

LUKE 13:22–30. (EHV)

He went on his way from one town and village to another, teaching, and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone said to him, “Lord, are only a few going to be saved?” He said to them, “**Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. 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. People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. And note this: Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.**”

“Strive to enter through the narrow door,” Jesus tells us. The Greek word Luke uses that the EHV translates as “strive” describes the kind of effort and struggle and strain and sweat that gets put into an athletic contest, like a wrestling match or a footrace. Luke later uses a word closely related to this one to describe Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was praying so earnestly that his sweat was as thick and heavy as drops of blood falling to the ground.

Have you ever *strived* for something? Maybe your parents told you that if you achieved certain grades on your next report card, they would buy you something you really wanted, or maybe you had to get your grades back up in order to be eligible to play your favorite sport in high school or college. So you hit the books hard and got a tutor and wouldn’t let anyone distract you and basically gave up your normal life for weeks or months or whatever it took. Or maybe you had a daughter graduating and wanted to host a party for her, and realized just what needed to be done in your house and garage in order for that to happen. So you blocked out large chunks of time every day and sorted through countless piles and items, throwing away and organizing until everything was clean. Maybe it was an athletic goal you were determined to reach or a record you were determined to break. Maybe it was a hunt. Maybe it was a craft or other hobby project. I’m guessing that each one of you has strived for something at least once in your life.

Whether we’ve truly strived for many things or only a few, there is one thing that Jesus wants all of us to strive for. He wants us to strive, to struggle, to strain to enter through the narrow door of salvation.

1. Why?

Jesus tells us to strive to enter through the narrow door because “many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” Jesus calling the way to salvation “the narrow door” and saying that “*many*...will try to enter and will not be able” reminds us of something he said much more clearly and bluntly in his Sermon on the Mount: “Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter through it. How narrow is the gate, and how difficult is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13–14).

Do we grasp how big of a reality check Judgment Day is going to be? Especially in our country where we place a high value on tolerance, and where tolerance often leads to affirmation and acceptance, we can get the idea that “Yeah, we have these religious differences now, but they’re just based on different cultures and upbringings and traditions that have developed over the years. But God’s going to accept everyone, or at least most of us, and everyone, or at least most people, are going to end up in heaven, whatever that might be.”

That’s not what the One says who proved himself the Son of God by conquering death. Now I don’t want to give the false impression that every difference between every Christian denomination represents the difference between heaven and hell, without any further discussion or distinction. But Jesus is also making sure that we don’t get the impression that those differences don’t matter. They do. He not only says that the better majority of people will not be saved and will go to destruction, but here he even says that many of those *who try to enter* will not be able. That’s a specific group of unbelievers. There are unbelievers who don’t try to enter. Their god is their stomach. Their philosophy is, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Live for today, for tomorrow may never come.” They don’t really give any thought to religion or take it seriously. Jesus isn’t talking about those people here. He is talking about people who do take religion seriously, people who know there is an afterlife and seek to be on the right side of it. Many of them will not be able to enter salvation.

Now in case we’re in agreement with Jesus up to this point, but we’re like, “Yeah, I know, but I’m not going to be in the number of those people,” Jesus makes us imagine that we are, so that we take his warning seriously: “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 up for us!’ He will tell you in reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’”

And now we find out that he is not just talking about people who take religion seriously in general, but people familiar with Jesus, people who have heard Jesus, people who acknowledge Jesus as an important religious figure. “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.’”

Now it is clear as Jesus goes on that he is primarily addressing his Jewish audience here. “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.” He wants to stress to his Jewish audience that just because they are children of Abraham, just because they are descended from the patriarchs, and just because they are familiar with Jesus and have heard his preaching and teaching and have eaten with him, for instance, if they were included in the feeding of the five thousand, doesn’t mean they’re automatically going to enter the narrow door of salvation.

But isn’t Jesus saying something to us too? Couldn’t the things that those locked outside on Judgment Day will be yelling also be things we could say? “Lord, I ate and drank in your presence. I took the Lord’s Supper multiple times. I participated in potlucks at church with other believers. You taught in my streets. I heard your voice in Sunday School and Catechism instruction and from the pulpit in my local city.” And yet Jesus says he will tell not a few of such people, but many, “I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers.”

Fear has sometimes been called the foundation of religion. Whether it's fear of guilt, fear of death, fear of God, or fear of the unknown, many view religion as simply a psychological solution to that fear. Usually this is pointed out with an air of condescension, as if religious people were somehow inferior human beings because they have these fears and because they need religion to cope with them.

But just because something is connected with fear doesn't automatically make it bad, does it? Those of you who have had or have small children have probably had to use fear for the good of your children. If your little boy is about to touch a hot plate or burner and you're not close enough to stop him physically, you will probably shout his name and say, "No! Don't touch!" and make a frightening face and tell him that he will get bad owies if he touches it. You want him to be afraid, because that fear will keep him from a sure and certain bad outcome.

So playing off people's capacity for fear is not bad, if the thing they should fear is real and will do them real harm. By helping to intensify their fear for that thing, you help them to search for an alternative to that thing so that they will not need to fear.

Does this sound like a legitimate fear, something that will do us real harm? "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, [people considered to be the fathers and leaders of the Jewish people,] but you [Jews] yourselves thrown out." Jesus might have put it this way for this audience today: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Martin Luther, the Lutheran Christian theologians Martin Chemnitz, Johann Gerhard, and C. F. W. Walther, and the Lutheran hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt in the kingdom of God, but you Lutheran Christians yourselves thrown out."

Can you imagine? That eternal pain, anguish, disappointment, and regret is an outcome Jesus wants us to be afraid of, for our own good. "Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." "Day of wrath, oh, day of mourning" indeed. Jesus wants us to be afraid of that outcome so that we will avoid it.

2. How?

But just being afraid of it is not how we avoid it. Just being afraid of it is, in fact, all the farther those who are religious but are not true Christians are able to go.

We avoid it, rather, by listening to Jesus and striving to enter through the narrow door. And it is not difficult to know what that narrow door is. Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus says even more explicitly in John 10, "I am the door for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved."

So ironically, striving and sweating and straining to enter through the narrow door means making sure that we are relying only on him for our salvation, only on his merits, only on his blood, only on his forgiveness, only on his strength, and not on our own merits, good works, and strength, not on our own striving and sweating and straining.

Why would Jesus call it striving to enter through the narrow door, when it means not relying on our own striving? He calls that kind of faith striving is precisely because it does not come naturally to us. The road of trusting in Jesus alone for salvation is not a downhill road, as if

once you get started on it in baptism, the rest of life is just coasting to heaven. As Jesus himself just said, even many people who listen to Jesus's teaching believe in some form of work-righteousness. Either they insist that they themselves chose to accept Jesus into their heart, or they met Jesus halfway, or the reason they are going to heaven is because of what he did for them *and* what they have done for him. Even among us Lutherans, I don't know how many Lutheran children I've asked in Catechism instruction, "What would you say to God on Judgment Day if he asked you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?'" and their answer has included something about them. I have to teach them that the answer from God's word is simply to point at the One sitting at God the Father's right hand, to point at Jesus who lived, died, and rose for them. And if Christian children struggle to answer that question, then what about us adults?

Strive to enter through the narrow door. Keep listening to God's word, not just letting it bounce off your eardrums. Keep receiving the Lord's Supper, but don't just go through the motions and actions of it. Listen to what you are receiving there, and receive it in faith. "This is the true body and blood of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ given into death and poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins." And Jesus did that, as he says here, for all people, for people from east and west, from north and south, so that they could recline not just at the Lord's Table here on earth, but recline at his table in the kingdom of God. There's nothing of your own to add to that work of Jesus and those promises of Jesus. That work of Jesus and those promises of Jesus—that *is* the door.

Strive to enter through that door. Jesus wants you inside with him, not outside in the darkness. He is the door. Enter through him, and you will avoid eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth. Enter through him, and you will enjoy eternal pleasures at his right hand. God grant it to us for Jesus's sake. Amen.