

Luke 13:12-20 "A Narrow Door Wide Open"

The Word of the Lord from Luke 13:14: Jesus said, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." This is the Word of the Lord.

Our text begins with the reminder that Jesus is journeying toward Jerusalem, and remember what that means. He's traveled many times before, but this journey began just after the Transfiguration, and the destination is the cross. He's not going in a straight line, but this journey is going to end on Calvary as He dies for the sins of the world. He's going to the cross and God's judgment to save all who will believe in Him.

And who will that be? Who will be saved? That's the question from someone along the way: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" It's a numbers sort of question, but Jesus doesn't respond with numbers or even a yes or no. Instead, He gives three warnings about the difficulty of salvation.

The first warning is this: the door to salvation is narrow, and it will be a struggle to get through.

The second warning is this: the door is going to shut. It won't be open forever. Sooner or later, the master of the house is going to rise up and shut the door, and then it will be too late. The time for salvation is limited. There is only so much time for the struggle before the door closes.

The third warning is this: plenty of people who think they are saved will be bitterly disappointed on the Last Day. They'll be shocked to find themselves on the outside of a closed door. They will say to Jesus, "We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets." But He will answer, "Depart from Me, all you workers of evil."

So there are the three warnings of the text: the door is narrow, and it's a struggle to get through; time is limited before the door is shut; and many who thought they were saved will find out they are not when it is too late.

Feeling nervous yet? If you hear this only by way of the Law, you'd better be nervous indeed. If salvation is a struggle and the door is narrow, how do you know when you have struggled enough to wriggle your way through? If time is limited, how do you know that you have enough time to strive and struggle and get through the door? And even if you strive and struggle with all your might, how can you be sure that you're saved and won't be cast into outer darkness for eternity? Oh, if you hear these warnings only according to the Law of God, you should be more than nervous. You ought to be terrified.

Yet many preachers will find this as a good way to preach this text. See, we're rather lazy by nature, and we tend to get rather relaxed with that full-blown Gospel message that Christ has already fully accomplished our salvation. If you want a congregation that's highly motivated to do good works, as a preacher you've got to keep them on their toes, constantly striving to do more in order to be sure they've done enough, lived enough of a Christian life. So if that was my aim, then that's how I'd preach this text to you: I'd say, "Look people, the greatest danger to your faith is complacency. Now that Jesus has died for you, salvation is still going to be a struggle. Frankly, the lives that you're living right now just aren't cutting it, and you'd better be working harder if you're going to get through that narrow door. Do more. Give more. Pray more. Serve more. Keep struggling. Keep striving, because the door is going to close." That's how you motivate people to act better—make sure that they're unsure of their salvation, that they've got to do more to be certain.

But that's a terrible sermon. In fact, that sermon is exactly what Jesus is warning against! The greatest danger to your faith here is not complacency. It's believing that your salvation comes about because of you, your striving and your struggle.

Good News in the Three Warnings

We need to look back and look at the context of Luke 13. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus has just healed a woman with a disabling spirit that has left her hunched over for 18 years—He's just demonstrated God's mercy and healing. But the ruler of the synagogue objects—he declares that the miracle is wrong because Jesus has done it on the Sabbath. He's worked a wonder on the Day of Rest, and thus He's broken the rules. There's the tension that pervades Luke 13 and all of Jesus' ministry: does salvation come because man keeps the rules, or because God comes near and does the miraculous saving?

So when Jesus gives these three warnings in our Gospel lesson, He's warning against trusting in your own efforts with each one. "Strive to enter through the narrow door," He says. "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter it and not be able." The door to salvation is narrow, because there is only one way to heaven. Jesus is that Door; as He says in John 14:6, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me." The fact that the door is narrow is in fact a warning, because man naturally believes that there are all sorts of ways to earn salvation—by works, by pilgrimages, by different gods, by doing this or that. When salvation is left to man, he always comes up with an endless list of ways to please God. He proclaims that the way to heaven is wide—and there's no greater evidence of that today than the lazy statement that all religions lead to heaven. Against all of that, Jesus warns that He is the only Savior; but if you are tempted to hear that as bitter news, it is not so. When Jesus declares that the door is narrow, He is declaring that there is a door. He is proclaiming that there is a way to heaven, despite the sinfulness and evil of man. If you're in a burning building, you don't complain that only one exit is clear—you go through it! Likewise, it's nonsense when one complains that God is unfair when He provides only one Savior. The truth is that the one Savior has suffered hell and died for all the world. The work is done. Why would God need to provide another Savior, another door, if Christ has done it all?

Yet, many will be unable to enter it. The door is too narrow. Why? Because salvation is a matter of repentance and faith, not your works. By the grace of God, you can go through. But try to bring along a few trophies to show off to God, to say, "This is why I deserve to be here," and you'll find they won't fit through the door. This was a huge problem for those around Jesus during His ministry, because the Pharisees were always teaching that you're saved because you've got enough good works to show off to God. In fact, they were so sure that their works would save them that they saw no need for Jesus—in fact, they believed they had to put Him to death for telling them not to trust in their works, but in Him. Don't be deceived: there's a Pharisee inside of you, too. Your Old Adam likes to put on a nice outfit now and then and persuade you that God loves you because of the good stuff you do—he does this to distract you from the grace that Jesus offers. That's why you repent whenever you think that you need to impress God with your righteousness for Him to save you.

And that's why you rejoice—there is a door to heaven, and His name is Jesus. This door is narrow because you don't need anything but Him and the grace He has won for you on the cross.

We should probably add that the door is so narrow as to admit individuals, not groups. Another big false belief in Jesus' time among His fellow Jews was the idea that they were automatically going to heaven because they were descendants of Abraham. They didn't believe in salvation by faith, but salvation by the right ancestry. The same temptation exists today, and plenty find themselves saying nonsensical things like "I am a Christian because my parents are Christians," or "I must be going to heaven because my name is on a church roster." This isn't salvation by faith, but salvation by

membership. But again, the door is narrow: it doesn't admit people in groups. It admits individuals instead; because as soon as you say that you're saved by belonging to a group, you're saying that you're not saved because Christ has died for you. So when you think that salvation is about belonging to this group or that club, you repent for the offense it gives to your Savior who has died for you. And you rejoice, for there is very good news for you in this: it is the news that Jesus has certainly died for you. If Jesus only died for certain groups or families, then what if you didn't belong to them? What hope would you have? None. But because Christ has died for all, you can be sure that His grace is for you.

So "strive to enter through the narrow door," says Jesus. Struggle to enter it. Let's be clear: the struggle isn't your striving to do good works. The struggle, the ongoing struggle, is repentance. It's striving against the temptations of your old sinful flesh that want you to trust in yourself. It is, by the grace of God and by the faith that He gives, saying, "I repent of my sin and I trust in Christ alone for my salvation."

What of the other two warnings? The second one is that time is limited before the master of the house rises and shuts the door. Once the door is closed on the Last Day, it will not open again. Now, the Master of the house is Jesus, who has died and is risen: the door could shut any day. You want to have your ducks in a row, be sure you're inside. Remember what we said before: if getting through the door is by your work, then that's a terrifying warning because you can't be sure you have enough time to do enough good to enter—if that were even possible. But there's better news for you here: the striving is repentance. Jesus is saying, "Repent before I return in judgment." If you are repentant and forgiven, then heaven is yours. You don't have to wonder if you've done enough to be ready—instead, you can be certain that you're forgiven enough right now. If the Lord returns today, heaven is yours because Christ has made it so by forgiving your sins.

The third warning Jesus gives is that many who thought they were saved will find out they are not when it is too late. They will say, "We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets;" but Jesus will respond, "I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from Me, all you workers of evil!" That's a serious warning, too—how awful to assume that you are saved, then to be shut out at the end. The context is important to understand the warning: remember that Jesus ate with Pharisees and taught them often. They were in His presence, but they still trusted in their own works, not His grace. Some may have gotten along well with Him, for all we know; but if they didn't trust in Him, they remained lost. So it is today: one can be in the presence of Jesus for now and still be lost. Jesus is, after all, present here. When you hear His Word, the Word made flesh is present here to give you grace and life and salvation. In your baptism, it is the Word Incarnate in and with the water—it's Jesus joining you to His death and resurrection. And, of course, in the Lord's Supper He is the Host, as well as the Meal. You eat and drink in His presence, as He gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, one can be a hypocrite in the presence of God, hearing Him teach and eating His Supper but still trusting in his own goodness to get to heaven. There will be many on the Last Day who say, "We ate and drank in Your presence and heard You teach—didn't our every-Sunday attendance earn a place in heaven?" The answer is no: it's not your work that gets you there, but the forgiveness that Jesus gives in His means of grace. So you repent when you believe it's your work of attending, of paying attention, of eating and drinking that makes God love you. And instead, you rejoice that the Lord Himself is present to speak and to feed you with forgiveness, life and salvation.

That's the Good News you find in these three warnings: the door is narrow, but the door is there, and it is only narrow because you need nothing else but Jesus for salvation. The time of salvation is limited, but you're prepared by grace if the Lord returns today, for He has done everything to accomplish your salvation and there's nothing left to do. Not everyone who has been in the presence

of Jesus, via His means of grace, will enter heaven; but you will, because in those means of grace the Lord gives you eternal life.

What then of good works? Remember the terrible sermon I shared before, preaching that you'd better do more, give more, serve more if you want to be certain of your salvation—using fear to motivate Christians. Such preaching can produce motivated people, but only for a while until the law burns them out. Meanwhile, Lutherans are sometimes accused of being a little quiet and lazy when it comes to good works. So here we go: should you be doing more? Giving more? Helping more? Serving more? Sure. Of that you can be sure, because original sin still clings to you and that means you're selfish by nature. You'd rather have other people bear the load, do the work. Refusal to do such good works will harm your faith—such thanklessness will work to lead you away from God's promise of salvation that He's already given to you. And that's the key: salvation is already yours, won by Christ and given to you freely in His Word and Sacraments. We don't tell you to do these things so that you might be certain of your salvation—such motivation by fear is not of the Gospel. No, we tell you that you're set free to do these things because salvation is certainly, already yours. There's a huge difference between being a slave who has to work hard every day for fear of being fired, and a child who serves as part of the household forever. You're a child, not a slave. The kingdom of heaven is yours, and the good works you do are a sacrifice of thanksgiving for that reality.

You're a child of God and an heir of heaven because Jesus has saved you. He's brought you through the narrow door. He's done everything so that you might be certain of your salvation, even if He should return today, and He visits to be present with you in His means of grace, to continually feed you with grace and salvation. "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Jesus doesn't say yes or no, doesn't talk in numbers or statistics. He does promise that many will come from all over and be saved, and that you are among them: for you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen