

Strive to Enter the Kingdom, Part 2

Luke 13:22-24

People are the same. People lived under the same delusions they told themselves the same lies. They assured themselves that they were safe, spiritually healthy, no concern for their eternal future, the reality of it anyway. Which is why Jesus keep pressing the same kinds of questions into their consciences. You've been showing up, you've been listening to my teaching, but you yourself, will you enter into my Kingdom. That's the question. Again, proximity to the truth is not what counts. Obedience to the truth that is the issue.

So that's the setting, that's the setting for today. Let's look at the second point and see the occasion. And the occasion, there's a question that comes up out of the crowd, and the occasion is a question, I think I'm not uncharitable in saying this, but it's a pointless curiosity. It's an idle curiosity. It's a, it's a futile question. I'll show you that and show you why that's not uncharitable to say that, but the occasion is

that there's a question that comes up of really pointless curiosity.

Look at verse 23. Along the way Jesus has been teaching and someone is listening to him teach and speaks up during a pause in the teaching, and Jesus takes a drink of water or whatever, he steps into that gap and he says, "Lord, will those who are saved," or rather those who are being saved, "will they be few?" Will those who are being saved be few?

He's talking about the future. Talking about the number of people who are going to be saved. No doubt something in Jesus' teaching prompted the question. He's been teaching on the Kingdom; this seems like something that fits right into that genre of teaching. We don't know exactly what it was that Jesus said that provoked this, but Luke tells us nothing about the questioner.

If you look more closely and consider what he's asking, you consider the information he's seeking from the Lord, he says. "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Look, whatever the

answer is to that question. What does he think he's going to do with that information? First thing about the question, whatever that answer might be, it has very, this question has very little to do with himself, right? It, it has no practical bearing on his life.

In other words, if Jesus answered his question with a straight forward yes or straight forward no, what's he gonna do with the information, right? If Jesus even gave the exact number of the elect of God ordained and chosen before the foundation of the world. Here's the number. I mean, what difference practically is that gonna make in his life?

What possible benefit could that be to him to know that number? How would he live his life differently in light of that knowledge? That Deuteronomy 29, he should pay attention to that the secret things belong to the Lord, right? The things revealed belong to us and our children that we might what, do them. Put them into practice. Live them out. Cautionary note from Moses of Wisdom.

Another thing about his question. The question kind of reveals an assumption, doesn't it? That he assumes that he is included in that number, of those being saved, whether the number is many or just very few, a remnant, he counts himself there. Because if he had any doubt about that, he would have asked a very different question. Lord, I know I don't care about arithmetic here. I care about arithmetic having to do within an integer, one, me. I'm concerned about only one number mine. How can I know that I have eternal life? He doesn't ask that question.

He asked kind of a question of idle curiosity. And nevertheless, Jesus receives the man's question, as he does so many times, and he pivots expertly from that question, whatever it is, and he applies it for a more general teaching. Broadens it out to the whole crowd. He does answer the question for him. We'll get to that. Probably not today, but he gets to that. It's not in the way the man expected.

But he, when he answers, it says the end of verse 23, and one man answered the question and he said to them, plural, he's

broadening this out to the whole crowd. So rather than answering the man directly, he's speaking only to him, Jesus broadens the interest of his teaching to speak to the entire crowd. They all need to hear what Jesus has to say here. And folks, so do we. We need to hear this too.

So Jesus, as I said, he doesn't address his reply to this questioner in particular, but rather he broadens it out. He repurposes the man's question, answering in a way that puts the question to use for better ends, for his own purposes. So Jesus would have this man. Have this entire crowd, all of us as well. He'd have us less concerned about satisfying intellectual academic curiosities. Instead, we're to direct our attention and our energy and our concern toward the state of our souls.

End of verse 23, Jesus said to them, to the whole crowd, this takes us to point number three, which is the thesis. Point number three, the thesis, a message of immediate relevancy. This isn't about idle curiosity. This isn't counting the number of angels that dance on the head of a pin. This is a message of immediate concern. Immediate relevancy to your life now.

He said to them in verse 24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." Tremendously important verse. So we're going to walk through the elements of Jesus thesis here today. Slowly, carefully, make sure we don't misunderstand this, and I'll list out the points, first, second, third, and you can write those things down, one, two, three.

First, let's consider the word strive. First, the word strive. It's a verb strive, it's *agonizomai*, and you can hear in that verb *agonizomai*, you can hear the English words agonize or the noun agony. And that's right for you to think that way. That's the main idea in that verb.

That verb *agonizomai*, it means to be engaged in a struggle. It comes from the public games where it literally meant to engage in a contest, to contend for a prize. All those who enter the arena, before they ever get there, to the arena, they have sacrificed everything. Many years of grueling training. No pain, no gain, right? They have come to win. They pay that cost. So

that they can overcome in a public contest where there is only one winner. Only one person comes out of that arena crowned.

Listen, beloved, when we evangelize, we need to present Jesus for who he really is. He is not some squishy mournful schmuck who comes down and says, pleads with people, to accept him, as if he's got a self-esteem problem. Jesus is a great king. And he makes a gracious offer and he points us to an open door. Those who see who he is, what he offers, they don't care that the doorway is narrow. Anything that constricts them as they enter into that, and it hurts them, Oh, it's far better than what they've come from. Because they've learned to hate their sin. They've come to be sad and sorrowful over everything that they've been living through.

They want nothing to do with themselves anymore. Narrow, I don't care if I could squeeze through it. Camel through an eye of a needle? I'll follow that camel, I'll get in. The door is open now. He's inviting. So those who reject the invitation to enter through the door that he's so graciously opened, he's

going to reject them. Makes sense, listen once that door is shut, there's no opening it again.

So we're gonna ask a third question, third. Is Jesus teaching works salvation here? I mean, I thought salvation was free. Free offer? Um, can I just cash in the coupon? Uh, agonize, strive, pain? If Jesus is teaching works salvation here, then in this one instance he would be contradicting himself and the rest of the entirety of Scripture.

So no, he's not teaching works salvation. Let's make that clear. Nothing Jesus says here or anywhere else in his teaching contradicts the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. In fact, those reformation distinctives that we speak of all the time and the solas, those, those come from him, they come from his apostles.

Those who strive to enter the narrow door are those to whom God has been gracious. Those to whom God has granted his saving, regenerating grace. So it's the grace of God alone that is the

single, necessary factor, in the salvation of any one sinner. And to all whom God gives his saving, regenerating grace, they will come through that narrow door, which is open to them.

Those who strive and are striving to enter through the narrow door or those who come by faith and by faith alone. Not by works, not by their own human efforts. Nothing generated within them. Even their faith isn't generated within them, right? That's the clear teaching of Ephesians 2:8 and 9, "for by grace you have been saved through faith and this," that demonstrative pronoun pointing right back to "by grace you have been saved through faith," this salvation by grace through faith is not your own doing, "it's the gift of God."

Even the faith to believe is not your own doing. You exercise it, but is not your own doing. "It's not the result of works, so that no one may boast." You don't boast in your works. You don't boast in your prayer. You don't boast in your baptism. You don't boast in your church attendance. You don't boast in even your faith. It's given to you. To strive, agonize, make

every effort strain every nerve and all the rest. No one does that apart from believing.

But all that agony, effort, energy, and strain, by believing that is worth it, for all who believe the word, the one who said "strive to enter through the narrow door," you know what they do? They gladly strive to enter. They eagerly joyfully, gratefully endure whatever agony is required.

That opened door is an escape from eternal death. That open door is their salvation from their sin that they've been saturated with. That open door is the means and the entrance into gladness and joy and no more sorrow and suffering over all their sin. So they run through it. Come to salvation in and through Jesus Christ and him alone. It's a constrictive way, isn't it? You don't come in defining Jesus like a Playdough man into whoever you want him to be. Oh my Jesus would never condemn homosexuality. Oh, my Jesus accepts all kinds of people. You bigoted Christian.

Well, whatever your Jesus is, not this Jesus, not the door. This exclusivity of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, this is the narrow door, and it turns so many people away. Those who strive to enter will enter. Only those will enter who strive.

By entering, they demonstrate that they've been granted eternal life from God. So those who strive are those who believe, and those who believe are those who've been born again by this gracious initiative of a sovereign God. No one enters by striving with mere human effort, doing works according to the flesh. The striving that Jesus describes here is the product of a regenerate heart. A person who believes and obeys.

So Jesus said in John thirt, three, John 3:5, "Truly, truly, I say to you," he said this to Nicodemus, "unless one is born of water and the spirit," unless one is born by forgiveness of sins and the baptism of the Spirit, can't enter the Kingdom of God. No entrance. All who are born again, born of God, they strive to enter, and they do enter. No, works salvation here.

So we understand the word strive. We see Jesus is evangelizing, we recognize he's not promoting works salvation, but instead a Spirit generated striving. So number four, why the need? Why do we need to strive? Why does it require such agony to enter through this door? Well, because Jesus said the, the, the door is narrow, didn't he? *Stenos*, it means constricted, tight, really hard to squeeze yourself through it.

Like me fitting into old suits, kind of like that. To get through such a narrow, constricted space you gotta leave your sin behind. You gotta give up any claims you think you may have on God's favor. Any privilege you think is yours by your upbringing, your nationality, your church background, your church affiliation, the parents who raised you, any spiritual heritage, family connections, all that's gotta go.

It's a narrow door. So narrow that even these intangible things of our lives like goals and ambitions and dreams and desires, all of it gets cut away at that door. Jesus said, Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me," what did he say, "let him deny," what, "himself take up his cross daily, follow me. For

whoever would save his life, will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

So this strain, exertion, painful effort, it's driven by a faith that produces sustained, lifelong self-denial. And for the Jews to whom Jesus spoke, it meant they had to fight against the cultural sense of false security that they've been raised with. The assurance they received from their parents, and their rabbis, and all their respected teachers. Their struggle was against the predominant, powerful, social pressure of a ris, religious establishment, centuries of tradition. Rabbinical teaching, social pressure from family and friends. Listen. Is that all that different from us?

For Americans, this means we have to fight against the deception of a false assurance that we have been raised with. All those inappropriate promises we heard from, maybe, well meaning parents and grandparents, and well meaning pastors, respected teachers who told us, you prayed the prayer, so don't ever question that again. You said Jesus is your savior, so don't ever question that again. It's the devil who wants to

tempt you to doubt your salvation. Once saved, always saved, you're good to go.

Oh yeah, we've got traditions of our own. Believe me, evangelicals have, have built centuries of tradition too. It's all based on false, distorted, perverted, twisted, and it's become sub-Christian gospel, not true gospel. So we too need to strain against all those traditions, even if it means upsetting grandma. Even if it means we gotta tell Mom, Look that prayer I prayed when I was four, I don't think it really meant anything. I don't think I really understood. Because my life between like 7, or 10, and 32 is just filled with sin. Don't you see that? It's not what a regenerate heart does. Mom, I'm sorry, but I really need don't mean to upset you, but I really need to be saved. Isn't it better, that I really find true salvation and eternal life by questioning all this stuff, than just by making you feel good, that you did a good job as a mom, raising me in AWANA? Oh yeah, we got traditions. Much of it based on sentimentality.

Fifth point, just wrapping up here. Fifth point is, ask this question, is striving the duty of the unsaved only or is there a sense in which believers need to strive? I'm just gonna answer that question because of the way I set up the question you know my answer. Believers need to strive. What does it say there, Jesus said *agonizomai*, and he put it into the present tense. Be continually striving.

Habitually strive to enter. Keep on striving, agonizing, straining, exerting. Make it your habit, your lifestyle to struggle, strain, striving to enter, and you say, well, can I have no assurance about my salvation then? Absolutely you can, because your assurance of your salvation comes from something completely objective. Having nothing to do with you. It has to do with the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

But you know what will strengthen your assurance when you see in yourself this heart of striving, of longing, of desiring, of putting off sin, and putting on righteousness that strengthens your assurance. You know what will dull your assurance and remove it? It should, if you're a true Christian.

When you see yourself addicted to ease. When you see yourself, settling into comfort and you really resent people challenging you.

It may seem like salvation sounds like a lot of work. Think about the apostle Paul, we read earlier from Philippians chapter 3. He talked about straining, didn't he? He uses the same word *agonizomai*, in describing his entire approach to ministry life, Colossians 1:29, "For this I toil, struggling," there's that word *agonizomai*, "struggling," but with this, "all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

Christians understand that. There is a struggle. Yeah, there's strain and toil and tiring labor. Our sin is always trying to pull us back, and hold us down, and distract us, and tempt us, and pull us away. But here's the secret. We don't just have our own power, which is useless to fight that battle. The secret of the Christian life is it's not your fleshly energy that's fighting the fight, it's the power of Christ in us.

Philippians 2:13 there, 12-13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." He said, oh, no, salvation by works. It's gonna be hard. No, no, "it's God who works in you, both to will," there at the hard level, there at the regeneration level, "it's God who works in you, both to will and to do the work for his good pleasure." Paul applied this to himself. Personally, throughout his entire life, his entire ministry.

1 Corinthians 9:24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." One prize, one winner. That's the one who enters through the narrow door. The one who's striving to enter, straining every muscle, putting out on race day and every day before that, and every day.

He goes on and says, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath that we an imperishable. So I don't run aimlessly, I don't box as one, beating the air. I discipline my body. I make it my slave. So that after preaching to others, I, myself will not be disqualified."

Disqualified? Is he, is he mourning the loss of a trophy to put on the shelf? He's concerned about being disqualified from the race. Disqualified from the match, kicked out of the contest. So he's exercising self-discipline. He's training himself for godliness. He keeps on straining, striving, pursuing the prize.

Beloved, that's the Christian life. It's one marked by striving against sin, straining against the desires of the flesh, struggling to break free and resist temptations, fighting to win, turning away from the world and all of its distractions. We don't do it from our own initiative. It's not our own will. It's God who works in us. He's been gracious to us, his sovereign initiative. We don't generate this effort from ourselves.

The power of the Spirit, it is in us to work and strive by faith. You don't do it in your own strength. We do it in the resurrected power of Christ. Strength of our Savior who's our ever present Lord. And listen, we often don't really, really

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refer to it as striving or straining, do we? What do we call it?

Blessed rest.