

## Salvation's Irony: *An open and shut case* Luke 13:22-30

**Introduction:** One of my favorite preachers named Alistair Begg shared a story about preaching in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and being encouraged and strengthened by a young woman inside a restaurant next to Harvard as he prepared a message. As Begg was sitting at a bustling restaurant full of regulars, the university culture felt overwhelming. He began to feel insignificant and how foolish the gospel seemed in this setting. He was feeling small. But he was encouraged to see a young Asian girl intently reading her Bible, so he asked her the question that seemed appropriate, "I see you are reading the Bible. Are you a Christian?" She smiled and replied, "Oh, yes, I've found the narrow way."

Her answer was as remarkable as her story. She came to Harvard from Korea and was the only Christian in her family. She left a Buddhist home (with its three million gods), came to study in the midst of Harvard's aggressive pluralism which tolerates everything except the narrowness of the gospel, and understood her faith so accurately that she could describe it as the "narrow way". Alistair Begg said he was emboldened to preach that morning, knowing that the gospel was effective to change the heart of the least likely.

This morning we are going to look at the irony of salvation, in how it is offered, how long it is offered, and to whom it has effect. I am reminded this morning of the power of God to work to save those who have no business receiving salvation. I am reminded that I have no idea why God chose to gift me salvation, man set on pride and selfishness, and not countless friends and cousins who are much nicer than I am. We all have questions as to "**why**" or "**why not**" when it comes to salvation, but this morning we simply revel in the fact that God saves, for His own purpose, for His own glory, and calls us to a narrow way.

### Salvation is Open, but Narrow (22-24)

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.

It started, like so many times in Luke, with a question from the crowd. The person was not identified as a leader or Pharisee, but simply a voice among the many. Jesus was transitioning from His final teaching in the Synagogues to His final itineration toward Jerusalem, where He would evade capture and enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, offering Himself to His people one last time. Though time has passed between this interaction and His healing of the crippled woman, Luke picks up the theme of the narrative here. The question that came from the crowd seems of place at first: "**Lord, will those who are saved be few?**" but understanding Jewish thought at this point helps bring it into focus.

The general understanding among the Jews at this time was that all Jews except the very worst would be saved. According to the *Mishnah*:

*"All Israelites have a share in the world to come, for it is written, 'Thy people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands that I may be glorified.' And these are they that have no share in the world to come: he that says that there is no*

resurrection of the dead prescribed in the Law, and he that says that the Law is not from Heaven, and an Epicurean. (Sanhedrin 10.1)<sup>1</sup>

In other words, what was revealed in the question was the expectation that there would be a positive answer, that all Jews would be a part of the Kingdom, except those who were especially evil. In Luke's narrative, Jesus had also just compared the Kingdom to a mustard seed (small and seemingly insignificant), and leaven, which is unseen when added to the mix of flour. Add that to the fact that Jesus' followers would be dwindling in number since His discourse on eating bread and drinking the wine, where many disciples turned their backs and no longer walked with Him (John 6:66), it was a question that the crowds were wondering. In typical fashion, the question allowed Jesus to address a larger issue without directly answering the question. He did not give a percentage or a number, and instead of answering "**will the few be saved**", He left the crowd with the real question: "**will you be saved?**"

### Entrance is on God's terms

#### *"Strive to enter..."*

The word "strive" is from a root word where we get the word *agonize*. It means to fight, struggle, and contend, particularly in an athletic venue (1 Cor. 9:25). Luke uses a similar word when talking about Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). It has to do with self-denial, not self-fulfillment, as any athlete competing for a prize understands. *But does this mean that salvation is an act of our own will or volition, or something that we cause to happen out of self effort?* That is not the point of the word Jesus used.

The idea is not to work one's way to God, but to **labor hard at listening and responding** to the message. The concept is very much like passages in Proverbs that exhort one to incline the ear to wisdom and pursue it like riches (e.g. Prov. 2:1-5)<sup>2</sup> In fact the gospels make it abundantly clear that we must enter on God's terms, and only if He opens the door. The gate of heaven only opens from the inside:

**John 6:44** *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*

**John 6:65** *And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."*

**Matthew 11:27** *All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

God opens the door, man enters the door. But what does it mean to strive to enter, to labor hard at listening and responding? It means we strive by the only means Jesus offered: Himself.

### Entrance is Hard

#### *"...the narrow door"*

The way of salvation is by nature *narrow*. In other words, the picture is of an opening from death to life as one that requires stripping away all excess baggage, since the opening is tight. In Matthew 7:13, Jesus described that many are on a wide path that is **easy**, one that requires no effort, no submission, no yielding, but inevitably leads to destruction. The narrow gate is one that is hard, and because of this, only a few find it. No one strolls into the narrow gate. No one enters the narrow gate and keeps an

<sup>1</sup> Kent Hughes, Luke Vol. II, p. 96, quoting Herbert Dansby, trans., *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford, 1933), p. 397.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Bock, Luke 9:51-24:53, p. 1234

easy life. **What makes the gate or door so narrow?** The answer is what Jesus already declared as the passport into what is beyond the door: **repentance and submission.**

**Luke 5:31-32** And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> **I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.**"

**Luke 13:5** No, I tell you; but **unless you repent**, you will all likewise perish."

The narrow door demands that we confess, admit, and acknowledge the fact that we are sinners who have offended a holy God, who by every right and measure should judge us by His wrath. The narrow door must be agonized through because salvation requires me to strip away all of self, any type of self righteousness where I think I can earn salvation, any self trust where I believe in myself rather than Christ, and any self-assurance that finds confidence in my work, rather than Christ's. Paul reminded us to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13). We work out our salvation knowing that it is a gift that God has given and enacted by the work of Christ on the cross. Our work is NOT to keep ourselves saved, or to make ourselves acceptable, or to earn anything. It is to continually fight the good fight of faith, to place every belief in Christ alone and make sure that He is our treasure, love, and joy. Because the door is narrow, it means by nature the entrance is limited.

### **Entrance is Limited**

***"many will seek to enter and will not be able"***

All Jews at this time believed they would be a part of the Kingdom, with differing ranks within. In that way, many would seek access into the feast (representative of communion with Christ eternally). But the chilling reality is the fact that though many will **seek** to enter, few will actually **strive** to enter, and thus will be unable to enter the future Kingdom with Christ.

This was not only true in Jesus' day, but ours as well. Though we live in a time where believing in nothing or everything equally is more loving than believing in something definitive, most people when pushed to answer will believe that if there is a heaven (or something equivalent) when they die, they not only want to be there, but they believe they deserve to be. Even if someone would rather go to a place like hell because *that's where all my friends will be* are really describing their version of a positive eternal afterlife, not one of punishment and exclusion. This is a sobering reality that reminds us that though there may be those seeking answers or God Himself, only a few will actually find Him. That reality is crystallized in the next section, as many will actually knock on the door, expecting to have a positive reception, only to find themselves shut out forever.

### **Salvation is Open, but not Forever (25-27)**

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!**'

### **Request after the door is shut**

In the continuance of the parable, Jesus pictures His Kingdom, the one that He brought and will be forever, as the other side of a narrow door. In the parable, there will be a time that the door, the entrance, will be shut, and when it is shut, there is no longer any entrance into the Kingdom. Notice

that it is the Master of the house that closes the door based on His will and timing. At that time, the culmination of redemptive history, there will be those who are on the outside of the door that will knock AFTER the door is shut. They will request entrance into the banquet feast, with the expectation that it will be opened for them.

Notice a few things off the bat in this parable. The door is shut in the Lord's timing, not those wishing to enter. In other words, the door is open, but not forever. There is a time limit for the offer of salvation. The offer ends with either **Christ's return** or **our death**. After either of these two things, no amount of pleading, no amount of request, will be able to open the door. "*And just as it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment*" (Hebrews 9:27). Today you are alive, you have air in your lungs and a beating heart. Today is the day that the offer of salvation is given: "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). Today is the day that you call on the Lord, asking Him for His grace to believe, repent, and enter into the narrow door!

### Response after the door is shut

There may be nothing more tragic than someone who receives terrible, eternal news when they expected the exact opposite. We should feel the weight of this scene. Many will come knocking on the door, but they will not only find the door shut, they will find that instead of a banquet feast, they will be exposed to judgment. There are two reasons that Jesus gave this crowd as the REASON that this Jewish audience, who were part of God's chosen people, daughters and sons of Abraham, heirs by heritage, would NOT enter the Kingdom. Though this was specific to them, they are still the same reasons today. We'll take the second reason first:

1) **They were workers of evil** - *without payment made for their sin* - Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 7:23, that they were cast out for being evil doers. Notice, He was talking, by and large, to moralistic and practicing Jews. These were NOT the overtly sinful of the day, but the well meaning, well intentioned, faithfully attending synagogue, believing in God sort of people. But God did not give the "credit" for their good work, but instead viewed all of their work apart from faith in Christ as *evil*. What they failed to realize is that we are not by nature good but part of a flawed system. We are by nature evil, working evil out of wretched, sinful hearts (Ps. 14:1-3; Rom. 3:10-18, 23; Jer. 17:9). If there is not application of payment for our sin, there can be no true salvation. It is only through the faithful, perfect sacrifice applied on our behalf, that comes by faith alone, that can save. Everyone is a worker of evil when we are apart from Christ.

2) **They were strangers to Christ** - This is perhaps the most tragic of all. Here was a group of people who not only studied the OT about the coming Messiah, but they actually met Him, in the flesh. They dined with Him. They heard His teaching. They were able to touch, communicate, and see Him with their own eyes. Yet the reason Jesus gave as to their exclusion of the Kingdom: **I don't know where you come from** (In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus said it this way - *depart from me, I never knew you.*) This is the difference between eternity with Jesus and apart from Him, heaven and hell, and bliss and judgment. The difference is Jesus. Do we know Christ, and are we known by Him? The difference is faith. The difference is placing our entire trust, belief, and life into Christ that we may know Him, be found in Him, and straining forward to what lies ahead in Him.

When Paul mentioned working out salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), he did so in a context of acknowledging that all that he did in his life before Christ was rubbish. True salvation was knowing Christ Jesus his Lord (Phil. 3:8), and by faith having a righteousness that was not his own, but was in Christ (3:9), so that he might attain the resurrection of the dead with Christ (3:11)

**Here is the sobering reality:** salvation is stripping away heredity (I grew up in the church), morality (I'm a good person), religious activity (I serve the community/church), passion for God without true knowledge (see Rom 19:2), and information about the gospel without placing our faith in Christ. When we point to ANY of these things for salvation, we will be on the outside of the door looking in. Salvation is all about Christ, not us. It is about believing that He exists and rewards those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6) through placing our faith in Jesus, who is the just and the justifier for us (Rom. 3:26). Without faith in Christ, we cannot know Him. Without knowing Christ, we have no salvation. Without salvation, we are left outside of the door.

### Salvation is Open, but Unexpected (28-30)

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."

#### Surprised by who is NOT behind the door

As the parable or picture extends, we get to see what happens on the other side of the door, while at the same time watching the scene unfold with those who are left out. Those who could not enter are still privy to seeing what happened on the other side. The Jewish nation who is left out sees the triumphal trio of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those through whom the promise of a nation and land were given. This was an ancestry that religious Jews of the day would have pointed to as the means by which their inclusion into the kingdom would have been secure. Yet they see them AND the prophets (who declared God's message to the Jews of the OT - often of impending judgment and calls to turn back to God) dining at the table, yet those who did not know Jesus were left out. This not only would have filled them with disappointment, shame, and sadness, but they were left in a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. If weeping indicates sadness, gnashing of teeth has the idea of fierce rage. They are left eternally shut out of a Kingdom that they had every opportunity to enter into, yet were unable because they trusted themselves rather than their Messiah.

#### Surprised by who IS behind the door

Now, there is a line of hope here. What was seen as narrow, hard, and limited is now seen as broadly effective. At the table of the Kingdom, reclining at the table with Jesus, will be those who come from all the corners of the earth (Matthew 8:11-12; Isa 2:2-4; 25:6; 56:6-7; 60:3; 66:19-24). This was always God's plan, but now we see it come to fruition. Unbelieving Israel is cast out, but Gentiles (all non-Jews) who believe are included into the Kingdom. This was how Jesus described the Kingdom earlier as a **mustard seed**, that started small but became shelter for the birds of the air, and **leaven in flour**, that was unseen yet unrelenting to effect the whole world. Here we see **eternal hope out of tragic unbelief**. Those who were last, who had no business nor care of the Kingdom, will be given a seat in the kingdom, and not one in the back row, but an equal seat with Jesus. In the Kingdom, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, free man or slave, male or female, but all are one **in Christ Jesus** (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-16). **Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that though the way of salvation is narrow, the offer and affect of salvation is broad, reaching to every tribe, tongue, and nation.**

#### Implications:

- **Though only few are saved, the breadth of salvation means ANYONE can be** - This is the hope we have, why we strive both here in our community and throughout the world. We believe that

the gospel WILL be effective to anyone. We also remember that we do not give up on anyone, knowing that as long as the door is open for salvation, there is hope.

- **We must remember there is a difference between a seeker and striver** - This is an important distinction to make, since Jesus made a monumental point of getting the message correct. Those who are seekers are open to the narrow door, but it does not mean they have entered it. We must continue to walk with people in the gospel, calling them to enter the narrow door, not simply seek salvation on their own terms.
- **When all is stripped away, do we love Jesus** - This is the question we are left with. If you stripped all religious practice away, are you left with Jesus? If we have done all the things we have done, but don't have a love, trust, and desire for Jesus, we have missed salvation. The answer to the question: "Lord, will those who are saved by few? is better asked '**Lord, will those who are saved be me?**'"

#### Questions to discuss:

- Based on the implications above, what does this mean for our evangelistic efforts? What do we need to major on? What do we need to avoid? What do we need to know?
- What does it mean to know Christ (read Philippians 3 for an example)? How does gaining knowledge help us know Him? What is the difference between the two?
- How can all the activities that we engage in help us know Jesus? How can they distract?