

## Luke 13:22-30

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

He said to them, <sup>24</sup>“Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup>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.’ <sup>26</sup>Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ <sup>27</sup>And he will say, ‘I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers.’ <sup>28</sup>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. <sup>29</sup>People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup>And note this: Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

## Last in Line

### I.

You stand there, peering through the gigantic plate-glass window. Wait staff seem to stream by endlessly with beautiful crisp fresh salads. There are delicately prepared meats with the side vegetables arranged exquisitely and artistically. The best of breads are being served and the finest drinks. You can see the desert cart just waiting to be wheeled out to the tables to tempt those dining with one last item.

It’s depressing to watch. Your planned dinner was supposed to be special. This was a place you had been waiting to go to for some time. You *thought* your reservation was made, but it turns out it was never registered. Maybe a tear even trickles down your cheek when you consider all the planning you did to make this day special—all for naught.

Back at the end of June, the Gospel reading began: “When the days were approaching for him to be taken up, Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51, EHV). Every week’s Gospel since then has been recounting things Jesus did and said as he was going to Jerusalem to face his ultimate task. All along the way, he taught. As for today, “Someone said to him, ‘Lord, are only a few going to be saved?’” (Luke 13:23, EHV).

That seems rather likely, doesn’t it? We are urged to accept everyone’s choices, no matter how wrong they might be—no matter how ludicrous. It’s Christians who are the ones who *don’t* have to be tolerated or accepted. Christians are seen as bigoted. When Christians are portrayed in movies or television, they are made fun of, and their characters are usually weak. Christian concepts and doctrines and teachings, especially if they stick to what God’s Word says, are mocked as being out-of-date or prudish, at best.

Then there is the Christian community itself. Our best attendance for weekly services is now  $\frac{2}{3}$  of what it was before covid. Most churches have seen a similar decline in attendance. To be sure, many watch our livestream service, but it isn’t the same as being in-person for worship, strengthening your brothers and sisters in Christ and being built up by them.

Jesus himself had similar results. Sometimes thousands would gather to hear him, but when the rubber met the road, they would declare his teachings too hard. They came looking for something other than what he was offering, so many went away dejected.

It's no surprise that this particular follower had that question: "Are only a few going to be saved?" He must have seen some walk away from Jesus, never to return to the group who followed and listened. He must have heard some making less than kind comments about Jesus and his teachings.

## II.

The question was about the many. How many? Jesus deflects. As is so often the case, the answer he gives doesn't necessarily reflect the question.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24, EHV). The first person to worry about where salvation is concerned is...yourself.

Jesus himself is the door. Strive to enter, he says. The struggle to enter is personal—it's all about you. It requires a great deal of effort because there is a lot of opposition. Pandemics aren't the only thing that weakens a person's resolve to receive the spiritual food of Jesus; all the activities of life that are so tempting on a weekend interfere. The intolerance shown toward Christians makes many hesitant to admit their faith until they abandon it completely.

"Many...will try...and will not be able." That sounds ominous.

It's like approaching the little podium and speaking to the Maitre D. You confidently give your name. As you stand there, the silence becomes more and more uncomfortable. Finally, after a pause that seemed endless, you are told that your name is not on the list. You do not have a reservation, and there is no way you will be seated that day.

It's not St. Peter behind the Maitre D stand at the pearly gates. It's the Lord Jesus on his judgment seat. He is the narrow door. Many will try to get past and will not be able. Why?

"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'" (Luke 13:25, EHV). At some point, for those who have despised the gospel, the door is closed. Maitre D Jesus will refuse to acknowledge you or let you through.

"Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' <sup>27</sup>And he will say, 'I don't know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers'" (Luke 13:26-27, EHV). Sometimes people talk about having a close, personal relationship with Jesus. If, however, that close, personal relationship just means sitting in a church pew while God's Word is being preached, but not having faith, it is not enough. The Bible tells us that dining with Jesus at his Supper without faith is actually to eat and drink judgment on yourself. Perhaps some will be shocked as they stand at the gates of heaven and hear Jesus tell them to depart.

"Evildoers," Jesus calls these unbelievers. They *thought* they were doing so many good things in this life, but all of it was nothing. Doing good means doing things out of love for the Lord Jesus from a heart of faith in him. Their works were not good, but evil.

"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" (Luke 13:28, EHV). Some seem to think that because Grandma and Grandpa were members of the church and strong believers that *they* are a shoe-in for heaven. They were the diners who thought they were on the guest list, but their names are not there.

## III.

Back to the beginning of what Jesus said: "Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24, EHV). Jesus is

the door. We said that before. He himself is extending the invitation.

So many are unable to go through because they are trusting on their past connections, or their close proximity to Jesus, but there was always something missing. Luther puts it this way: “They do not know what the narrow door is. It is faith, which makes a person small, even nothing, so that he must despair of all his works and only cling to God’s grace, abandoning everything for that...they do not become small, they do not despair of their [works], but rather gather them together in big bags, hang them around [their necks], and want to go through” ([LW 75:367](#)).

A person has to be small to get through a narrow door. Jesus says: “Note this: Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30, EHV).

Jesus was the One who truly *was* first. If there were a line to enter heaven, Jesus is at the very, very front. But he didn’t stay there. He made his way to the back of the line, taking every sin from every human being on himself on the way. To be the narrow door to heaven, Jesus paid for them all on the cross.

Some refuse to admit they belong at the back of the line. They are puffed up with themselves and think they deserve to be first. They elbow their way up to the Maitre D’s stand and demand admittance. It doesn’t work. Their own worth and worthiness simply aren’t enough.

There are others who position themselves with the Apostle Paul. He said: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” of whom I am the worst” (1 Timothy 1:15, EHV). That’s the “smallness” Luther spoke of. The worst sinners all make our way to the back of the line with Paul, realizing we don’t deserve to be on the list at the Maitre D’s stand. We come into the worship service prepared to confess our sins and hear the absolution of Christ himself.

Jesus says: “People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29, EHV). Though he spoke of the personal struggle against all that would prevent us from entering through the narrow door, Jesus promises there will be people from all over the place who will be there.

Even now we are members of that kingdom. Jesus, the Maitre D, invites believers forward to recline at his table and receive his body and blood, the very body and blood that were given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.

We, who were sinners and who were last in line, now wear the robes of Christ’s righteousness and are first in God’s sight. Amen.