

Luke 13:22-35

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everybody. My name is Peter Almo. I'm very happy to be here tonight with you.

Let's start by praying. Lord, thank you for this opportunity that we have here tonight, the freedom that we have in this country, Lord, to come and to worship you and to praise you and to hear your word preached.

Please be with me tonight, Father, as we look at your word. Let it be mightily applied to the hearts that are here, that it would enliven them and encourage them to live a life devoted to you, Lord, in service of you.

And I'd like to echo the prayer we heard earlier of those horrific events that happened last night. Lord, please be with the people, victims, their families. I pray these things in Jesus' name. So the other day, I was walking through part of the Yale campus, and I was really struck by the sheer beauty of the university.

McNosey, we were talking about, we were near there together. And I must admit, as an adolescent, I used to imagine that, you know, perhaps I would end up at a place like that, walking those hallowed ivy halls of one of those great bastions of thinking as a future master of the universe.

[1 : 24] I know that Greg can relate to that and Matt. But alas, as youthful exuberance and passion for recreation left little of the sober discipline required to ascend the ivory tower, perhaps I saved myself from a string of demoralizing defeats.

It is common knowledge that Yale, like other Ivy League schools, has an incredibly selective process, resulting in a staggeringly low acceptance rate. In 2014, hovering just above 6%. For you English majors like me, not very good at math, that means Yale rejected roughly 94% of their applicant pool. The interesting facts among that statistic lie not in the 6% accepted. Now, there is a story to tell there, but rather in the 94% rejected, and more specifically, the quality, the staggering quality of that 94% rejected.

And by the way, that year, Yale had 31,000 applicants. So that 94% represents roughly 29,000 people. Half of those people had near or perfect GPAs, standardized test scores, recommendations, extracurriculars, you name it.

[2 : 45] And it still wasn't enough. In fact, one former Yale admissions officer wrote, In the last 15 to 20 years, Yale's applicant pool has gone from hyper-competitive to a Darwinian dystopia so cutthroat, you'd feel guilty even simulating it on a computer, just in case the simulations had emotions.

For the 6% accepted, their stories are too varied and impressive to fully enumerate here. 17-year-old published poets, bassoon prodigies, young Latina from the South Bronx who founded her own nonprofit, bringing minorities together.

Indeed, it was one admissions counselor who mused that the Yale acceptance letter was far more impressive than the diploma. A curious proposition to consider as I approached the destination on my walk that day, our very own Trinity Baptist Church.

I couldn't escape the irony of a church like ours lying on the doorstep of an institution like that. I imagine our Yale members suffer from some sort of whiplash when you consider the stark contrast between Yale's acceptance rate and our own.

Just consider the invitation of the evangelical church today. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[4 : 12] Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3. Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe, for there is no distinction.

Romans 3. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2. The greatest acceptance letter in the history of the universe is acceptance into the kingdom of heaven, an acceptance purchased with a simple, childlike faith in Jesus the Messiah, that we should stand here in this place, children of an adoption into God's own family, co-heirs and co-rulers with Christ, while mere steps away, men and women toil for an acceptance they may well have rightly earned, but will never receive, is an irony worthy of Aristotle.

And it is that stark dichotomy that brings us square with our sermon text this evening, which is Luke chapter 13, verses 22 to 35. You can read along with me.

Luke chapter 13, starting in verse 22. And he went through the cities and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. Then one said to him, Lord, are there few who are saved?

[5 : 51] And he said to them, Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open for us.

And he will answer and say to you, I do not know you, where you are 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 you, where you are from. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity. 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 and yourselves thrust out.

They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And indeed, there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last.

On that very day, some Pharisees came, saying to him, Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill you. And he said to them, Go tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.

[7 : 07] Nevertheless, I must journey today, tomorrow, and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem. Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her.

How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. But you were not willing. See, your house is left to you desolate.

And assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see me until the time comes when you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. My sermon tonight is going to explore three points.

First, is the gate narrow? And how hard do we need to strive? Second, what are the consequences for not striving for the narrow door?

And third, what is promised to those who persevere? Let's start by looking again at the beginning of verse 23. Lord, are there few who are saved?

[8 : 13] It almost sounds like a weary Yale applicant pleading with her admissions based better. How should one answer such a question? How could I answer that question tonight? Should I say, yes, of course, most will be saved.

God is love after all. Just look at John 3.16 or consider 2 Peter 3.9. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

That sounds pretty darn good. I'd probably get great focus group feedback on that approach. Or, I could give the good reformed answer.

God's elect was established before creation through the grace of the Father. Are there few who are saved? Well, that's a silly question. The exact perfect number of people will be saved. God's foreknown elect.

You should know that that's secretly the answer that I like, but it tends to rub people the wrong way. So no, I think for tonight and for every night, we should let Jesus himself answer the question by looking at his response in the next verse of our sermon text, verse 24.

[9 : 23] Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. Those are sobering words.

But what do we make of it? It just seems incongruous with our current strand and brand of evangelicalism, doesn't it? It kind of makes heaven seem like Yale, making God, I guess, the Yale

admissions board, which is just a terrifying thought.

Especially because I think we've all grown comfortable with that tried and true Southern Baptist altar call model. Now, I know that we would never perform such a thing here at Trinity, but all the same, there is something comforting about the thought of Michelle firing up the electric organ while Nick soothingly invites any and all to come and make a simple profession of faith and enter the glorious ranks of God's redeemed.

Well, which is it? Is salvation as hard as getting accepted to Yale with few making it or as easy as walking the aisle and praying the prayer with multitudes joining the heavenly throng?

I think one simple truth that I can bumble my way through tonight is that salvation is as simple as walking the aisle and professing faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. And in that sense, certainly many could receive it.

[10:44] But God's word seems to undeniably suggest that we would do well to strive to enter as if we were trying to get into Yale.

And in that sense, less than we would hope will be truly called to the heavenly path. Why do I claim that scripture seems clear about that? Well, look again at Jesus' admonishment in verse 24.

Strive for the narrowed door. That word strive, when translated from the Greek, the Greek word being agonizeste, which means to engage in athletic contest or martial combat, literally hand-to-hand deadly combat.

Jesus doesn't simply implore his listeners to try a little bit harder. Give it a real go. The gravity of his word choice is severe.

Strive with all your might. Let's consider a few other encouragements found throughout scripture, not here in verse 23. They all reinforce that point.

[11:49] You don't have to turn to these. Just listen. I'll read through them myself. James 2, 17. So also by faith itself, if it does not have works, it is dead.

1 Peter 1, 6 and 7. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith, which is more precious than gold, though it perishes if tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5, 48. Not difficult to follow. You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. Seems straightforward to me. It's pretty simple. Colossians 3, 23 and 24.

Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. Titus 2, 14.

Who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Philippians 1, 27 and 28.

[13:01] Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction but of your salvation and that from God. Need I go on? Strive for the narrow door.

Work heartily. Your faith, which is more precious than gold, is tested with fire. Be zealous for good works. Be perfect, proclaims the gospel of Matthew.

Be perfect. I hear Yale calling. So is the gate narrow? Yes, it is. Or the door, rather. Must you strive to enter through the narrow door?

Yes, you have to, with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind if you were to follow Jesus tonight. And striving for the narrow door is part of that. And now it's time to ask ourselves, well, what does that look like today?

[14:07] How are we to strive? And I think that this is practical. And the really good thing is, is that we all are really bad at these things. So you only can go up from here.

Pray more. How's everyone's prayer life tonight? Seek quiet time with the Lord regularly. Just commit to daily prayer.

Even if it's only five minutes a day. Read your Bible. How about your devotions? You want to draw nearer to God? Pray to Him and be in His word regularly.

Commit to a personal devotion. And strive to commit to a second devotion. With a loved one, or with a friend, a co-worker. Be in God's word. You could start tithing. It's a touchy subject, I know.

Don't concern yourself with percentages, 10%, 20%. At its heart, tithing is simply giving back to the Lord sacrificially. If you're only giving the comfortable amount, or nothing at all, commit to giving just a little more.

[15:11] Strive to sacrifice for the Lord in your giving. You could join a small group if you haven't already. Start fellowshiping with brothers and sisters, edifying the body. The beautiful thing about a small group is that it kills lots of birds with one stone.

You'll regularly have time of looking at the word. You'll have a time of prayer, and a time of encouragement and fellowship. Give of your time. Become a servant.

New Haven is ripe with opportunity to serve others. There are myriad outreach and charitable organizations. Start right here, even. Get with one of the elders. Ask where you can be involved and be of service.

Jesus came to be a servant. If we are to follow and love him, we must strive to be servants as well. Finally, confess your sins.

This is something too few of us are comfortable with. I'm not comfortable with this. Perhaps it's too Catholic, or it's too Puritan. Maybe it's just too biblical for us to be comfortable with it.

[16:12] Confess your sins to God first and foremost, but don't hesitate to confess them to one another, whether it be a loved one, a parent, an accountability partner, one of the elders. Striving for the narrow door must include confronting our own sin, seeking forgiveness for it, and growing.

Friends, when Jesus tells us to strive for the narrow door, this is what that looks like. Is the door narrow? Yes, it is. Because the maw of sin is eternally wide.

Must we strive? We must. And now let's consider our second point. What happens when we don't strive for the narrow door?

Now the answer is simple. Hell. Dun, dun, dun. End of point. Moving on. I know we hate this. The politically correct phrase, of course, is eternal separation from God.

Now I can assure you that that is no less harrowing than just hell. Look back at our sermon text, if you will, directly after Jesus' exhortation in verse 23 to strive for the narrow door.

[17:20] This is verse 24. Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open for us, and he will answer and say to you, I do not know where you are 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 you, where you are from. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity. 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 and yourselves thrust out.

Now one of the harder aspects of interpreting Jesus' words, specifically in the Gospels, is trying to figure out, is he speaking to the time and people immediately surrounding him?

Or does his prophetic sayings take on what we call an eschatological dynamic, which simply means a looking forward to future end events?

Is it to the people that he's talking to right then and there? Is it about the future? It's a very hard thing to figure out. But it's almost always safe to assume that both things are happening simultaneously.

[18:39] And I don't think our sermon text tonight is an exception. Remember that part of Jesus' audience in our sermon text are Pharisees. In fact, according to all four canonical Gospels, the Pharisees appear to be Jesus' most regular audience, apart from his followers, of course.

When once the master of the house has risen up and shut the door, well, who is the master? Certainly God is. What is the house? Well, the house is Israel.

In the immediate first century context, the Israel to which Jesus is now come and is ministering to. But the warning can be applied to all people for all time. Who are these previous members of the house now found on the outside?

Well, certainly the Pharisees, for one. They saw themselves as the truest devotees to Yahweh and to the Torah. The people of the land, which are your average Israelite, saw them as the pulse of Israelite religious life.

But don't be deceived into assuming that we cannot play the part of the Pharisee. For that is the very real threat we face today. People who speak the right words and attend the right gatherings, but who are, as Jesus proclaimed, whitewashed tombs.

[19 : 54] Guard yourselves tonight from hypocrisy. Guard yourselves from hardness of heart. Strive for the narrow door. Look at verse 27.

All you workers of iniquity. This begins that eschatological, the clearly eschatological part of this text. 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 and yourselves thrust out.

Now, lots of preachers consider it a minefield speaking about hell. But Jesus is certainly invoking hell when he references weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And the saddest part of this apprehension that I think we have sometimes is that Jesus, more than anyone, spoke of hell. Of the realities of hell. The reality of eternal separation from the Lord.

Now, if we aren't striving to emulate Jesus, if I don't come over here tonight and strive to emulate Jesus, well then who am I emulating? Salvation comes through faith and faith alone.

[21 : 01] But the only response to salvation, to putting off the old man and putting on the new, to discarding old wineskins for clean new ones, according to Paul, John, Peter, and Jesus, our response to that salvation is an earnest and persevering, striving for the narrow door, striving to increase in both faith and works.

And it is wholly appropriate for me and for you, within self-examination, when faced with a self that has professed faith, but has not put off the old man, is hardened of heart, and will not, cannot strive for the narrow door, to question that faith that we thought we had in the first place.

Because the consequence is not a slap on the wrist. The consequence is darkness, and it's a darkness without end. Be convicted about that. Be convicted about your lack of faith tonight.

Be convicted about your hardness of heart. Be convicted about your abysmal prayer life, your abysmal devotional life. Be sorrowful about your lack of good works, of your apprehension at giving more during the offering, at your stamina and resoluteness for concocting reason after reason for not serving.

Weep and cry out for your inability to strive for the narrow door. If the consequence for not striving for the narrow door isn't hell, well, what in the world are we striving against?

[22 : 33] You know, Paul famously said, 1 Corinthians, if Jesus has not been resurrected, then our faith is in vain, and we are of all men most pitied. Well, I say to you tonight, if there is no weeping and gnashing of teeth, then your striving is also in vain.

What is the consequence tonight for not striving for the narrow door? Eternal separation from the Father. Hell. Strive for that narrow door. And now that we've delved deeply into that unsavory subject, I think that it's appropriate that we look upward and enthusiastically toward that third and final point.

What is promised to those who persevere? What is promised to those who strive for the narrow door? Start in verse 29, please. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God.

And indeed, there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last. On that very day, some Pharisees came, saying to him, Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill you.

And he said to them, Go tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. By verse 29, Jesus is purely speaking now to what is going to happen.

[23 : 55] He's looking to the future. That they will come from all corners of the earth to sit and eat in the kingdom of God. That's the church.

That's all of us. We're made up from all nations. And we're going to recline at the feast of the Lamb, at the consummation of Jesus' return. We're looking forward to when Jesus' return.

And Jesus is talking about that here. It's a fully forward-looking prophecy. And it's a prophecy buttressed by both ends of redemptive history.

First, Abraham has promised that through his seed, Jesus, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. That's the east, the west, the north, and the south. Now, I will ask you to turn one time to a different verse here.

This is Revelation chapter 19. This is the other end of that redemptive history. Revelation chapter 19, verses 6 through 9.

[24 : 57] When I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exalt and give Him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.

It was granted her, and this is where we should be focusing, it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure. For the fine linen is what?

It's the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, Write this, Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. And He said to me, These are the true words of God, The righteous deeds of the saints.

The righteous deeds of the saints, the striving for the narrow door of the saints, is the garment adorning the bride of Christ. Well, that's who we are, friends.

[25 : 58] We are the bride of Christ. What is promised to those who persevere? It's to sit at the marriage supper of the Lamb, in the new heavens and the new earth, adorned with fine linen, adorned with our striving for the narrow door, as the bride of Christ, to be made one with Christ forever.

Can there be anything more glorious? And this feast will represent, no, it will be, not just represent, a radical unbraiding of the earthly norms, which are the shackles of sin.

Look at Jesus' words. This is back in Luke 13, our sermon text. Verse 30. Indeed, the last will be first, and the first will be last.

You know, we're told all the time to strive for things, and it's not the narrow door. We're told to strive for an end to war, an end to hunger, an end to suffering, strive to overcome racism, strive for social justice, strive to make the world a better place.

In fact, it's Yale and similar institutions who are leading the call for these things. But friends, can we not see the truth together tonight? Strive for the narrow door, strive for the righteousness we will wear like fine linen, because by doing so, we will be present at the end of war, the end of hunger, the end of suffering, the end of racism, perfect justice, where the last will be first, and the first will be last.

[27 : 42] The new heavens and the new earth, the marriage supper of the Lamb, why do we persevere? Why do we strive for the narrow door for these things? And if you still are holding out doubt, if you still feel like, well, you know, maybe, I just don't want to strive for that narrow door.

I'm comfortable with where I'm at. Look with me at Jesus' words in verse 32. When told Herod is seeking to kill him, he said to them, Go tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.

None of Jesus' words are by accident. Our section starts with somebody saying, Will many be saved? It ends with Jesus, excuse me, Jesus making this reference. He doesn't just answer the original question, Will many be saved?

He doesn't answer it like a stoic with a philosophical exhortation, Work hard, try to be a good person. No. He implores you to strive for the narrow door.

He explains to you what's at stake when you don't. He paints for you a picture of what it will be like when you do. And finally, in verse 32, he guarantees that promise with the seal of his own blood.

[29 : 05] Behold, I cast out demons, I perform cures. He certainly could have added to that, I tame creation and feed the hungry. I perform wonders to show you what sin has done to my creation and what I plan to do about it.

I show you how things are supposed to be, and on the third day I shall be perfected. Like all biblical truths, if they aren't rooted firmly in the reality of the resurrection, then they're not a biblical truth.

And striving for the narrow door is no exception. Jesus is, of course, predicting here his passion and being raised to new and glorified life after his crucifixion, what Paul rightly calls our first fruits.

For God so loved the world that he would leave nothing to chance. He so loved the world that he would not leave his elect to languish and labor under the weight of their own sinful natures.

He so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to suffer and die and be raised to new life so that your striving for the narrow door cannot be in vain. It can't be in vain.

[30 : 12] It won't be in vain. And how do you know that? Well, you can find comfort in the words of the Apostle Paul when he's writing to his church that he founded in Ephesus, pleading with them to strive for the narrow door.

This is in Ephesians 2. You don't have to turn there. I'll read it. Ephesians 2, first verse. And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience,

among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved and raised up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

And this is what is so astounding to me tonight as I prepare for this sermon. Jesus is adamant. You need to strive for the narrow door.

[31 : 54] You need to have works. Faith on its own, without works, is a dead faith. But then here Paul assures us that even though he has told you you have a tough task ahead of you, strive for the narrow door, God even goes so far as to prepare that striving beforehand for you.

If you still lack sufficient encouragement to strive for the narrow door, I can think of no better truth than what we find here in Ephesians 2, verse 10. Created in Christ Jesus for good works.

Created in Christ Jesus to strive for the narrow door. If you believe in Jesus tonight, you know that you have now been created to strive for the narrow door. And God has prepared beforehand that process for you, that you should walk in them.

It confounds the mind. But it rouses the soul. Does God implore you to strive for the narrow door? Absolutely. And like a loving and merciful Father, He even prepares the path for us ahead of time. He tills the soil. He breaks the ice. He gets the lid on the pickle jar loose. God loves you so much. He's so invested in your sanctification and future union with Him that He will not see you fail.

[33 : 09] My yoke is easy and my burden is light. God is true to His word. God is true to you. Lord, we just want to come to you tonight and thank you for salvation.

Thank you for grace. Thank you for your Son who went to the cross. Thank you for all of the good works that you have prepared beforehand. You told us that we need to be perfect.

You told us that we needed to strive for the narrow door because many won't be saved. Lord, you told us that we would not be able to do it.

That we would fail in that endeavor. So what did you do? You made sure that we would be successful because you prepared those works beforehand for us. Please, Lord, help us to believe that tonight.

Help us to commit ourselves to you, to loving you, to serving you, to striving for the narrow door in the faith that you have prepared that process for us, that you are walking through that process with us, that you are perfecting us, and that what you set out to do is accomplished, that you do not fail when you set out to do something.

[34 : 27] And you have very much set out tonight to save us, to redeem us, and to see that we strive for the narrow door. Please, be with those that are here tonight.

Encourage them, raise them up, help them as we all seek to strive for the narrow door. And I pray these in Jesus' name. Amen.