

# Enter through the narrow door

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 13 and verse 22 to 30. Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.
- Someone asked him, Lord, are only a few people going to be saved? He said to them, Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.
- Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, Sir, open the door for us.
- But he will answer, I don't know you or where you come from. Then you will say, We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.
- But he will reply, I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers. There will be weeping there and gnashing of teeth.
- [ 1 : 1 7 ]     When you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.
- Indeed, there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last. So, I wonder how much of an analytical or abstract thinker you would say you are.
- Maybe you like to take on a knotty logic puzzle and kind of work through the different facets and implications of it. Maybe when you're faced with an ethical question, maybe for you, it's a delight to work out all the possibilities and think through the different lines of questioning.
- This is supposed to be one of the major aims of our education system, isn't it? To teach people to think, to teach critical analysis and so on.
- There's a reason why the late night university dorm room discussions are putting the world to rights. There's a reason why that's a well-worn stereotype, isn't there?
- [ 2 : 3 8 ]     And this kind of analytical thinking, of considering the problem, this kind of analysis is certainly a virtue in many ways, isn't it? But I guess there's a question as to whether that is always true, whether it is an unqualified virtue.
- And I suggest that our passage this morning actually prompts us to consider that question as to what, if any, qualifications we put on that kind of analysis.
- Here's the situation. Jesus' journey is continuing. Jesus is walking along the road with his disciples. He went through the towns and villages teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.
- And perhaps spurred by something Jesus has taught, or maybe just from the kind of religious and philosophical questions that are kind of in the air at the time. From that background, somebody asked him, Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?
- There's not an immediate link to the preceding section. Clearly, this is a different occasion to what we were thinking about a couple of weeks ago. Though perhaps Luke compiles this side by side with the account of the parables of the kingdom.

[ 3 : 54 ] Perhaps he puts these side by side because of a common interest in the future, in the coming kingdom of God. So as we consider this question for ourselves this morning, as we hear this question, are only a few people going to be saved?

Well, as we see how Jesus responds to that, we see three significant changes. There is a change of subject, a change of focus, and a change of expectations.

So, first up, the change of subject. And that text is going to stop bashing me in the head now, so that's good. First up, the change of subject.

Did you notice, as Sarah was reading that for us earlier, did you notice the disconnect in these first few verses between the question and the answer? Question, are only a few people going to be saved?

Answer, make every effort to enter through the narrow door. I mean, the answer is not unrelated to the question, and there is a hint at an indirect answer.

[ 5 : 02 ] Many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Cautiously, I suggest that implies the answer to the question is, yes, only a few. Many will try, suggests that those who succeed are only a few.

But Jesus doesn't let this discussion be that kind of theoretical whataboutery. This isn't that kind of abstract university flat discussion, is it?

Jesus doesn't leave this question out there at a few people or many people. No, Jesus makes the questioner himself at the subject of discussion.

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door. Jesus says to this man, your first concern isn't whether there will be many or few saved.

Your first concern is, will you be one of them? And he says that doesn't depend on whether or not there's space for you, whether you're one of the select few.

[ 6 : 01 ] No, that depends on your own behavior. It depends what you do. Make every effort to enter through the narrow door. Make every effort.

Folks, this isn't a casual thing, is it? Make every effort. It's not something that you kind of drift into. You must make every effort.

You must strive. The verb here in Greek, this is the one we get agonized from. There's a degree of energy, effort, desire, even pain involved in this process.

Friends, if you are tempted, if you're tempted to think that you will be saved, that you will enter the kingdom of God by default on cruise control, friends, I must warn you, that is most certainly not the case.

If you're minded that having been baptized as a baby, well, therefore, all is well. If that's your thinking, I suggest you are not making every effort to enter.

[ 7 : 02 ] If you think that because you one day many years ago decided to follow Jesus, but there's no evidence of it in your daily life beyond the kind of formulaic attendance that church functions nowadays, that attendance still in your pajamas, and just about rubbing the sleep from your eyes in time for the benediction, folks, if you think that decision long ago is what it looks like to strive to enter through the narrow door, then I suggest you have not understood.

If there's no evidence that the fruit of the Spirit is growing in your life, then I suggest your intellectual assent to the propositional truths of the faith does not constitute having entered through the narrow door.

Where is the agonizing over sin? Where is the straining to leave behind that which is incompatible with your faith and to strive for what lies ahead?

Where is it in your life? I don't mean to say that human achievement merits entrance into the kingdom. No, the question is one of attitude. Look down at verse 25.

Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, Sir, open the door for us. But he will answer, I don't know you or where you came from. And you will say, we ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets.

[ 8 : 26 ] But he will reply, I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers. These ones who are excluded, these people left outside the door, they're protesting, aren't they?

We ate and drank with you. You taught in our streets. And Jesus says, I don't know you. Now, folks, this is not, this is not by any means an exclusion of any genuine seeker.

No, this is a rejection of the dilettante, a rejection of the one who sits on the edges, who enjoys kind of the experience of being around Jesus or around his people, but who never actually commits, never actually listens.

He taught in their streets, but did they listen to his teaching? Did they obey his teaching? Did they strive to enter through the narrow door? Well, clearly these ones did not.

They ate with him, and yet they never came to know him. He remained kind of out there as an abstract, idle curiosity. Never did they close with Christ, as the Puritan writers were fond of putting it.

[ 9 : 36 ] If watching The Apprentice has taught me anything, it's that you have to actually close the deal. You have to shake hands. You can negotiate as well as you like, but if you don't actually come to terms, if you don't close the deal, you have achieved nothing at all.

Friends, it does you no good to just sit on your sofa listening to me tell you about Jesus? You must know him. Some of you, some of you have been, some of you have been coming to Covenant Church for many years.

Some of you have been going to church since you were born, and maybe now later on in life, but you're still not quite actually signing on the dotted line. You've never closed the deal.

You go to Covenant Church, but you're not a member of this church or of any church. And maybe you're not a member of Christ's church either. The Christian faith is not an intellectual curiosity.

Don't sit there asking idle questions of philosophical speculation about angels dancing on pins and will only a few be saved, and so on and so forth. Friends, you must close with Christ.

[ 10 : 53 ] There's a change of subject in these verses. Jesus says it's about you. There's also here a change of focus. If you like, the focus of the question is on the number who will be saved, and the focus of the answer is more on the timing of salvation.

It's there in the first part of the response in verse 24. The contrast between the present tense command, make every effort, versus the future when many will try and not be able to enter.

And it comes clearer still in verse 25. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, Sir, open the door for us. But he will answer, I don't know you or where you came from.

There is going to be a day when it will be too late. Don't worry about how many people will make it inside. Worry whether you will get there in time.

When you head out to the Western Isles on the ferry, there's often just one sailing a day to most of the islands. And if you're going for that ferry, you don't think, well, I'll time it so I arrive five minutes before it sails.

[ 12 : 06 ] No, you check and you double check the time and how long in advance of that time you're supposed to check in. And you look up the traffic conditions and then you look them up again tomorrow. And you compare how long three different online maps say it's going to take you.

And then you double the worst of those three and then you add half an hour for good measure. You don't want to miss that boat. There's only one. So you make sure you leave in plenty of time.

Friends, why do so many people do the exact opposite when it comes to Jesus? Why do we put it off and say, I'll worry about following Jesus when I get old. I'll think about all that if I get ill.

Friends, I tell you the consequences of missing out are a whole lot more serious than 24 hours in Obam waiting for the next ferry. Jesus says, verse 28, there will be weeping there and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God.

But you yourself are thrown out. Why would you run the risk of missing the boat? Of weeping and gnashing of teeth? You don't know when the boat is going to sail.

[ 13 : 11 ] So get on it now. That's Jesus' advice in these verses, isn't it? Make every effort. Present tense command. Right now. Make every effort.

Determine that you will be aboard. Jesus came to earth that first Christmas and he declared, the narrow door stands open. Come on in. This Advent season, we remember Jesus' birth.

We remember him coming to make this way for salvation. And we remember also that another day is coming. A day when he will come to judge the living and the dead.

We look ahead to the day when that door is going to close once and for all. Children, teenagers, you can do this now.

Today. It doesn't have to wait until you're older. No, Jesus. Enter through the narrow door. Come and take your place among those from east and west and north and south.

[ 14 : 10 ] Verse 29. Come and take your place at the feast in the kingdom of God. Grownups, that goes for you too. This is not something to put on the 2021 to-do list.

Today. Jesus' answer changes the subject from an abstract discussion to the subject being you and me.

And Jesus' answer changes the focus from the number to the time. Then third, this answer requires a change of expectations.

We've touched already on this expectation that having eaten and drunk with Jesus, having listened to him teaching, that this is going to justify admission to the feast.

Jesus says an emphatic no to that expectation. And we see another expectation confounded in the closing couple of verses. There will be weeping there and gnashing of teeth.

[ 15 : 12 ] When you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

Indeed, there are those who are last, who will be first, and first, who will be last. See, folks, the expectation.

The expectation for Jesus' Jewish audience, the expectation is they get the front row seats at the banquet. In fact, not just the front row seats, it's really the only seats at the banquet.

They're God's chosen people. They're the ones who he loves. And the people of the other nations, well, they'll be subject to judgment. And they, the Jews, will know God's blessing.

Psalm 23, verse 5. See, the Jewish man reads himself into this psalm in the place of David here, as the one for whom the table is prepared, as the one for whom the feast is set, as the one over whom the anointing oil is poured.

[ 16 : 37 ] And therefore, he reads the people from other lands as the enemies, as the ones who, being vanquished foes, have to look on in dismay as God's friends feast.

That's the significance here of in the presence of my enemies. That they sit there, the enemies, they sit in the dust, subjugated, conquered. They suffer as God's beloved feasts.

They're the vanquished foe. And that's what's happening here in Luke, isn't it? God's friends are at the table having a party, and God's enemies are outside knocking, pleading, weeping, gnashing their teeth.

That's what Psalm 23 looked forward to. And yet, here in Luke 13, Jesus completely subverts their expectations, doesn't he?

Because the caste has changed. Instead of the Jewish crowd being those on the inside, and all the nations go without, instead, instead the you, instead Jesus' Jewish audience, they are the ones who are thrown out.

[ 17 : 50 ] And the people come from the four corners of the globe to take their place at the feast. The nations are gathered in. Those whom Jesus' audience thought were God's enemies are here sat at the table.

Now, folks, we don't have that same kind of ethnic identity. We don't, I imagine, feel offended by the idea of non-Jews seated at God's banquet.

Okay? But we still have to ask whether we have similar expectations that are in danger of being confounded, that need to be corrected by passages like this one.

We need to ask whether we are subconsciously assuming that heaven is going to be full of people like ourselves, just like those Jews did.

American pastor David Cassidy, he points out that the average Christian in the world is not male, but female. Not white, but brown or black. Third world, not first world, and far more Pentecostal than Presbyterian.

[ 18 : 59 ] The average Christian in the world today is a 22-year-old brown female. Makes you think, doesn't it?

And on one level, I suppose, you know, provided you're not offended by the idea of who else is going to be in heaven, well, what difference does it make to us who the average Christian is?

The question is, am I one or not? But if we bring this question, this analysis, a little bit less global and a little bit closer to home, then I think it starts to become a little more significant in terms of our own thought processes.

Because then we have to ask, well, who do we, who do we even subconsciously, who do we assume is going to be on the outside while we assume we are on the inside?

Who do we not even speak to about Jesus because their face doesn't quite seem to fit? Who do we dismiss from consideration because they're not like us?

[ 20 : 04 ] Which of the barriers of colour and class and language and whatever and whatever and whatever, which of these barriers do we need to demolish in our own minds? Because the people are coming from north and south and east and west.

See, there's a danger that we expect people to be on the outside who actually will be on the inside. And there's a danger of the opposite, isn't there?

There's a danger that, like that complacent Jewish audience, there's a danger that we assume that we will be within and may end up without.

Because we may be putting our confidence in the wrong place, we may be depending on the sort of passing acquaintance with Jesus that characterise much of his audience in these verses and whom he ultimately condemns in verse 27.

I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers. If we think we're Christian because we're British, well, we have a serious problem.

[ 21 : 14 ] If we think we know Jesus because we've heard people talking about him, then we have a serious problem. If we think that we have a place at his feast because our parents always brought us to church, we need to be worried.

There are those who are last who will be first and first who will be last. Friends, take heed of the three big changes, the three reversals in these verses.

Don't waste your time on idle speculations. The chief subject for your consideration is your own salvation. Don't think the question is how many will be saved.

Is there space to get in? No, instead ask, will you be wise enough to come in time? And don't think, don't expect that you have a seat at the table by virtue of anything, but that you have made every effort to come in through the narrow door, that you have closed with Jesus, that you have come to the one who says, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, show us your ways.

[ 22 : 46 ] Grant that we might not think in the abstract, but think about your call on our lives. Lord, may we, as those who wish to know you, may we be those who commit to that, who make the effort to do that, who don't dabble in Christianity, but who devote ourselves wholeheartedly to your service.

Lord, may we be those who make every effort to enter through the narrow door, who will be delighted to see the crowd from every tribe and tongue and nation around us as we sit and we feast at your table.

Amen.