

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

## THE NARROW DOOR

Luke 13:22-30

by

Steven J. Cole

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Luke Lesson 66

### The Narrow Door Luke 13:22-30

Years ago, before Korea was divided, a theological professor from Yale visited a mission in northern Korea. He wanted to preach in a country church, so the mission sent him with a missionary interpreter to a rural Korean village. The professor began his sermon, "All thought is divided into two categories, the concrete and the abstract."

The Korean interpreter looked at the tiny congregation sitting with eager attention on the floor of the little church—toothless grandmothers, barefoot schoolboys—and made a quick decision. "Dear friends," he translated, "I have come all the way from America to tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ." From that point on, the sermon was firmly in the interpreter's hands (Samuel Moffet, *Christianity Today* [11/14/94], p. 55).

I love to sit around and discuss theological issues with anyone who is interested. That was probably one of the best aspects of seminary, to be able to interact with my classmates on a broad range of biblical and theological issues. But while it is fine to discuss theology, there is an inherent danger in doing so, namely, the danger of not applying the truth to one's own heart.

In our text, Luke again emphasizes Jesus' teaching ministry: "He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem" (13:22). If you know the end of the story, the mention of Jerusalem strikes an ominous note, because it meant rejection by the nation and the horror of the cross. Somewhere in some village some unnamed person in the crowd asked Jesus an interesting theological question: "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" I don't know the man's motives for asking the question. Perhaps he saw the increasing opposition from the religious leaders and he could sense that the crowds, although superficially interested in Jesus' message, tended to side with their leaders. But he asked this question, "Are there just a few who are being saved?"

Most of us have wondered about that question as we look at the billions of pagans compared with the few committed Christians. It would have made for an interesting theological discussion. But Jesus did not answer the question directly. Instead, He directed the question away from abstract theological speculation and toward specific application for each person in the crowd. The man had asked, "Will the saved be *few*?" Jesus turned it around to ask, "Will the saved be *you*?"

Remember, Jesus was speaking to a crowd made up mostly of religious Jews. Almost to a person they believed in the one true God. They were not agnostics or polytheists. They believed in the Hebrew Scriptures and lived in basic accordance with them. In giving His answer, Jesus was not addressing a pagan audience. He was talking to the "church" crowd, most of whom assumed that they would go to heaven because they were good Jews. And He gives us church folks some important and practical lessons on the subject of salvation:

Salvation requires our earnest effort, our urgent attention,  
and our careful self-examination.

It requires our earnest effort because the door is narrow. It requires our urgent attention because the door is soon to be closed. It requires our careful self-examination because once it is closed, the door will be eternally-closed.

1. Salvation requires our earnest effort: the narrow door (13:24).

Our Lord did not say, "Good question! Let's divide up into groups and discuss what each of you thinks about it." To pool the group's thoughts would only increase speculation. Jesus wasn't interested in speculation about theology. He was concerned about the personal salvation of His hearers. So, rather than opening it up for discussion, Jesus gave a command that applied the question to His hearers' hearts: "Strive to enter by the narrow door."

- A. Salvation requires our earnest effort because the door is narrow and exclusive, not wide and all-inclusive.

Strive comes from a Greek word used of athletic contests and of war. Obviously, it implies a great deal of effort. You don't win wars or athletic contests by being passive. You never see an athlete

receiving the gold medal, who says, "I had never worked out or run in a race until a few weeks ago. I thought it would be fun, so here I am." Every athlete who wins *strives* to win. He invests great energy and effort into winning. It is not an accident if he wins. It is the result of deliberate and sustained effort. Not everyone receives the prize. Only a few are winners.

The fact that the door is narrow implies that it takes some deliberate thought and effort to go through it. There aren't many doors into the same place, so that you can take your pick. There is one and only one door, which is Jesus Christ. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Him (John 14:6). The entrance is narrow and exclusive, not broad and all-inclusive.

There isn't one great big door that's easy to find and stroll through without thinking about it. There is one narrow door. You might not like the fact that it is narrow. You may think that it's too exclusive. You may say, "I believe that God is loving and that He will accept everyone who tries to do his best. I believe that all sincere people will get through the door." But, the fact is, according to Jesus it *is* narrow, not wide. He made it narrow without checking with us for our ideas about how wide it should be. Whether you like it or not, Jesus claimed to be the only way to God. You can either enter through the narrow door, which is Christ alone, or you can invent a broad door that includes many ways to God, and thus contradict what Jesus Himself said.

Jesus is asking, "Are you striving to enter the narrow door? Are you making your salvation a matter of deliberate and sustained effort? Are you sure that you're entering the narrow door as defined by Jesus and not a broad door of your own choosing?" You say, "Whoa! I thought that salvation is a free gift, received simply by grace through faith, not a matter of our effort. How does this harmonize with striving for it?"

Jesus isn't talking about salvation by works or human effort. But He is talking about our attitude toward it. Those who are only mildly interested about salvation will not obtain it. Those who view salvation as an interesting topic for discussion are missing the point. Those who say, "I believe that all roads lead to God and all good people will go to heaven" are engaging in human speculation,

but they are not submitting to Jesus' divine revelation. They are putting their thoughts about being open-minded and tolerant above Jesus' words that the door is narrow.

The salvation of your eternal soul should not be a casual subject that is good for an occasional stimulating theological discussion! It ought to consume your attention. It shouldn't be a matter of mild interest that elicits a halfhearted response. You need to take great pains to make sure that you have entered the narrow door. Jesus doesn't say, "Stroll through the big door sometime when you're not doing anything else and check it out." He says, "Strive to enter by the narrow door."

Again, picture the Olympic athlete. He makes winning the gold medal the focus of his life. Everything he does is controlled by his goal of winning the gold. He won't eat anything that is not good for him, because it might hinder his muscles from performing at their maximum on the day of the race. He doesn't go to parties and stay up late the night before, because he wants to be rested and ready to give everything to the race. He will refrain from engaging in fun activities that his other friends enjoy, such as skiing or playing softball, because he doesn't want to break his leg or tear his ligaments. He is disciplined to work out for hours, often when his body is screaming, "That's enough!" because he wants to win.

That's the kind of attitude that we should have toward our own salvation, according to Jesus. It shouldn't be a nice thing to think about every once in a while when you don't have anything better to do. It should be on your mind every day. It should govern everything you do. It should determine how you spend your time, your money, and your leisure hours. You must strive to enter because the door is narrow. It's not a great big wide door that you can wander into without thinking about it. You must be earnest to make sure that Christ alone is your hope of salvation.

B. Salvation requires our earnest effort because many will seek to enter and will not be able to do so.

Jesus says that *many* will seek to enter and will not be able. The following verse indicates that they will not be able to enter because they missed the deadline. It is not that many strive to enter, but only some of those striving succeed. Rather, as the fol-

lowing verses show, some will wake up to the serious issues involved in their own salvation too late. They had assumed that all was well with them because they were decent, religious people. They knew Jesus in a casual way, but they had not taken the gospel to heart. They had never repented of their sins. But they didn't consider these matters seriously until it was too late.

I'll say more about missing the deadline in a moment. But for now, I am making the point that if you follow the crowd you will not follow the Savior into eternal life. Jesus says that there are many (and He is talking about the religious crowd) who will not enter through the narrow door. If you follow them, you will be shut out when that door slams shut. And, it always takes effort, both mentally and morally, to go against the majority. You have to think about matters for yourself and decide, "I will not follow conventional wisdom. I will not go along with group pressure. I will follow the Lord Jesus Christ."

So Jesus' first point is that salvation requires our earnest effort. If you are only halfhearted about it or go with the crowd, you will miss it! You must strive to enter by the narrow door.

2. Salvation requires our urgent attention: the soon-closed door (13:25-27).

We all tend to procrastinate, but Jesus tells us that salvation is the most dangerous matter in all of life to procrastinate about.

A. Salvation requires our urgent attention because the time is coming soon when the door will be shut.

The day is coming when the head of the house (God) will get up and shut the door. Clearly, at that point there will not be another chance to get in. Once the door is shut, it is shut. Those inside are in; those outside are out.

You ask, "When will the door be shut?" That's for the head of the house to decide. The final closing of the door will be at the judgment, which will take place at the second coming of Christ. John describes the scene: "And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.... And if anyone's name was not found

written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:12, 15). Since the Lord is coming soon, you don't want to procrastinate about salvation!

But each person's eternal destiny is fixed before the day of judgment, at the point of death. Hebrews 9:27 states, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." Since life hangs by a thread, even for the youngest and healthiest among us, we dare not procrastinate about the matter of salvation.

Maybe you're thinking, "I'm young and healthy and the second coming is probably not going to happen soon. I've got some time before I need to deal with these matters."

But that's not wise because the head of the house might slam shut the day of opportunity for you to respond to His offer of salvation. This was true for Jesus' hearers. Messiah was in their very midst and they were in danger of rejecting Him. They had the unique opportunity of hearing Jesus Himself teaching the Word of God, but that window of opportunity was about to close, because Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem. In a few short years Titus, the Roman general, would destroy Jerusalem and the temple and the Jews would be dispersed for 1,900 years.

As with them, so with us: the opportunity to respond to Jesus is now. Don't mistakenly think, "I've got plenty of time." You might not have another opportunity like that which you have right now as you hear the Word of God proclaimed. You may leave here and your mind gets caught up with work or duties at home or other things, and the tug of the Spirit on your heart fades. It is said of Esau that after he had sold his birthright, later, "when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears" (Heb. 12:17). He missed his day of opportunity with God.

Once that door is shut, there will be no bargaining or working out a last minute deal. We must enter on God's terms and in God's time, or not at all. At the judgment, everyone will know the truth and realize what a horrible mistake they have made. But it will be too late. As J. C. Ryle puts it, "Hell is nothing but truth known too late" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:134). Salvation is an urgent matter!

- B. Salvation requires our urgent attention because there is a great difference between casual acquaintance with Jesus and a personal relationship with Him.

Those who are shut out seem surprised. They call out, "Lord, open up to us!" But He says, "I don't know where you're from." They reply, "We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets." They were acquainted with Him. But the problem was, He was not acquainted with them. He tells them, "I do not know where you are from. Depart from Me, all you evildoers." If you have a genuine personal relationship with Jesus, you will not continue in your evil deeds. Salvation is God's free gift, apart from works, but those who are truly saved will make progress in holiness, apart from which no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

Now, not later, is the time to make sure that you have a personal relationship with Jesus, not just a casual acquaintance with Him. One major evidence of such a relationship is that you are growing in holiness, not just outwardly, but in your heart.

Thus salvation requires our earnest effort and our urgent attention. Finally, Jesus teaches us that ...

- 3. Salvation requires our careful self-examination: the eternally closed door (13:28-30).

Since many will be surprised and since the stakes are so high and irreversible, we must be careful to examine our own hearts, to make sure that we are inside the narrow door before it is eternally closed. There are three reasons we must examine ourselves:

- A. Salvation requires our careful self-examination because of the horrible consequences of making a mistake.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth doesn't sound like a fun experience, especially when it continues through all eternity! Think of it as an eternal root canal without anesthesia! These men had assumed that they would be included in the kingdom. They were Jews, not filthy gentiles. They were related to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But now they find themselves shut out and, of all things, those dirty gentiles from east and west and north and south are inside, dining with the patriarchs and prophets!

Contrary to popular modern views, hell will not be a wild party for all the wicked. And, contrary to most popular thinking, hell will not be just for the worst of the worst—the Hitlers of this world. These men were religious Jews who thought they were deserving of heaven. But they would not submit to Jesus and so they faced the horrible eternal consequence of being in that place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Because there will be many religious people in hell, all of us who attend church should examine ourselves to make sure that we are not cast into that place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

B. Salvation requires our careful self-examination because there are two and only two final categories.

The closed door makes a final separation between those inside and those outside. There are none sort of in and sort of out. While there are gradations of rewards for those who are in and gradations of punishment for those who are out, there is a great chasm fixed between the two (Luke 16:26), with nothing in the middle. You won't be basically in heaven because you're a basically good person. Either you're in because you have entered through the narrow door, which is Jesus Christ, or you're out because you have trusted in your own goodness or in the fact that you're a church-going American Christian. You need to examine yourself and carefully answer the question, "If I were to stand before God and He said, 'Why should I let you into My heaven?' what would I say?" The only correct answer is, "I am trusting completely in Your Son Jesus and His shed blood."

C. Salvation requires our careful self-examination because those who assume they're in may be out.

Jesus says that there will be a great reversal. Many who thought they were first will be last. Many whom the "first crowd" thought were last, will be first. The Jews of Jesus' day despised the pagan gentiles. They thought that if they ate with gentiles they would be defiled. But Jesus says that many gentiles will be in the kingdom, eating with the patriarchs and prophets, while many self-righteous Jews would be shut out.

These verses demand our careful attention because we who are in the church are in the same place as the Jews of Jesus' day.

We are familiar with the things of God. Perhaps like me, you were raised to know the gospel. But being in the church is not enough. Have you personally entered through the narrow door? Have you come to Jesus as a guilty sinner and laid hold of Him as the only acceptable sacrifice for your sins? Are you seeking to know Him and grow in Him as your Lord and Savior? General acquaintance with Jesus won't be enough in that terrible day. Don't assume that just because you know about Jesus, you know Him.

### Conclusion

David Brainerd, the great missionary to the American Indians, was once witnessing to a chief who was very close to trusting in Christ. But he held back. Brainerd got up, took a stick, drew a circle in the dirt around the chief, and said, "Decide before you cross that line." Brainerd knew that if the chief missed that moment he might never be so close again.

My prayer is that the Lord will use this message to draw that line around you if you have never entered through the narrow door, which is Christ alone. Salvation is not just an interesting theological notion to discuss. It is of crucial importance for every person because the door is narrow and it soon will be shut forever. But right now it is still open. Jesus says to you, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss: We are too casual about salvation because we have disregarded the biblical doctrine of hell.
2. How can salvation be a free gift simply received and yet require our striving?
3. Scripture says that without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). How can this be harmonized with salvation by grace through faith apart from works?
4. How can a person who is unsure about his salvation gain true assurance? How can we know that we've entered through the narrow door?

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