

August 24, 2025
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

“Invited to Strive”

Luke 13:22-30

Some guy asks Jesus *“Lord, will those who are saved be few?”* It’s a question that invites theological and even philosophical teaching by Jesus about the overarching nature of God and salvation. But Jesus is having none of it. He doesn’t say it’s a dumb question, but He blows it off and turns it around and points it right at all those listening and forces the question to be “Are you saved?”

“Strive...” In other words, “Man, woman, you better strive...” *“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”*

This is one of Jesus’ scarier statements, isn’t it? It seems almost designed to make you panic and desperately look around for something more you can do to assure your passage to paradise, to find this narrow door. And things seem to get more desperate as Jesus keeps on talking. *“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!’”*

That’s some alarming rhetoric from the Savior of the world there! What do we do with this?

Well, first off, I think we have to remind ourselves that salvation is a gift of God in Christ; it’s all by grace. So it’s not like we can strive to enter through this narrow door by doing more and better good works; somehow improving our faith and standing before God. That narrow door is Jesus. He does all the work of salvation and He is the judge by whom you are received into His kingdom or not.

That said, it’s pretty obvious from Christ’s words here that simply having some idea or understanding of Jesus in your orbit is not entering through the narrow door. The parable is clear; just eating and drinking with Jesus and hearing what He says falls short. Acquaintance with Jesus simply is not enough. Faith unto following Jesus wherever He might lead you is required. So there is an obvious dichotomy in play: Jesus’ work alone saves us, yet we are to strive toward Jesus who is the door to His kingdom.

In the immediate context of Jesus speaking these words I believe the Jewish rejection of Jesus is in play. To seek Jesus, the narrow door, is to forsake the old way of the temple, the ceremonial law and sacrifices which all pointed to Jesus and which His ultimate sacrifice on the cross will complete and make obsolete. Most of the Jews won’t do that. There is a lot of this taught by Jesus in the passages leading up to today’s reading. Many Jews will seek to enter the kingdom by means of that temple and the law. They will fail. The few who follow Christ, the narrow door, will succeed.

And of course we can hear Gospel good news pointed at us in Jesus’ words: *“And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.”* This assures us that Christ is for Jew and Gentile alike. **We** are called to follow Jesus into the kingdom.

Yet we cannot leave these alarming words of Christ back in the first century and pretend they do not speak to us today. The same dynamic at play in ancient Israel has been happening in

the Christian church for its entire existence. People come to know the one true God, yet somehow fall into a spiritual malaise in which they think they have salvation worked out; where they are “close enough” to Jesus; that they no longer have to strive.

This happened with the ancient Jews. God calls them to true repentance in faith lived out in love for God and neighbor. They turned things into keeping the law and doing right sacrifices to be good with God. They thought the inclination of their hearts didn’t matter, so long as they were hanging out in His house, in His orbit. So they could serve themselves, partake in the more socially acceptable sins and have those taken care of at the temple, and life was pretty much theirs to live.

That’s not a far cry from a Christian today believing if they go to church when it’s convenient and do the confession, absolution and Lord’s Supper thing, then they are good to go and really don’t have to mind Jesus much in the rest of life. Truth is, a lot of folks don’t even include the going to church part—just give Jesus a nod and a prayer once in a while, and they pretend everything is fine. But please don’t think this cannot be you or me just because we’re here today. We’re human. We’re sinners. The temptation toward a lazy, misguided and empty practice of faith has been around since Satan spoke it to Eve.

So yes, it is a good reaction when we are made uneasy as we hear these words of Jesus “*For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able.*” It forces us to ask ourselves, “Am I saved?” Maybe even ask in a little bit of a panic. I mean, if you don’t worry about that at all, maybe you’re a little bit too comfortable, thinking you’ve got salvation all handled.

But if these words make us uneasy and we then ponder what is necessary, we see these words for what they are—an invitation and exhortation: “*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*” That door, of course, being Christ our Savior.

Repentance, of course! The Christian life is one of daily repentance; turning away from sin and ever more fully toward our Savior. But I believe Jesus here is urging us to much more than just our catechism understanding of repentance resulting in forgiveness of sin. “Strive” means to continually struggle against forces that are against you. Have you ever gone outside in a tropical storm or hurricane and that wind and rain was going opposite the way you were heading? You had to struggle, fight, strive toward your destination. So when Jesus calls on us to “*Strive to enter through the narrow door*” I believe it’s really simply a powerful way of saying “Follow me...in all of your life, no matter what tries to impede you.”

The Christian life is not like the stereotype of a government employee at the DMV. You know what I mean, somebody who shows up and does the absolute minimum necessary for thirty years until they reach retirement. Christians are not going through the motions, doing our temple rituals, to get to the heavenly pension. The Christian life is one of following your Savior and King every day.

Of course it’s a life of repentance, because we can be very poor followers, constantly distracted by temptation like my dog seeing a squirrel—zip! There we go. This is why it’s a constant repentance throughout our day; not just a Sunday morning thing. It’s a constant returning to Christ in shame for forgiveness; a constant prayerfully looking to God for direction, a constant depending on Him for the strength to strive as He bids us to do.

This Divine Service is very important. Here we come together in fellowship as God’s people, are assured of His faithfulness to His promises in His Word, delivered full forgiveness in His Sacraments, and rightly return to Him thanksgiving and praise for His goodness, and boldly pray to Him for more. But you can think of this as the Sabbath rest where we recuperate and are strengthened for what follows—the faithful striving to which we are called the rest of the week.

So yes, hear these disturbing words of Jesus: “*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able*” and be rightly disturbed. They run to Jesus, the narrow door, for the comfort of His grace. Do this often, faithfully and repentantly, every day until this narrow door receives you finally into the paradise of eternity.

Amen.