

²²He went on his way from one town and village to another, teaching, and making his way to Jerusalem. ²³Someone said to him, “Lord, are only a few going to be saved?”

He said to them, ²⁴“Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. ²⁵Once the master of the house gets up and shuts the door, you will begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open for us!’ He will tell you in reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ ²⁶Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷And he will say, ‘I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers.’ ²⁸There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown outside. ²⁹People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰And note this: Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

I remember as a child driving up into the mountains of Colorado. The sites grew more and more beautiful as our family minivan climbed higher and higher into the sky. At different points, we took breaks to take pictures, let the engine cool down, and give my dad a rest from driving. Because that driving was not easy. All those switchbacks on the mountain pass were dangerous. At times we'd be driving right next to the edge of the cliff, able but not willing, to stick our heads out the window and look down for hundreds of feet. And at certain places on the path, the road narrowed, sometimes to only one lane, forcing the cars going up and cars going down to take turns. It was in those narrow spaces that we couldn't look out the window. We were too afraid. I'm sure it was some of the most white-knuckle driving my dad has ever had to endure. Those narrow spaces are tight and harrowing.

Jesus talks about narrow space is today. But as he's describing the kingdom of God, he doesn't compare it to a mountain road. He compares it to a narrow door. Now, right away, Jesus makes it clear that not everyone will enter into the kingdom of heaven: “Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” I think we often make the assumption that almost everybody is going to be in heaven. But that's not what Jesus says here. He shares the harsh reality that there will be many who perish for eternity: “Once the master of the house gets up and shuts the door, you will begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open for us!’ He will tell you in reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ And he will say, ‘I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers.’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown outside.” These are fear inducing words from Jesus. There are many who believe they're part of the kingdom of God but will be so surprised to stand outside of his heavenly feast on the Last Day. And who are these people whose eternal home will not be heaven? Jesus tells us. It's the evildoers. It's the unrighteous.

Many will not enter heaven because they depend on the wrong thing. Some depend on their pedigree, their family lineage. This was the biggest pitfall of the people Jesus is preaching to here. His Jewish audience believed they were right with God because they were God's chosen people, the keepers of his promises. And they traced that roll back to their forefathers, back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Jesus makes it clear to them that they will not be saved because they are physical descendants of the patriarchs. In fact, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when they see their forefathers on the other side of the gates.

You talk to people today, and there are plenty who don't go to church or have any relationship with the Lord, and yet, when you talk to them about their faith, they think they're right with God because of who they're related to. “My mom always went to church.” “My wife prays for me every Sunday at church.” “My grandparents laid the foundation here.” There's an assumption in these words, right? The assumption is that because we're connected to people with faith, we will ride their coattails into glory with them. Yet, many will be surprised at the end when grandma is standing inside, and they are not. The faith of the parents does not save the children.

Many will also not enter glory because they depend on superficial connections. Baptism is certainly not a superficial thing. It is a promise from God. But we do treat baptism as a superficial thing when we bring babies to be baptized, then never foster the fire of faith lit by baptism by bringing that child up in the word. We treat church attendance in a superficial way when we think that our presence here is what defines our faith, even if we never open our ears and take to heart what God tells us in his word. My heart breaks every time I hear one of our members talk about being good enough for heaven, because it feels like the message I try to hammer home week after week has landed on at least two deaf ears. We come up with all kinds of excuses about the outward things we do for God or the money we put in the collection plate or the years we spend on the church council or Ladies' Aid. Just like the crowd with Jesus, we think brushing shoulders with him and his people might get us into heaven: “We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.” And what does Jesus say to those who rely on superficial connections: “I don't know you or where you come from.”

Finally, many will not receive the kingdom of heaven because they lean on their sense of superiority. In your mind, what does God see when he looks at you? Does he see a person who is so much better than their drunkard neighbor? Does he see someone who is really trying to do

right in their lives? Does he see a genuine person, someone who cares for others more than the average person? None of us thinks of ourselves as moral garbage. Even when we do wrong, we spin it in our minds like the most talented political shills who go out and lie for their preferred politician or leader. We all think we're good people. But is that what God sees? "Depart from me, all you evildoers." You better be sure that you truly are a good person if you want to make into the kingdom of God, because the bar God sets has no give for what is fake or embellished. One sin damns and slams the door shut.

This door is narrow, isn't it? And as we find, all these things we depend on don't help us fit through the door. In fact, they make us wider. All the accomplishments I think I'll bag up and carry into heaven to prove I belong will actually have the opposite effect. They won't get me in. They will get me stuck.

This narrow door isn't narrow because you have to be a particularly great person to enter through it. Its narrowness is meant to make you try to bring nothing through it. This narrow door is faith in Jesus. And who is it for? Well Jesus tells us it's for people from north, south, east, and west. It's for the greatest and the least. It's for all. The door may be narrow, but the incredible fact is that there is a door. And that door was put there for you.

So, how do we enter through it? As we just talked about, it's not about making ourselves as big as we can with all our many godly accomplishments. If we rely on these things, we will not fit. No, we must become small, setting aside our prideful baggage to cling only to Christ. There's some irony that the one who comes to warn of the problem is also the solution. The one who tells you that you can't earn heaven on your own is the same one who earns heaven for you. And if anyone looks at this section and tells you that Jesus is advocating for the people to do anything more than trust in him, they are falling into the same trap Jesus warns against here and ignoring that Jesus' story does not end with teaching and preaching, but going to the sacrificial altar of wood on the cross. Jesus does not ask us to live up to a certain standard to enter the door. He lives that standard of perfection for us and calls us to do nothing but trust him.

But you'll point out: "Jesus says, 'strive to enter.'" That certainly sounds different than, "Just trust in me." Jesus also says those who will stand outside are the evildoers, or the unrighteous. We know that our righteousness does not come from within us. It comes from Christ. It comes from knowing Christ. But the Christian faith is not just having knowledge. The way to heaven is not simply knowing a password. It's faith. And faith is more complex than just knowing the name of Jesus. It's loving the name of Jesus.

The striving that Jesus is talking about here is striving to be small to fit through the door. It's striving to stop depending on ourselves when our every urge in life is to depend on ourselves. We become small through daily contrition and repentance, by recognizing our sin and the

Savior who died for those sins. Now, you hear this message every week, but have you become calloused to it? Do you float through life, excusing your sin as “not a big deal” instead of wrestling with it and confessing it? Be warned: If you try to carry even one bag full of pride through the narrow door, you will not fit and you will be left in the darkness forever with all the rest who thought they were just fine with God because they did this or that.

But here’s the good news. All those sins, all those arrogant mindsets, they don’t stick to you. Christ takes them away from lowly sinners. He lifts up those who are humbled when they open their eyes to their spiritual reality and stop living under the lies their broken hearts tell them. Heaven is yours because of Jesus, and now he calls on you to live like someone who has had heaven given to them free-of-charge.

Yes, strive to enter through the narrow door, clinging to Jesus like you cling to the car as it climbs the side of the mountain, but don’t strive by trying to lift yourself up and glorify yourself before God. Strive by reducing yourself to nothing, so that Christ is your all-in-all. Repent and receive what he gives freely. Himself. Amen.