

²² He went through one town and village after another, teaching and making his way to Jerusalem. ²³ “Lord,” someone asked him, “are only a few people going to be saved?”

He said to them, ²⁴ “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because I tell you, many will try to enter and won’t be able ²⁵ once the homeowner gets up and shuts the door. Then you will stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up for us!’ He will answer you, ‘I don’t know you or where you’re from.’ ²⁶ Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I don’t know you or where you’re from. Get away from me, all you evildoers!’ ²⁸ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth in that place, when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ They will come from east and west, from north and south, to share the banquet^[a] in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Note this: Some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last.”

There is a door

There is an old woodcut from the time of the Reformation by the artist Barthel Beham called Christ in the Sheep Shed. There is a lot going on with this woodcut and the longer you look at it the more you notice. The shed dominates the woodcut. In the background you’ll find the crucifixion and sheep gathered around looking up. But you’ll also see a wolf and a shepherd. The shepherds are leading their sheep to the shed. But all over the shed, climbing the walls and sitting on the roof ridge looking out over the pasture are monks and even a pope. Some are seen digging through the roof calling others to join them as they’ve found a way. Another is seen knocking on a closed door right next to the open door. Still more are pointing to the roof as if to say, “That’s the way. Look how high and mighty he is seated up there!” but at the open door next to a seated beggar stands Jesus. Yes, Jesus is the door through whom we must enter for eternal life. Jesus is the door and that door is open.

But not everyone is going to like this art. It’s exclusive and people will question, “Are only a few people going to be saved? Do you think you’re going to be the only one there? What about those who just live a good life? Will they be saved? What if someone never has a chance to hear about Jesus?”

But Jesus brings it from theoretical to practical. He turns the question around in a great reversal and asks this man, “Are you going to be saved?” We might not like how exclusive Christianity is. Many have long given up on Jesus’ claim to be, “*The only way, the truth, and the life.*” So many have buried their head in the sand of shallow confessions and close enough Christianity. In contrast to universalism is Jesus, “strive to enter the narrow door.” There is a door and it is open for now.

But, “*Are only a few going to be saved?*” This question reflects a common thought of the time concerning the relationship of Judaism and the people of God. Were all those calling themselves Jews really part of the chosen people? A remnant was clear from scripture. God would preserve a few and the Essenes saw themselves as that “saved” group who scorned other Jews as the ungodly and not good enough. The Essenes were a sectarian group who preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls. But nowhere in scripture do we find “all of Israel being saved.” Instead the Old Testament is a story of apostasy and failure in the face of God’s continued intervention and preservation. So how does God relate to the hoard of humanity, the unwashed masses? It’s almost as if the questioner wants to put a limit on salvation.

Jesus refuses to answer with a simple yes/no. Instead he applies it personally. Jesus turns this question around on him so that he has to examine his own heart. What about you? He responds directly with a 2nd person singular. *Then you will stand outside... He will answer you... “I don’t know you.”*... Jesus gives him some much needed advice, “*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because I tell you, many will try to enter and won’t be able once the homeowner gets up and shuts the door.*” Make every effort. Last week I spoke about an agon being a race. It is a race or competition of some sort. Here is the verb form, agonizomai, from which we get our English word, “agonize.” It means to make every effort, to struggle, to strive to win and prevail.

Here Jesus says, “*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*” This does not mean that moral effort is necessary to enter eternal life. Jesus is not telling people they can strive to the point of earning righteousness; much less salvation. This is not about how one comes to faith but rather this is what one who is faithful does. They strive, they struggle Paul details this struggle in Romans 7:15,25 “*For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate... who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God.*” Why? Because there is a door.

But that door is narrow and Jesus seems to answer that question with, “Yes only a few.” Maybe someone has asked that question to you. They’re critical and want to decide whether or not God is being fair. Does God shut out some and allow entrance to others. Is he being just? So they put God on trial and if they don’t like the answer to their question, then they reject God and go in search of another door of their liking. “*Many will try and will not be able*” The truth is people won’t like the answer. The door is narrow. But maybe we’ll try to widen the door. Many churches don’t have a clear confession of faith. The creeds are thrown out and concise language that clearly sets right and wrong are removed. But comparing ourselves to others does no good. Jesus applies this lesson personal, “What about you?”

That door is narrow and we do not enter as a group but it Pharisee, Lutheran, or even the label Christian. We enter one by one. So how are you striving? Are we over confident in ourselves? Do we cling to our works, who we are and what we’ve done? Jesus warns us that proximity to him does no good. It doesn’t matter if you eat or drink in his presence or hear him teach in the streets. That means you can serve the church, play the organ, hang a cross over your mantel, and even be friends with the pastor but that does not mean we are guaranteed a spot. You can be baptized and confirmed and yet if we are trusting in our work we will be sorely mistaken.

So how is your struggle? Maybe we’re not that different from the outside world. We have the same questions. We too want to put God on trial as being not fair. Our culture lies to us, “As long as you are a good person, that’s all that matters.” Even our sinful nature tells us, “You’re a good person or at least your better than others.” We want to play God and determine who is in or out based on our own set of standards.

“*Many will try to enter and won’t be able.*” Once the homeowner gets up and shuts the door the time of grace will be over. We move from a “*narrow door*” to a “*shut door*” emphasizing that the time to repent and receive the Lord is coming to a close. This is urgent. This should be a priority before the door to life slams shut. Jesus then says, “*Some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last.*” Those who have it all together may miss out and the last person you’d think you’d see in heaven they may be there.

What about you? Jesus doesn’t leave him without an answer. First he appeals to his heritage. How did the patriarchs get to heaven? Was it because they were such fine upstanding citizens? Not exactly Abraham was a deviant who handed over his wife to foreign kings to be defiled. Jacob had 12 children with two wives and their servants. How then were they saved? They believed the promise. *Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.* They are saved through the promise of the seed of woman. They looked forward to the fulfillment of the promise.

And Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. Luke 13:22 takes us into part II of Luke’s travel narrative. Part three and four are still to come but Jesus is going to Jerusalem. There he will be considered the last, the least in the kingdom of God and he will take on the form of a servant. There Jesus will not be recognized as the Master of the banquet. Instead he will strive and struggle through rejection. There he will agonize for our salvation and be judge unworthy of life. But the last will be first and God raised him up and seated him at his right hand. God overruled their judgment of Jesus.

Jesus is the only way to salvation, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.*” This salvation is not limited to a select group of people. Otherwise you’d have to point to scripture and show me for whom did Jesus not shed his blood? To whom does Jesus not want us to go with the gospel? Which ethnic or

national identity is to be excluded? There is none. Because of Jesus, *“People will come from the east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* There is a door. Although the door is narrow, it is big enough for everyone.

The great message of Christianity is that it doesn't depend on birth, culture, language, or what you can do. None of that matters. Christianity depends on Christ. You don't have to adopt another culture. Christianity is absolutely inclusive of all people. He opens a way for us by his flesh and his blood shed on the cross. The objective nature of the gospel tells us that salvation does not depend on us but on him. We were the last, the least, the worst of sinners when Jesus opened the kingdom of heaven.

In baptism he brought us into his kingdom. There he creates a new heart within that longs to enter heaven. There he clothed us in his righteousness and continuously reminds us of his banquet in the kingdom of God. Here we receive his body and blood shed for you. So when we fail and begin to think we are different because of some inherent good in us, Repent. Strive against the flesh. Believe the good news this is for you. And then don't ignore the door. Don't fritter away life distracted by the pleasures of this world. Press on and make every effort to enter because it's open.

And then we can point one and all, those who are first as well as those who are last to this door. They may not be born close to Jesus; then again they might be your pastor, who also can be led astray. So let us take Jesus encouragement as we strive against this world and our sinful nature to enter salvation in the only way possible, the narrow door that is repentance and faith in Jesus. And then, as we take a look around us, let us see everyone as an opportunity while the door is still open.

If you are still wondering, “Will there be many saved?” I don't know. Scripture doesn't deal with salvation in such an abstract manner. God never tells us to worry about numbers he simply points us to the door and says, “Come all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.” The door is narrow but it is still open for now. Amen.