THE NARROW DOOR

Luke 13:22–35

Key Verse: 13:24

“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”

Last week we kicked off our study of Luke’s Gospel Part 2. We’re starting at the halfway mark of Luke’s famous “Travel Narrative to Jerusalem,” which covers chapters 10–17. The events in this section happened during the last few months of Jesus’ life on earth. This section has some of his most famous parables, and the main theme is “the kingdom of God.” This Fall Quarter we’ll be studying Luke until we finish this section.

Last week Jesus healed a crippled woman by his word and his loving touch, and he was criticized because he did it on the Sabbath. But he compared the healing to a mustard seed of God’s kingdom. We learned that as his followers we too should be sowing the small seeds of God’s compassion and kindness to people, believing that his kingdom will grow amazingly when we do.

In today’s passage Jesus continues on his journey to Jerusalem and gets asked a question. Instead of answering directly, he challenges the people listening, and us, to make every effort to enter through the narrow door. It’s a famous allegory for what Christian life is like. As we think about these verses today, we want to learn what it really means to enter through the narrow door, and how we can actually do it. We’ll also take a look at Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem and find what we can learn about him from it. May God open our hearts and help us accept Jesus’ challenge today.

Look at verse 22. Jesus wasn’t just traveling; he was visiting each town and village along the way. It was his last journey before his crucifixion. So he knew his time was short. He made the most of it by teaching people God’s word diligently. We can see the area where he traveled here on a map.

Look at verse 23. We wonder why someone blurted out such a question. This person must have been following and listening very closely. Recently Jesus had denounced the towns where he’d performed his miracles because they never repented (10:13–15). He’d also rebuked the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the time, for their hypocrisy (11:42–54). At the beginning of this chapter Jesus said twice, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish” (3,5). Putting this all together, this man was getting the impression that not many would be saved. But saved from what? What does it mean to be “saved”? In light of verses 28 and 29, one meaning of being saved means to be able to enter the kingdom of God. At that time people thought that all the Jews, by definition, would be able to go to God’s kingdom. But Jesus seemed to be saying something different.

How did Jesus answer the question? He didn’t just address the person with the question; he said to them all, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to” (23b–24). Jesus didn’t let them just speculate about people in general; he challenged them to do something personally. To do it, he used the metaphor of a narrow door.

When we think about a narrow door, many things come to mind. First of all, it may very well be that the metaphorical house Jesus is talking about had a much larger, grander door right in front, with better lighting and much easier access. But the narrow door was off to the side, harder to find, harder to get to, and harder to fit through. People would have to push through shrubs, duck, crouch down and squeeze themselves to get through the narrow door. It seemed too much trouble. But the irony was that only the narrow door gave access to the house. Many would come to the much easier, bigger front door, but it wouldn’t even open, and nobody would ever come to answer it no matter how much they rang the bell or knocked. So what does the narrow door represent? As we said, it’s the way to be saved; it’s the way to God’s kingdom. What is this narrow door?

**First** the narrow door is a warning against spiritual complacency. We can understand this when we think about many of the Jews of Jesus’ day. Many thought they had a guaranteed ticket into God’s kingdom; they weren’t really worried about it. Jesus was saying that with that attitude, they would try to show up casually at the entrance to God’s kingdom and, to their shock, wouldn’t even be allowed in. Many people today think God is love, and so they think they have nothing to worry about; no matter how they live or what they do—they’ll be accepted. But Jesus says, “…because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.” This is why the Bible urges us not to be complacent but to “continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Php2:12).

**Second** the narrow door is the way of faith in God’s grace. As we said, if the narrow door is the way to be saved, the way to God’s kingdom, then we can define it as the way of faith in God’s grace. The only way anyone can be saved and eventually enter God’s kingdom is by faith in God’s grace. Only humble people can take this way. This was shown to be true many times in Jesus’ ministry. Back in chapter 7, a woman who’d lived a sinful life came and anointed Jesus. People were judging her, but Jesus praised her and told her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Finally he told her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (7:48,50). She had faith in Jesus’ forgiving grace. That was her “narrow door.” Later another woman came to Jesus while he was busy with a very important man. She just touched him from behind and her bleeding illness was healed. Then Jesus insisted on meeting her. She came forward and told the whole truth. Then Jesus told her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace” (8:48). Here the word “healed” is the same in Greek as the word “saved.” It was her faith, Jesus said, that had done it. Faith in his grace was her “narrow door.” Much later, Jesus was going through a remote place where he encountered ten men with leprosy and he healed them all. But only one of them came back, praising with a loud voice, throwing himself at Jesus’ feet and thanking him. Jesus told him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well” (17:19). Again, being “made well” is the same Greek word as being “saved,” and again it was the man’s faith that made it happen. Faith in Jesus’ grace was his “narrow door.” Finally, there was a blind man by the roadside in Jericho. He kept shouting, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” People were rebuking him and telling him to be quiet, but he was shouting all the more. Finally, when Jesus stopped and called him, the man asked for his sight, and Jesus said, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you” (18:42). Again, the word “healed” is the same Greek word as “saved.” Faith in Jesus’ mercy and grace was his “narrow door,” too.

There were many strict, religious people in Jesus’ day. They thought that by their legalistic religious observances they were making themselves right in the sight of God. But the way of good works, of strict religious rituals and rules, is not the narrow door (Ro9:30–33). Only humble faith in Jesus’ grace is the narrow door that leads to healing and salvation.

**Third** the narrow door is living in a close, personal relationship with Jesus. Let’s read verses 25–27. What’s repeated here is what’s really important. The owner repeatedly says to these people, “I don’t know you or where you come from.” They claim to have a casual and even a familiar relationship with him. They say, “We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.” The problem was, while they were in close physical proximity to Jesus, they never developed a personal relationship with him. They were content with being spectators. They depended on that one time when Jesus was with them, but they never sought to be close to him afterwards.

Many people mistakenly think Christianity is about believing the right things, about having the right theology, or the right morals. But it’s way more than that. Christianity is about growing in a deep, personal relationship with Jesus. That personal relationship is the narrow door. Like any real, personal relationship, it takes effort to develop. If we’re superficial about the relationship, it’s like we don’t want to be bothered to go deeper. Then it’s distant and forced, not authentic. Those who are spiritually healed and saved, who get to enter God’s kingdom, are those who’ve developed a close, personal relationship with Jesus.

**Fourth** the narrow door is the way of the cross. Jesus himself was taking this way, in obedience to the Father’s will. People wanted him to be a popular messiah. But he told his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life” (9:22). It was the way of the cross, the only way that led to life. The cross was awaiting him in Jerusalem, and we see in today’s passage that he’s determined to get there (22,32–33). The way of the cross is the narrow door.

When Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow door,” in a sense he was inviting us to follow him. Earlier he said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (9:23). By nature we don’t like suffering or self-denial. This is why Jesus said, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.” In Greek “Make every effort” literally is “Agonize.” It’s the same word Paul used when he said to “fight the good fight” (1Ti6:12; 2Ti4:7). The night he was arrested, Jesus went to a place to pray, and he said, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” It says, “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (22:42,44). The word “anguish” is this same word “agonize” or “make every effort.” Like Jesus, if we’re really going to enter through the narrow door, carry our own cross and follow him, we’ve got to really struggle against our desire for ease, comfort and pleasure, our desire to live for ourselves, and especially against our sinful nature. There are so many choices we have to make every day—some small, some big. It’s hard and weird to go to that narrow door on the side of the building. Many avoid that narrow door, the way of the cross. But then they can’t experience healing, salvation and the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (9:24). Let’s read verse 24 again.

Now let’s read verses 28–30. Here Jesus challenges Jewish exclusivism. The outcasts will be in; the elite will be out. Jesus is saying that those who’re proud, who have an entitlement mentality, will be greatly surprised to find themselves thrown out of God’s kingdom. God wants in his kingdom only humble people, those who’ve entered through the narrow door, those who’ve put their faith in his grace and who’ve made every effort to grow in a personal relationship with Jesus and follow him in the way of the cross. Here Jesus also answers the original question if only a few are going to be saved. He says God’s kingdom is going to be filled with people who’ve come from all over the world.

In the last part of today’s passage some Pharisees come to warn Jesus to leave before Herod catches him. The powers of darkness were eager to swallow him. But Jesus was sure that God’s will would be accomplished. He was doing nothing but good, living in the light, driving out demons and healing people and putting his full trust in his Father God. Jesus knew he would be killed not by Herod on the way, but in Jerusalem. Jerusalem had had a long history of killing God’s prophets who’d come to challenge them to repent of their sins against God. Jesus knew the same fate awaited him there. When he thought of this, his heart became so sad—not for himself, but for them. Read verse 34. Jesus had a mother’s heart, even for these people. He knew that when they rejected him, their house would be left desolate—meaning Jerusalem would in a few decades be totally destroyed. In verse 35 he predicts both his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and perhaps also his second coming.

So today Jesus is challenging us: “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.” It’s a pretty serious challenge. May God help us to accept this challenge personally.