

*August 21, 2016*

*St. Luke 13:22-30: “The Narrow Door”*

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Years ago, before Korea was divided, a theological professor from Yale visited a mission in north Korea. He wanted to preach in a country church, so the mission sent him with a missionary interpreter to a rural Korean village. The professor began his sermon, "All thought is divided into two categories, the concrete and the abstract."

The Korean interpreter looked at the tiny congregation sitting with eager attention on the floor of the little church—toothless grandmothers, barefoot schoolboys—and made a quick decision. "Dear friends," he translated, "I have come all the way from America to tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ." From that point on, the sermon was firmly in the interpreter's hands (Samuel Moffet, *Christianity Today*, 11/14/94, p. 55).

Sometimes we tend to treat the things of the Bible in an academic way using a technical language that may cover a lot of ground using only a few words. There are times and places when this is necessary. Then there are times and places where we have to remember that we are dealing with souls who need to hear things in a way that involves them personally. That brings us to our Gospel lesson for this morning.

We find Jesus teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. His destiny is to die and rise there. As he makes his way through various towns and villages, someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" The question sounds rather academic, and appears to require a simple "yes" or "no." Jesus could have used academic shorthand: "Yes, according to the doctrine of Election." The answer would have been correct if the question happened to be only theoretical, but it would have done very little to deal with the person and what was obviously behind the question.

Jesus answers the question in a way that is personal. If the person was simply looking for a factual point of teaching, he got a lot more than perhaps he bargained for. The way in which Jesus answered the question forces the person to look inwardly. For Jesus, the question must be applied to the self rather than a search for a simple fact. The person asks, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" But Jesus answers, "What about you? Will you be saved? Are you among the few or many? Are you playing games with your salvation and in danger of ultimately losing it, or are you living in a state of repentance?" And so, the Lord answers with a warning that is intensely personal, and a powerful picture of the other side of the grave.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door," Jesus says, "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. . ." Our Lord and Savior will not let the questioner examine other people without examining himself. That is why he says "Strive - (you asking the question) Strive to enter through the narrow door." There are two thoughts that we must understand well in order to benefit from the text. We need to understand what Jesus means when he is talking about "the narrow door." Also, we need to understand what Jesus means when he says "strive to enter."

First, with regard to the meaning of the narrow door, R. C. H. Lenski in *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* gives us a wonderful picture:

The kingdom is conceived as a great house, entrance to which is obtained through a door, and this door is narrow. Our effort is not to push open the door; it is open to begin with, but is shut and locked after a time. So we are to let nothing deter us from entering while it is open. It is readily seen why Jesus pictures the door as being narrow; this portrays . . . repentance by which we enter Christ's kingdom.

Repentance is the work of God in the human heart. Repentance consists of two parts. The first part is terror smiting the conscience with a knowledge of sin, and the other is to believe that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. Amendment of life and the forsaking of sin should then follow. These are understood as the fruits of repentance, as John the Baptist teaches in Matthew 3:8.

Now, please keep in mind that the command to "strive" does not mean that one saves himself by his own power and strength. It does not mean in any way that we are saved by our good works. Again, repentance is the work of God in the human heart. As it says in the Gospel of John, "Then they said to him, 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:28-29).'" In his commentary on *Luke*, Dr. Arthur A. Just remarks:

The struggle [striving] is produced when the Word of God - such as the teaching of Jesus here - calls one to repent and trust in Christ, but the sinful human nature wars against God's Word. The struggle is resolved as the old Adam is put to death by the Law and the person of faith is raised to new life with Christ by the power of the Gospel. St. Paul offers a window into this inner struggle and how it is resolved in Rom 7:7-8:1-11, with a concise summary in Rom 8:13. *This ongoing, lifelong struggle characterizes the lives of all who are baptized into Christ (Rom 6:1-11).*

The Greek word for "strive" or "struggle" is "agonizomai." I place it in front of you because it should sound familiar. It is the word from which we get our English word "agonize." The word was commonly used by the Greeks to describe athletic contests. Athletes "agonizomai" in order to win. They exert enormous effort all the time. Jesus is warning us to agonize in order to enter through the narrow door.

Because our sinful human nature wars against God's Word, the sinful nature must die and a new person must rise. This is agony, for in dying and rising with Jesus, sin becomes utterly sinful and we die to it and give up our desires for it. We also rise to a new life, and for now we live in an old messed up world that would bring us back to sin, unbelief, and the devil. Consequently, we are always agonizing in daily repentance, for we are constantly dying and rising with our Lord and Savior to overcome sin, unbelief, and the devil. The Christian life is lived in law and gospel, dying and rising in Baptism, living Baptism in confession and absolution, and receiving the body and blood of the one who died that we might live.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is asking us: "What about you? Will you be saved? Are you among the few or many? Are you playing games with your salvation and in danger of ultimately losing it, or are you living in a state of repentance - agonizing against the forces that are against you - the sinful flesh, the

unbelief, and the devil?" The constant danger is that we are allowing sin to have dominion over us, and that we are no longer living in repentant agonizing. It has become a common thought among those who claim Christ: "I know what I want to do, and I'm going to do it. I will not listen to the Holy Spirit in the Bible telling me otherwise. I want to make my own decisions and be happy." There is no agonizing in a statement like this. Our Gospel lesson says:

Strive to enter through the narrow door. 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!" 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 13:24-28).

The words now pretty much stand on their own don't they? Jesus is the narrow door. He is open. To enter through him is to die and rise with him, and to live that death and resurrection throughout your earthly life. And it involves agony until the last day.

If any one among us has fallen into malicious, unrepentant sinning against God and still eats and drinks in his presence, let him repent. As Peter says, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago (Acts 3:19-21)." Agonize to enter through the narrow door! And may all of us be the people who will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at the table in the kingdom of God!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott