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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XLVIII. Strive to Enter Through the Narrow Door**  
**Luke 13:22-35**

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Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, passing through towns and villages along the way. He has already twice told His disciples about the endpoint of this journey – about how, in Jerusalem, He will be arrested, tried, and crucified.<sup>1</sup> The disciples have seemed not to comprehend what He has told them – or not wanted to comprehend it. But Jesus has set His face and His feet toward Jerusalem – and nothing will dissuade Him, nothing will be allowed to get in the way of His fulfilling the mission for which the Father has sent Him. Even when the Pharisees come and tell Him that Herod is out to kill Him even now, Jesus just brushes them off. Not even an old fox like Herod will stand in the way of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

So here's Jesus on the road, slowly, through village and town, making His way to Jerusalem. When, one day, someone in the crowd around Him asks, "*Lord, will those who are saved be few?*" Now, why in the world would someone ask Him something like that? Elsewhere Jesus has made it clear that it is not for us to know who will be in and who will be out – that's God's business alone, not ours even to speculate over. So why would this person in the crowd ask such a question? My only guess is that he or she was fishing for a compliment. Asking this question solely in order to elicit from Jesus a bit of praise – you know, something like, "Well, that's not for you to know. But I can tell you, my friend, that you have nothing to worry about. You've been so good and faithful all along this road to Jerusalem that you are going to be right there near the front of the line when I open the doors to my Kingdom."

But if that's what this person was hoping to hear – oh boy, did that ever backfire! For Jesus turns to this person, turns to the crowd around this person, and not only refuses to answer the question as it was asked, but takes that question and turns it around upon the asker: "*And he said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'*" And then Jesus goes on to talk about how, just because you have been walking alongside Him for a while, eating meals in His vicinity, is no guarantee of Kingdom entrance. Just hanging out with Jesus on occasion is not going to guarantee you a VIP All-Access Pass to the Kingdom of God – won't guarantee even a cheap seat in the nosebleed section. Instead, says Jesus, "*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*"

"*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*" We don't like it when Jesus talks to us like this. It makes us nervous, quite frankly – that is, if we are the sort of people who care at all about what Jesus says to us. But Jesus does say things like this quite a bit, in fact – that entrance into His Kingdom is something which makes demands upon us. Perhaps most pointed of all such

statements is that verse in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says to us, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*”<sup>2</sup> We don’t like it when Jesus talks to us like that. And here He is this morning, on the road to Jerusalem, doing so again. “How many will get into heaven?” asks that person in the crowd. And Jesus just takes that question and turns it around on him – on us – saying, in effect, “You better tend to your own salvation before you start worrying about everyone else. Strive to enter through the narrow door in your own life first.”

No, we don’t like it when Jesus talks to us like this. For one thing, it’s unsettling to us. And for another, it’s confusing to us – theologically speaking. We are taught that we are saved by His grace, freely given and unmerited by us – saved by grace, not works. And that is the truth – the Gospel truth. It’s not the salvation speculations of theologians which has taught us that – it is flat out chapter and verse from the Bible that we are saved only by God’s grace and not by our own deeds and merits. Salvation is a gift we receive, unearned and yet freely given to us by a merciful God; and not something we are forced to achieve. So, then, what’s all this business about having to strive in order to enter the Kingdom? How are we both saved by unmerited grace freely given and yet also required to strive for the Kingdom of God?

Well, the problem is not with the Gospel – Jesus is not at all confused here about how salvation operates. We are. We make the mistake, sometimes – and maybe even especially here in the Bible Belt – of thinking that salvation is just one thing: being forgiven for our sins. But salvation, according to the Bible, is actually two interrelated things: being forgiven for our sins and also, and just as importantly, being transformed by Jesus from out of our sins and into His likeness. Learning how and being made truly able in our daily living to walk in His Way, according to His Truth, more and more living His Life and so bringing honor and glory to His Name. Justification and Sanctification are the fancy theological words for this two-part description of the one thing which is our Salvation. Justification – Jesus justifies us before God by His death on the cross, and our sins are forgiven. Sanctification – Jesus then changes us, starts making us into saints, by raising us up into the new life He has made possible for us on earth through His resurrection.<sup>3</sup> We are forgiven – salvation, part one. But we are then also to be transformed – salvation, part two. And you can’t have one without the other.

And that is what Jesus is pointing us toward when He says to the crowd and to us, “*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*” He is telling us that while salvation is, truly, a gift from God, a grace freely given – nonetheless, it is a gift which requires a response on our part to be effective and fulfilled. Part one, justification: Jesus offers us grace for the forgiveness of our sins – but we have to accept that grace, accept Jesus as our Savior, and willingly open ourselves up to His cleansing mercy. Part two, sanctification: Jesus gives us further grace in order that our lives should be transformed according to His Way, His Truth, and His Life – but we have to want that transformation, we have to cooperate with His Spirit prompting us to change, we have to dedicate ourselves to learning and doing the daily work of being His disciples. Giving energy and effort to learning from Him how we are to live; and then seeking, with deliberate intent, to put what we have learned into practice daily. We are saved by grace – both justification and sanctification are the gifts of God’s grace. But grace, if it is to be effectual in us, requires of us a response. A response along the lines of exactly what Jesus says here – that we should, “*Strive to enter through*

*the narrow door.*” It’s Jesus telling us not to take His grace for granted, but instead to let it grow in us daily.

So, being a Christian is not a box we just check off on our life to-do list once we have prayed the sinner’s prayer and accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior – we now have work to do. It is not a box we check off, rather it is a deeper walk with God which is meant to begin in us the minute we pray that prayer – a journey on the road with Jesus that is meant to guide, direct, and occupy our life’s focus and attention and energies all the rest of the way forward. And being a disciple of Jesus is not just to repeat the Apostles’ Creed with gusto on those occasional Sunday mornings when we have deigned to bless the Lord with our worship attendance. Rather being a disciple of Jesus means that we are striving each and every day to answer faithfully His disciple call: *“Follow me!”*<sup>4</sup> Follow Jesus on the road of discipleship, the road which leads to the Kingdom of God.

That is what Jesus is seeking to awaken in us, spur us on toward, when He says to us things like, *“Strive to enter”* or *“Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord’”* – He’s telling us that our relationship with Him is the single most important thing we do in this world – the single greatest priority we open our eyes to every morning and lay our heads down to every night. And that the worst thing we can do in this life is to take that relationship for granted, ignore it, became distant from it. Because then not only will we be missing out on the very best, most helpful, and most needful and delightful aspect of our daily living – but we also then run the risk of coming to that final day and having Him look at us and say, *“Do I know you? I do not know where you come from.”* He is telling us that our response to Him – not just once upon a time, but every single day – is the single most important thing in our lives. Our response to Him is our chief job in this life – commandment number one, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”*<sup>5</sup> So please, He is saying to us, please do not neglect it.

*“Strive to enter through the narrow door,”* He says to us. Meaning put some effort into your walk of faith. Don’t expect it to just unfold automatically, on its own – because it won’t. *“Strive to enter!”* C. S. Lewis once put it this way:

*The world does not consist of 100 percent Christians and 100 percent non-Christians. There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name . . . There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so . . .*<sup>6</sup>

In other words, every day we are in the process either of becoming more like Christ or less so. Strive, says Jesus, strive – so that His grace will not be wasted in us.

Or maybe this is even better. I don’t know who wrote this, but it really says it straight up and simple:

*If you really do believe that everything belongs to God;  
if you really have received grace because what Jesus did on the  
Cross, He did for you;*

*if you have ever received assurance that your sins are forgiven;  
 if you really have received the promise that you are going to live  
 with God in Heaven forever one day;  
 if you really have been given the Holy Spirit to dwell in your heart;  
 if you really have been given the Scriptures to guide you;  
 if you really have been given a church where you can be known and  
 loved;  
 if you really have been given spiritual gifts so that you can know  
 significance and meaning –  
 then Jesus says,  
 Get at least as intentional and fired up as some guy who's living his whole  
 life just to pile up a bunch of stuff that's going to be discounted at a  
 garage sale or on eBay five minutes after he dies. Get at least that  
 fired up for Jesus.<sup>7</sup>*

“*Strive to enter through the narrow door,*” says Jesus. “Don’t just accept my grace, put it into practice.” Not so much because we’re going to miss out altogether on the Kingdom of God if we don’t – though that certainly cannot be ruled out, based on what Jesus says here and elsewhere. But “*strive to enter*” also because that Kingdom life, that Kingdom joy, that Kingdom feeling of fulfillment and love and laughter and peace can begin in us right now, through His grace and our response. It doesn’t have to wait for when we die and go to heaven. “*Strive to enter*” because His grace is so powerful and so present to us now that it can open up for us a taste of heaven in our lives even here on this earth and even now in our lives as they are today. “*Strive to enter,*” finally, is not Jesus threatening us. It’s Jesus inviting us – into a life which could be, even now, so much more than the one we are already living.

Let me end with this story – a parable if you will – of why and what it means that Jesus is calling us to give Him our all, and not to take His grace and our salvation for granted. Here’s the story:

*There is an old story of a king who went into the village streets to greet his subjects. A beggar sitting by the roadside eagerly held up his alms bowl, sure that the king would give handsomely. Instead the king asked the beggar to give him something. Taken aback, the beggar fished three grains of rice from his bowl and dropped them into the king’s outstretched hand. When at the end of the day the beggar poured out what he had received, he found to his astonishment three grains of pure gold in the bottom of his bowl. O, that I had given him all!<sup>8</sup>*

In our passage, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. In our lives, let us be on the road every day with Jesus, striving to enter through the narrow door, striving to live every day deeper into His grace. For, goodness knows – God knows! – that it will be more than worth our while to do so. Now, as well as in the Kingdom to come.

<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:21-22, 43-45. Jesus will do this a third time in Luke 18:31-34.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:21.

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<sup>3</sup> The Westminster Shorter Catechism is helpful here: “*Q.33. What is justification? A. Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone . . . Q.35. What is sanctification? A. Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.*”

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 4:18-22.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 12:29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in John Ortberg, Eternity Is Now in Session (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2018), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, quoted in Timothy Keller, Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ (New York: Viking, 2016), p. 97.