

## Luke 13:22-30

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*He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. <sup>23</sup> And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, <sup>24</sup> "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup> 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.' <sup>26</sup> Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' <sup>27</sup> But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup> And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."*

Have you ever had trouble fitting through a doorway? I suspect you probably have at different times. Maybe you had a couple bags of groceries looped around both wrists, and getting across the threshold required some acrobatics. Perhaps you've tried to hurry to make it onto an elevator as the doors began to close. Or think of the last time you moved: did you have any trouble getting your bulkier items through the door? Your couches, the refrigerator, the washer and drier? Every time I've moved, it seems like inevitably at some point I'm going to have to break out a tape measurer to figure out if there's any way I can fit a large piece of furniture through the open door.

Well, in the section of Scripture we just read, Jesus says that the door to heaven is extremely narrow. He says that so each and every person will take the time to measure themselves while they're here on earth. Right now is the time for us to determine whether or not we're going to fit through. With that in mind, the theme we'll be considering today is:

### **"Will / Fit Through Heaven's Narrow Door?"**

- I. Strive with sanctimony, and you'll be sorry
- II. Strive with repentance, and you'll be saved

Some of the most frustrating interactions in life come when you say or do something with good intentions, but then your words or actions are misconstrued in some way. Maybe you offer to help someone with a task simply because you want to be helpful, but they misconstrue your offer as the assumption that they can't handle the task themselves. Maybe you just need some alone time to recharge and so want to go to the store by yourself, but then your spouse gets the feeling that you just want to escape from *them* for a while, and their feelings are hurt. Maybe a new baby is born, and you'd love to call and ask how things are going, but you also don't want to be a burden during a hectic time. But *then* your lack of a phone call could be misunderstood as you not caring about them.

Misinterpreted intentions. It sort of seems like that type of interaction is taking place in our text this morning. We have a man approaching Jesus with a seemingly important theological question: **"Lord, will those who are saved be few?"** An innocent enough question, but then Jesus responds rather harshly. In fact, He doesn't even actually answer the man's question, instead, Jesus responds, **"Strive to enter through the narrow door."**

Had Jesus, perhaps, misunderstood this man's intentions? The man could have had any *number* of motivations behind his line of questioning. Perhaps he was asking from a place of genuine evangelistic concern. Maybe it came from personal uncertainty about *his* soul's eternal future. Maybe he was in the midst of theological debate and wanted to appeal to an authority on the matter. Or perhaps he approached with just empty curiosity. Of course, as God, Jesus knew what this man's intentions were and knew this was not a valid question. If it were a valid question, Jesus would have answered with something like: "Yes, many," or perhaps, "No, few," or perhaps, "That's none of your business, follow Me." But Jesus does not answer the question that is asked, leaving us no doubt about the nature of the man's motives. But that leaves *us* with the difficulty, "What was wrong with the man's question?"

I think we can compare this question with another which we have heard being asked of Jesus, and that will help us find the problem behind it. Remember that rich young ruler who asked Jesus, "**Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**" (Luke 18:18) Of course, we know there was a big problem with that question too, namely, "**What must I do...**" That man was entering the discussion with the false notion that there was some good deed he could perform in order to force God's hand into giving him salvation. But the Bible makes it very clear, "**By works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight,**" (Romans 3:20)—in other words, there is nothing *you* can *do* to earn that status of being good and right before God. But for all the flaws in that rich young ruler's question, his thoughts were at least somewhat *directionally* correct. He *was* concerned about his soul's salvation, and he wanted to figure out how to be certain that he could be saved as well!

Could we say the same about the man in our text? Nowhere in this man's question is any hint of the thought, "Will I be saved?" And based on Jesus' response, we can determine that this thought *was* missing from the man's motives. He was curious, speculating on the eternal well-being of others, but in doing so, he's avoiding the uncomfortable questions about his own spiritual life. Maybe, he figured that he was a lock for heaven and that he didn't really need to look inwardly at all.

That type of mindset can easily set root in any Christian. To be concerned about others, to want to check-in with a fellow Christian after not seeing them in church for a while, I think many of us do that. And don't get me wrong, that's a very good thing, and I thank God for giving us this concern! But just as we are able to do with many good things, we can turn even this into something detrimental, when we're *always* focused on others. It's a tough balance to strike, because while it's a wonderful thing to look out for the souls of our Christian brothers and sisters, we could eventually stop looking at ourselves. Instead, we might subconsciously just start comparing ourselves to those people who haven't been in church, and then we might start feeling like our salvation is all but assured, after all, "I never miss church, I always give an offering, I go to Bible Class, and I never forget my prayers!" And then, we're just like this man, no longer wrestling with the question, "**Will I Fit Through Heaven's Narrow Door?**"

So, in responding, "**Strive to enter through the narrow door,**" Jesus is, in effect, telling the man, "Don't worry about how many other people will be there; worry about how *you're* going to fit through the door." After all, Jesus goes on, "**Many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.**" And who is Jesus referring to there? Is He talking about those good-for-nothing tax collectors, perhaps? The prostitutes? The openly shameful sinners? Not at all. The people Jesus was referring to

at the time were the Pharisees: a group of people who were *very* pious-looking, the good church-going people of the day. But they were also a group who were completely confident in their own “sanctimoniousness”—in other words, they thought they were morally superior to others *because* of the life they lived. And they were also a group of people who would be so surprised to be excluded from heaven on Judgment Day that they would ***“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!’”***

The door to heaven is narrow, as Jesus says, narrow enough that people who trust in themselves won't get through it. And that should make you stop and think about something. These were the fine, upstanding citizens who, outwardly at least, had not so much as a spot on their records. They went to church every Sabbath Day. They were not misers, but readily put in ten percent of their income in the collection plate each week. They never forgot their prayers. And yet, these same people, Jesus said, would not be able to squeeze through the door of heaven. **If a person were to strive for heaven with sanctimony in their hearts, they would end up sorry.**

That's because the door to heaven is narrow as God demands repentance. Which brings us back to the man's improper motives, the same downfall that many of us might have slipped into. In speculating about the salvation of others, we might be avoiding the uncomfortable questions about our own spiritual lives. When we look closely at ourselves, we don't like what we see, and it's painful to come to grips with just how much we've failed God, and so the easy thing is to avoid looking. And yet, we ought to take a good, hard look at ourselves with the painful recognition of our sin for what it is, because this is what Jesus tells us to do.

Jesus says, ***“Strive to enter through the narrow door.”*** And that's a strange instruction to our Lutheran mindset. “Strive, work to enter heaven? That's just not right!” Strive how, strive for what? The answer is the opposite of what we might naturally think. The world loves to promote striving, working hard. “Strive to be the best you can be.” “Scratch and claw your way to the top.” “Work harder than the person next to you, and you'll be noticed.”

But Jesus is really saying the opposite here. It's not “strive to be the best,” after all, He concludes our text saying, ***“Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”*** Jesus really means *strive* to be last, *strive* to be least, *strive* to be nothing. And this is properly described as “striving,” because it's hard work, it's the exact opposite of what we naturally want to do. We love getting credit for our good work, but to be last means to know that of myself I would *be* nothing, I could *do* nothing, and there is *nothing* about which to brag and no achievement about which to boast. For what do I have which God has not given to me? Striving to be last means that if you have any wisdom, or learning, or insight, or success, you know it says so little about you, and instead says everything about the God who gives it all *to* you.

Striving to be last, most of all, involves giving a good, long look at the question: ***“Will I Fit Through Heaven's Narrow Door?”*** To determine that, you must first break out the measuring tape and take a good look at yourself in view of God's commandments. And then you begin to understand something: on your own, you are *last* in God's book. Each of us has to admit, with the Apostle Paul, ***“I am the***

**chief of sinners!”** (1 Timothy 1:15) Because only you know what kind of sins you are guilty of; what skeletons are in your closet, what evil deeds lie in your past. Only I know what wicked thoughts have lingered on my mind and tempted my soul, thoughts unworthy of any Christian, not to mention a pastor. If we are at all honest in our self-assessment, we all must cry out with the Apostle Paul, **“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** (Romans 7:24-25) And then Paul’s answer is also our own answer: **“Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!”**

Strive to be last in *this* way, and let God make you first. How Jesus delights to speak along these terms. Think of how frequently we see this theme recurring in the Gospel of Luke: Mary rejoices that through the birth of her Savior-Son, God has pulled down the mighty from their thrones and filled those with low estate. (cf. Luke 1:48-50) Simeon, filled with the spirit, prophecies that Jesus is appointed for the falling and rising of many in Israel. (cf. Luke 2:34) Jesus reveals that whoever exalts himself before God will be humbled and whoever humbles himself—*God* will exalt. (cf. Matthew 23:12) So, likewise today, Jesus gives us the promise that those who **“are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”**

So, do you ever think of yourself as the *last*—the least likely person to get through the door of heaven? Then take heart, for through His Son Jesus Christ, God takes the last and makes them first. He says to you, **“Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.”** (Matthew 9:2) And why is that? Because of Jesus Christ. He was first in the Lord’s book, His beloved only-Son. He’s the only one who did live a perfect life, who could qualify as being suited for heaven because of the way He lived. And yet, Jesus—the *first*—made Himself *last*, by dying the cross in our place. He took the curse of our sin upon Himself and willingly came in dead last on Calvary, all in order to save us. Because of that sacrifice, God pronounces upon you His forgiveness. For Christ’s sake, He throws the door of heaven *wide open* to welcome you in.

So as we ask the question—**“Will I Fit Through Heaven’s Narrow Door?”**—how can we be certain of the answer? Simple. Just measure yourself according to the standards of God’s law; run through the Ten Commandments and see how your life stacks up. Then abandon any sanctimonious thoughts of deserving God’s favor, and instead repent. Cling only to the cross of Christ. And that’s all there is to it! For there’s one thing we can say with certainty: no one who repents of sins and trusts in Jesus for forgiveness can possibly fail to pass through the doors of heaven. May the Lord keep us steadfast in *that* blessed faith for the rest of our lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.