word was Luke 13.24. In that message, I explained to you that there is no conflict in the mind of God regarding salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and the Savior's command that sinners strive, the Greek word αγωνιζομαι, to enter in at the strait, or narrow, gate.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, for centuries before the decisionism brought in by Charles G. Finney's heresy, preachers and Christian scholars of every stripe and persuasion, from Arminian to Calvinist, from Church of England to Baptists, directed and urged and provoked sinners to "strive to enter in at the strait gate" as my Lord Jesus commanded.

But which so-called soul winners of the last 150 years, which notable evangelists of the last century and a half, have preached sermons on, much less urged sinners to, strive to enter in at the strait gate? Quite the contrary. Preachers and so-called soul winners these days are decidedly *against* sinners striving to enter in at the strait gate, being unjustifiably fearful that striving to enter in at the strait gate is somehow working for your salvation.

Excuse me, but no one who does what the Lord Jesus tells him to do is working for his salvation. Moreover, suppose you cannot see the difference between striving to enter in at the strait gate as the Savior commanded, and trying to work for your salvation (which God's Word repudiates). In that case, it's your own false perception that's to blame, and not that rare preacher who preaches the whole counsel of God's Word.

These things said, I discover that those of you who have experience with other Churches, and by that, I mean you have the great misfortune of having previously listened to decisionist preachers and been previously subjected to decisionist ministries, are typically extremely reluctant to strive to enter in at the strait gate. Never mind that the command to strive to enter in at the strait gate is found in the Bible. Never mind that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself clearly directed sinners to strive to enter in at the strait gate. Never mind that Scriptural

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<sup>1</sup> Decisionism is the belief that a person is saved by coming forward, raising the hand, saying a prayer, believing a doctrine, making a Lordship commitment, or some other external, human act, which is taken as the equivalent to, and proof of, the miracle of inward conversion; it is the belief that a person is saved through the agency of a merely external decision; the belief that performing one of these human actions shows that a person is saved.

Conversion is the result of that work of the Holy Spirit which draws a lost sinner to Jesus Christ for justification and regeneration, and changes the sinner's standing before God from lost to saved, imparting divine life to the depraved soul, thus producing a new direction in the life of the convert. The objective side of salvation is justification. The subjective side of salvation is regeneration. The result is conversion.

<sup>2</sup> Eva 154

evidence is strong that those who do not strive are far less likely to be saved than those who do strive. And never mind that the universal testimony of godly pastors and commentators in past centuries attested to the benefit of striving, the orthodoxy of striving, and the necessity of striving.

The plain fact of the matter is, as a pastor, I must deal with issues as they are, not as I want them to be. Sinners tainted by decisionism are unlikely to strive. So, I am faced with the necessity of persuading those who are lost and set against striving to strive. And should I fail and should you, for some reason, stubbornly refuse to strive to enter in at the strait gate, if the Lord Jesus' words in Luke 13.24 and following are to be believed, then unless you strive, you will not be saved and you will die in your sins.

My goal this morning is to attempt once again to persuade you to strive. To that end, please turn to Hebrews 11.6. When you have found that verse, please stand for the reading of God's Word:

"But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

My unsaved friend, recognize that this verse has definite application to you. I know this to be true because the examples of faith contained in this 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews are not all examples of faith found in the lives of saved people, believers. Hebrews 11.8, to be specific, refers to the kind of faith described in our text, though it was exhibited in the life of Abraham while he was *unconverted*. With that knowledge, let's read the verse:

"By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went."

"By faith Abraham" did something *before* he arrived in the Promised Land, while he was still unconverted, an unbeliever.

Now that it is established that Hebrews 11.6 can very well apply to you who are not saved, let's consider this subject of striving, of struggling with everything that's in you, of wrestling with your own sinful nature, and perhaps even wrestling with the Savior as Jacob did at Penueel the night he was saved, in Genesis 32.

To persuade you to strive, to show you that striving is not a waste of time, to encourage you to throw yourself into the struggle to obtain like precious faith, to exhort you to press into the kingdom, I want you to consider three things in our text:

## **First, CONSIDER THE NECESSITY OF FAITH**

"But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*," Hebrews 11.6.

We live in an era when words carry little weight, when they are virtually devoid of content or meaning. The result, of course, is that truth is more difficult to pass on to people. But let us recognize that God's Word is not contemporary speech, where when a man says "That's impossible," he means that it's difficult, and when he says "That's going to be difficult," he means that he will be inconvenienced. Not in God's Word. There is no use of hyperbole here, exaggeration for emphasis. What the writer of Hebrews literally says here, he literally means. Without faith, *it is* impossible to please God. A quick review of the words is essential at this point.

First, the word "without." This is the word *χωρίς*. It refers to being separate or apart from something.<sup>3</sup> Here, the word is used to provide a mental picture of something called "faith" being separated from a person. So, imagine a person *without* this thing called faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Bauer, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), page 1095.

Now, look at the word “faith.” This is the verb form of the word πιστίς. It means to be persuaded to the point where you trust someone, rely upon them, and have confidence in them.<sup>4</sup> Faith *always* has an object, someone or something that is trusted; otherwise, it’s not faith. And don’t think unsaved people can’t have faith. Abraham did. So, even before you are saved, you have to have some confidence in God, some faith in God, to be saved.

The next word is “impossible.” This is the word ἀδύνατος. It comes from the word δύναμις, which is usually translated “power” or “ability.” But this word, with the Greek α in front of it, means without power, without ability, impossible.

Fourth, the word “please.” This is the word εὐαρεστέω. If you have a Roman Catholic or mainline denominational background, you may have heard the word “eucharist.” Baptist pastors typically use this word only when they are swinging toward Catholicism or religious liberalism. The word here is similar to “eucharist.” It means to fully gratify someone, to delight him.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we see that without faith there is absolutely no way you or anyone else can be, or can say, or can do anything that will please God, that will gratify God. Faith, in some small amount, is absolutely necessary.

## Second, CONSIDER THE EXISTENCE OF FAITH

“... for he that cometh to God must believe that he is”

Two comments are in order here:

First, “he that cometh to God.” Please understand that the writer to the Hebrews recognizes that no sinner can come *directly* to God. John 14.6 records the unmistakable words of the Lord Jesus Christ:

“No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

As well, the Apostle Peter very clearly pointed out that faith in God cannot rightly stand without the intermediating role of the Lord Jesus Christ, when he wrote about Him in First Peter 1.21,

“Who by him do believe in God.”

Hebrews 7.25 shows perfect harmony with these two verses:

“Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him ....”

The pronouns “he” and “him” referring to the Savior.

So, recognize that when the writer of Hebrews comments about coming to God, there is no thought of even attempting to come to God except through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, “... he that cometh to God must believe that he is.” You *must* believe that there is a God, that He is real. And don’t think that this fact is so basic as to be assumed, because too many children do not believe in God.

From little kids all the way up to adults, some simply do not believe in God. And why should they, in some cases?

- They do not see anyone praying to the unseen God.

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<sup>4</sup> Bauer, pages 816-818.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, Jr., Cleon L. and Rogers III, Cleon L., *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key To The Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1998), page 542.

- They do not see anyone sacrificially giving to the unseen God.
- When was the last time they saw someone inconvenience himself to worship and serve the unseen God?

I wonder, myself, if some people really do believe in God. If they don't believe in God, it would explain a great deal, wouldn't it? It would explain their utter lack of fear of God. It would explain their unwillingness to give to the cause of Christ.

Why should a God Who doesn't exist be feared? And what an utter waste it is to throw money away to a God Who isn't real? So, you see why so many kids are unwilling to strive to enter in at the strait gate. They don't believe in God. He isn't real to them because they perceive that He isn't real to anyone they know. Can you blame a child for denying the existence of God, if the adults in their life are the indicators of the reality of God?

How much easier it is for a child to fear God who fears his father. No fear of dad, no concern about the consequences of disobeying him, no concern about getting a whooping when you ignore his directives, and it only makes sense such a child will deny the existence of God.

We need to get this sorted out once and for all, because unless God somehow and in some way makes the reality of His existence known beyond doubt, there is no possibility of being saved. No one will strive to be reconciled to a God Whose existence they doubt.

## Finally, CONSIDER THE NATURE OF GOD

“... and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

Okay. Let's say you attend Church to hear about this God Whose existence you sincerely doubt. Then, one day, something happens to convince you that God is, God is real, He is there! I don't know what would convince you, since it's different for different people. But you are somehow convinced. Now what? Now, consider what this God is like. He must be big. He must be powerful. However, beyond those considerations, God has revealed to us certain essentials about His nature that motivate people to pursue Him. The first bit of wisdom you possess will be a fear of Him. The first bits of knowledge and understanding of Him will be a fear of Him. From the last phrase of our text that I have just read to you, we find other essentials.

First, the word “he.” This is a personal pronoun. God is a “he.” That is, He is a personal being. And insofar as we are to conceive of God in terms that we can understand, God shows Himself to be a masculine personal being. And throughout the Bible, this truth is stated and reinforced thousands of times.

Next, God “is a rewarder.” The English word “is” appears twice in Hebrews 11.6, but our word “is” does not translate the same Greek word in each instance. The first Greek “is,” εστι, is the ordinary word meaning that God exists, He just is. But the second word translated “is,” γινομαι, is significantly different, and means that God comes to be a rewarder. What kind of a rewarder is God? Does He reward with salvation those that work for it? No. Romans 4.4-5 clearly shows us that the reward is not of works, but of grace:

- <sup>4</sup> Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.
- <sup>5</sup> But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

So, God is a rewarder, but He doesn't reward works of righteousness that a person does, or tries to do, by responding with their salvation. Reward here means *getting* something extraordinary, but it doesn't refer to *earning* something wonderful. Neither does it refer to God saving someone *because* they believe in Jesus Christ, but rather *through* their faith in Christ. Faith is not the instrumental *cause* of salvation, but the instrumental *means* of salvation.

Finally, “of them that diligently seek him.” “Diligently seek” translates a single Greek word, ἐκζητέω. The word means to search out, to seek after.<sup>6</sup> So you see, it’s not only in the Gospels that sinners are shown to be actively pursuing the salvation which is by faith, but in the rest of the New Testament, as well, and in the Old, too. In this verse, where God is diligently sought after, let us remember that seeking God is based upon the fact that a sinner can only come to God by coming to His Son, Jesus Christ.

Once again, in a completely different part of the New Testament, we have seen that sinners are to exert themselves to be saved, are to strive to come to know Christ, are, to use the words of the writer of Hebrews, to “diligently seek” God by striving to come to Christ.

Lest you let it slip by without notice, what kind of God does one deal with to be saved? An arbitrary God? A hateful God? A mean-spirited God? This God is indeed angry, because He has been sinned against. And He is inconceivably holy. But He is also, by nature, a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

In other words, those who truly ask are answered. Those who truly seek will find. Those who actually knock find it opened unto them. It’s just as my Lord Jesus said in Matthew 7.7.

But if you will not ask you will not be answered. If you will not seek you will not find. If you will not knock it will not be opened unto you. In other words, if you will not strive you will not be saved.

### SERMON:

It is the nature of God to reward those who diligently seek Him. But you must seek Him in the manner He prescribes. You must pursue reconciliation with Him in a fashion that does not dishonor Him, does not denigrate Him, does not exalt yourself in the process, if you want to be saved.

Remember, because of your sins, you deserve the most horrible punishment. Because God is merciful, He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus, to suffer and bleed and die as a Substitute, to satisfy His righteous demands as our holy God.

Jesus Christ, the ever-accessible Savior of sinful men’s souls, is seated at the Father’s right hand on high, having risen from the dead after His passion, in a glorified human body, and ascended to where He now is until He comes again, in power and great glory.

With Him in heaven until His Second Coming,<sup>7</sup> and with you down here on earth, dead in trespasses and sins, what must you do to be saved? You must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, according to the Apostle Paul and his partner Silas in Acts 16.32.

But where does striving come in? Why is striving necessary? To what end did the Lord Jesus command sinners to strive, does Hebrews show that sinners are to seek diligently? What is the benefit to you of striving, of diligently seeking God in Christ? Why is it that sinners are very unlikely to be converted apart from striving?

Why is it that you are almost certainly unconverted, who did not strive and who did not diligently seek God, leading up to that profession of faith of yours that you take so much comfort from?

Let me try to answer these questions and others not yet asked by addressing three topics that are vital to real striving, critical to diligently seeking God.

### **First, THERE IS A CONNECTION BETWEEN STRIVING AND HONESTY**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 16.11; 110.1; Matthew 26.64; Mark 12.36; 14.62; 16.19; Luke 20.42; 22.69; John 3.13; 13.1; 14.2-4; Acts 1.9-11; 2.33, 34-35; 7.56; Romans 8.34; Ephesians 1.20; 6.9; Colossians 3.1; Second Thessalonians 1.7; Hebrews 1.3, 13; 8.1; 9.24; 10.12-13; 12.2; 1 Peter 3.22; Revelation 19.11

You are a dishonest person. Every unsaved person is naturally, at the core of his being, dishonest. And since you are by nature a liar and deceitful, you are a dishonest person.

This inborn dishonesty of ours is borne out by both our experience and the testimony of God's Word. You lie under pressure, equivocate when put on the spot, exaggerate for effect, embellish in order to entertain. In short, you are not an honest person. But your dishonesty goes beyond fooling other people. You are so dishonest you fool yourself, deceive yourself, lie to yourself.<sup>8</sup> And God's Word bears this out. You don't need the Bible to convince you that you are not as pretty as you think you are, as intelligent as you think you are, as athletic as you think you are, as important as you think you are, even though the Bible is quite plain and straightforward about these subjects. You began speaking lies, to others and to yourself, when you were born, Psalm 58.3. And, to this day, your lies cause you to err, Amos 2.4.

Here is where striving will help you. If you will strive to enter in at the strait gate, you will see how strait the gate truly is, how narrow the passageway to eternal life truly is. If you will diligently seek Him, you will see, as you have never seen before, your corruptness, your weakness, your deceitfulness, your perverseness.

Striving makes a person look into the mirror of God's Word, like a man beholding his natural face in a glass (James 1.23). And when you look into the mirror of God's Word, and when you keep looking, and keep looking, and keep looking, you will see things you've never before seen, things you don't want to admit about yourself, but true things.

Your deadness, the coldness of your heart, the callousness of your conscience, the insincerity of your motives, the wickedness of your appetites, the twists and warps of your mind. All of these things, and more, are revealed only to the sinner who strives, the lost person who diligently seeks.

That's why I say there is a connection between striving and honesty. For, you see, only the convert to Christ acknowledges his sinfulness to God, and only the person who has strived has come to see that sinfulness. First John 1.9:

"If we confess *our* sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Such a confession as this, which is wholehearted agreement, cannot rightly occur before striving, before diligent seeking, has shown you what you're really like spiritually. Therefore, there is a connection between striving and the honesty evident when genuine conversion occurs.

## **Second, THERE IS A CONNECTION BETWEEN STRIVING AND HUMILITY**

The two chief sins of any lost person are lies and pride, the two components of Lucifer's sin when he sinned against God and fell, Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. And this is only natural, since unsaved people are like their father, the Devil.<sup>9</sup>

Here is how striving can be beneficial. Strive to enter in by your own power, and you will fail. Seek to live a moral and upright life that is pleasing to God, and you will fail. Determine to trust Christ, and you will fail. Work to reform the very nature of your wicked heart, and you will fail. And what happens when anyone fails and fails and fails and fails? He is humiliated.

Recognize, humiliation is painful and agonizing, just as gut-wrenching as being exposed as a deceitful fraud and being made to be honest with yourself is tormenting. But as honesty is good for you, no matter how

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<sup>8</sup> James 1.22

<sup>9</sup> John 8.44

much pain that honesty has cost you to acquire, so too is humility good for you, no matter how painful the humiliation.

Does anyone think it feels good to get happy that you've come to Christ, only to be humiliated by the fact that you've arrogantly exalted yourself instead of humbling yourself in the sight of the Lord? Yet this is what happens to the false professor who claims he's come to Christ without striving, that he's been born again without diligently seeking.

But what good does it do to make a false profession that's arrogantly bolstered by a fraudulent testimony? All that's really important is a new creature. So, you strive and fail, you strive and your false profession is dismantled quickly by a somewhat skilled pastor or eventually by life, and you are humiliated by it all.

It's hard. It's painful. It's discouraging. But most of all, it's humiliating. But is that bad? No, that's good. You see, God gives grace, not to those who are proud, but to those who are humble, James 4.6 and First Peter 5.5.

And since depraved people are far too wicked to humble themselves, they must be humiliated. How are you, who will not humble yourself, to be otherwise humiliated? Through striving, through diligently seeking, through struggling and failing, struggling and failing, struggling and failing, to come to Christ.

If the striving sinner is converted, if the diligent seeker ever does truly come to Christ, it will be when you have been so humiliated that you finally give up all self-saving efforts, you finally give up all self-exalting remedies for your soul's diseases, and cast yourself upon the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior of your wretched soul.

So, you see, there is a connection between striving and the humility required to sincerely come to Christ with empty hands, relying solely on Him for safety and deliverance.

## **Finally, THE CONNECTION BETWEEN STRIVING AND HOPE**

If striving helps you come to grips with the deceitfulness of your heart, so that you are honest enough to see yourself a sinner in need of a Savior, and if striving helps you to come to grips with the pride of your own heart, so that you are humiliated enough to come to Christ with empty hands. The connection between striving and hope looks in the other direction entirely. Not inwardly here, but outwardly, upwardly.

Striving is necessary so that you can overcome your own sinfulness enough to come to Christ. This is true with honesty and with humility, by God's grace. But the connection between striving and hope has to do not with *your* sinful nature, but with God's gracious nature.

What good will it do a man to wrestle with his own sinfulness if he has such an opinion of God that he doesn't think any good will come of it? And that's the way it is with some of you. You don't strive to enter in at the strait gate because you are less convinced that God is good than you are that you are bad.

Some of you are more convinced that you are evil than you are convinced that God is righteous, more confident that you are helpless than you are convinced that God is merciful. And the result of your distorted and warped view of God is that there is no optimism in you that if you will strive to enter in at the strait gate that you will eventually succeed.

Some of you might as well be Muslims, for all the arbitrariness and cruelty and meanness that you ascribe to God, paying little or no attention to His description of Himself on the pages of this precious Book.

I want you to understand that though you are lost, though you are dead in trespasses and sins, though you are undone, you simply *must* have some measure of hope that if you will strive you may be the object of God's mercy and be saved. Remember, God describes Himself as a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. And this does not in any way conflict with salvation by grace through faith.

Perhaps you've prayed the sinner's prayer. It didn't work, did it? You may even have asked Jesus into your heart. That didn't work either, did it? So, here you sit, lost and probably discouraged by the fact that the Word of God doesn't stir you, doesn't move you, and your heart is not broken over your sin.

The problem is that you've committed so much sin, your heart is so hard, your conscience is so seared, that you are now almost unfeeling and insensitive. All the more reason for you to commit yourself to striving to enter in at the strait gate, determining to diligently seek until you find Christ.

Striving is the means God has ordained to prepare your sinful heart to simply come to Christ. Not that Jesus Christ is not accessible. Not that anyone who won't simply come to Him won't be received by Him. To address the matter from the human side only, the problem is that you will not come to Christ unless your heart is especially prepared by striving and diligently seeking.

Do you want the Holy Spirit to succeed in convicting you of your sins? Then strive. And does not Scripture hold out some encouragement for the person who strives, for the person who diligently seeks? Sure it does.

I want you to strive to enter in at the strait gate, not to make you jump through hoops, but to see you saved. I want you to diligently seek, not to expend energy unnecessarily or break your heart needlessly, but to see you converted.

Because, with the hardness of your own heart, the seared condition of your own conscience, the dullness of your own mind to spiritual things, your only hope of ever coming to Christ is if you will commit yourself to striving to enter in at the strait gate, no matter the cost, no matter the effort, no matter the exertion.

Begin to strive now. Diligently seek now. "But I don't much feel like it now." Of course, not. Your heart is too cold. Your conscience is too calloused. You've sinned so much that it's made you insensitive. But if you do what God's Word says, the effects of sin will be reversed somewhat, and your heart will be prepared to believe in righteousness.

Proverbs 16.3 reads, "Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established." Begin to strive, like you're supposed to, and let God take care of the rest. Begin to strive, and perhaps you will someday be one of God's trophies of grace.