

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 28, 2022

Make Every Effort

Luke 13:22-30

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Luke first told us this near the end of chapter nine. Now, at the beginning of today's text, it helps to be reminded. Not because Luke is a stickler for geography, but because we need to keep the larger story in view. We need to remember where Jesus is headed. His journey is more than just a sequence of stops in various towns and villages, a collection of pushpins on a map. It's a path, a way, toward his own suffering and death. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

And along the way, someone in the crowd shouts out a question. "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" (v. 23). It's not just that one person's question. It's probably on the hearts and minds of many people in the crowd, partly because they've heard Jesus' teaching about the urgency of the kingdom and the cost of being one of his disciples. They already sense, from what Jesus has said and done, that making it into the realm of God is no smooth and easy path that a limitless multitude will use to coast on into the life of the world to come. "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

Jesus answers this question indirectly by focusing not on how many will be saved but on how we can be saved. He uses the image of a door. And not just any door. A narrow door. So there's an invitation, an open door, but it's not a door that's easy to get through. It takes effort. In other words, entering the kingdom of God requires focus and discipline. What's more, this door of opportunity won't stay open forever. This narrow door is also the soon-to-be-shut door. And you don't want to be among those who are left standing outside, knocking and pleading to be let in. "Lord, open the door for us" (v. 25a).

But the one who owns the house and hosts the gathering answers, "I don't know you or where you come from" (v. 25b). "What do you mean, you don't know us? We had meals with you. We listened to your preaching and teaching." But he still won't let them in. The Lord says, "Knowing me involves more than just being in my presence and hearing what I have to say. Real fellowship runs deeper. And just hearing isn't enough. How much have you really done what I've taught you?"

Our Lord reminds us that casual interest isn't the same thing as true repentance and faith. When the time comes for the final reckoning, having a religious heritage, having checked off a set of beliefs, and having hung around Jesus won't be enough. Your life will be assessed by how much you've truly followed the way of Jesus and been shaped into his likeness. That's what it means for him to know you, and for you to know him.

During his career in government, Arthur F. Burns occupied several important places of authority and responsibility. He was chairman of the United State Federal Reserve System, ambassador to West Germany, and an economic counselor to several presidents. In the 1970s, Burns, who was Jewish, began attending an informal White House group for prayer. Each week a different person took a turn ending the meeting in prayer. At first the group

wasn't quite sure how to involve Burns, so he was passed by. But as one author summarizes it,

One week ... the group was led by a newcomer who did not know the unusual status Burns occupied. As the meeting ended, the newcomer turned to Arthur Burns and asked him to close the time with a prayer. Some of the old-timers glanced at each other in surprise and wondered what would happen. But without missing a beat, Burns reached out, held hands with others in the circle, and prayed this prayer: "Lord, I pray that you would bring Jews to know Jesus Christ. I pray that you would bring Muslims to know Jesus Christ. Finally, Lord, I pray that you would bring Christians to know Jesus Christ. Amen."¹

Burns was onto something by this prayerful challenge to us who profess faith in Christ, to carefully consider how much we truly know him and whether we're truly living according to his will and way.

There's a quotation attributed to author and storyteller Garrison Keillor. It comes in slight variations, but essentially goes like this: "Anyone who thinks sitting in church can make you a Christian must also think that sitting in a garage can make you a car." Jesus' answer to the crowd's question about how many will be saved "closes the door" on any presumption that just a casual association with him and his followers is enough to merit admission to God's reign. It's no wonder that a few chapters earlier, when Luke first tells us that Jesus is setting course for Jerusalem, Jesus soon starts talking about the cost of following him, culminating with, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (9:62).

I like the way that Eugene Peterson renders Jesus' answer to the question, "Will only a few be saved?" Jesus says, "Whether few or many is none of your business. Put your mind on your life with God. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires your total attention."² As I noted earlier, entering the kingdom of God requires focus and discipline. In our text, this is captured by Jesus' statement, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door." The phrase "make every effort" translates a term that means "to strive." It was a word the Greeks used to capture the agony of the athlete in the stadium. Then, as now, athletic excellence didn't just happen. It requires training and strenuous effort. You have to resist distractions, practice self-denial, and make sacrifices. Similarly, when it comes to entering the reign of God, Jesus says you must make every effort, you must strive, to enter through the narrow door. Salvation involves a kind of spiritual fitness.

Minister and author Tony Jones writes about the danger of over-relying on head knowledge in order to follow Jesus more faithfully. Though that's certainly part of discipleship, there's also a need for simply getting in there and doing what Jesus commands and commissions us to do. Jones says:

Getting a "feel for the game" in following Jesus is much the same. You can listen to innumerable sermons and read countless books, but the true transformation happens only when you practice the disciplines that lie at the heart of the faith. As the disciplines are practiced, your life becomes more attuned to God's life, and you become more "at one" with the rhythms of creation. Like a finely trained athlete, you can anticipate the movement on the field; like a world-class pianist, you actually inhabit the music as you take notes on the page and give them life; like an expert carpenter, you run your hands over the grain of the wood and see what this rough cut can become.³

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's on his way to the cross. And those who want to be saved, who want to come into the realm of God, must also follow a path defined by his cross. This means a life of self-denial, of dying to self, in order to truly live on the inside of

God's reign. As one person has put it, "Access to God is not a wide-open, take-any-route-you-want affair. He sets the route's ways and means."⁴ As followers of our Lord, we still believe that he always has been, always is, and always will be the way.

According to him, those who take this way come from many different directions. That's because the invitation goes out to the whole world. God desires that everyone have access to his blessing through Jesus. But note that this doesn't entail universal salvation. In other words, the belief that eventually everyone will be saved and enjoy the life of heaven, the reign of God. This teaching is at odds with so much of what the Bible says about those who will experience eternal life and the blessedness of God's presence because they have received the kingdom, in contrast to those who will experience eternal death because they have rejected the reign of God in the world and in their lives. Jesus' words about a narrow door that eventually becomes a closed door are a sobering warning that how you and I respond to God and to his power and presence in our lives makes all the difference, now and forever.

Jesus says, "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their place in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last" (v. 29-30). Notice how our Lord keeps us on our spiritual toes by reminding us that in the end, there will be some unexpected reversals. As one commentator has put it, "Many will get to the table, including some surprises."⁵ It reminds me of something that John Newton, the converted slave-dealer, who authored the beloved hymn, "Amazing Grace," once wrote. He said, "If I ever reach heaven, I expect to find three wonders there: First, to meet some I had not thought to see there; second, to miss some I had thought to meet there; and third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there!"⁶

Amazing grace. That's what ultimately gets any of us through the narrow door and into the everlasting gathering of God's people. Jesus isn't trying to tell you that if you have enough moral determination, enough willpower, and enough self-discipline, you can make it into the kingdom of God. Salvation always has been, and always will be by grace through faith. But genuine repentance and faith involves truly knowing Jesus personally, following his way and doing his will.

In the end, he's the one who will judge us. The very one who is on his way to Jerusalem. On his way to the cross. On his way to a death that will secure the forgiveness of our sins and open the doorway to resurrection life. So remember that the one who will make the final assessment of your life and my life is the one who died for us. As author and pastor Frederick Buechner has written:

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.⁷

Here today, out of his great mercy and love for us, Jesus continues to invite us and exhort us. The narrow door is open, he says, but it won't stay open forever. So by God's grace and in God's power, make every effort to enter. On the other side of this door is the reign of God, a realm of life and joy, an assembly of the faithful who can testify that all the labor, struggle, self-discipline, and self-denial are worth it. It all comes down to knowing Jesus. So where do you stand in relation to him and his kingdom?

¹ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2003) 101.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress 1993) 154.

³ Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 31.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove; IVP Academic, 1994) 245.

⁵ Bock, *Luke*, 246.

⁶ Quoted in *Our Daily Bread* (March 21, 1996).

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 58.