

## **“Strive To Be Small”**

**Luke 13:22-30**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

At one time or another, I would guess that each of you has been in a position where one of your kids, a friend, or maybe even you, had the brilliant idea to stick their head through the slats of a banister. The end result of this was typically one of 2 things. Either you fit it through and got it stuck (break out the tub of margarine), or, as in my case, your head was too big to go through it. In much the same way, many find themselves striving to enter the narrow door of Christ, and find themselves either too big to enter, or they get halfway in and get stuck. In our text this morning, Jesus is answering this question, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” His answer, more simply stated, is “Yes.” The Lord is telling us that we must be small, meek, and humble so that we might enter through His narrow door. So, how do you strive to be small enough to enter? It certainly makes it sound like there’s a lot of work for you to do to get in, or does it?

Many in the church today perpetuate this idea that there is indeed a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done for you to make it through the heavenly door. Modern day Evangelicals want you to focus on obeying the commandments, reading the Bible, and helping your neighbor. These are all good things that the Lord has commanded you to do, but what do they have to do with the attainment of your salvation? They will tell you that living a life for Christ through actions and deeds is the only way to achieve your promised salvation, neglecting the clear teaching of Scripture to the contrary. Hear from the Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:16:

...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Actions and deeds serve a great purpose in the life of a Christian. Because of the faith that has been given to you through God’s gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, you should strive to live a life according to that faith. The problem with basing your salvation on how good you are at being a Christian is that it makes your salvation all about you. When you do good things that put a proverbial “feather in your cap,” you inflate your egos and pat yourselves on the back, making yourselves larger than Christ, and thus finding your heads too big to fit through the narrow door.

Works-based righteousness is not a new heresy in the church. It has permeated the clear message of the Gospel for centuries as people try to find any way they can to make themselves a part of their own salvation equation. As sinful human beings, they twist the Scripture to fit their own whims and desires. Even the Apostles had to contend with this self-serving malarkey. One of the clearest rebukes of this is found in the final words of Peter's 2nd letter where he says in regard to the writings of Paul:

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

The stability of which Peter speaks is not the strength of your faith or the counting of your works, but it is your belief in the salvation that is yours in Jesus Christ, a salvation that is offered to all, though many will reject and pervert it in favor of their own ideas and purposes.

This is what we see rampantly growing in the mega-church movements today, even running rampant amongst those who proclaim themselves to be Lutheran. They engage in an act called eisegesis, where they read themselves into a Scripture passage, or twist it to fit the answer that they have already predetermined. These are the people who will constantly tell you that if you love God, then you will be blessed. If you pray to God, you will receive all that you ask for. If you need salvation, it's on you to come to Jesus and get it, welcoming Him and His gifts into your heart. They want you to strive for yourself, to build up your own faith the way you want it to be. They want you to rely on their empty platitudes to guide you in your life of faith, instead of the truth and purity of the Scripture. Each one of you knows the value of the Word of God and the power that it holds. These false-prophets want to lead you astray, to believe in your heart that if you just work hard enough, struggle enough, and strive to work your way through the narrow door, that you'll manage to make it in.

But the Lord says, "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." Those Christians relying on their works and actions to get through the narrow door, will be among those who find themselves "not able" if they fail to rely on their faith in Christ as the price of entry. They are like the kid whose head makes it in the banister but gets stuck, unable to make it through. A half-hearted belief in the redemption offered to us in Christ's atoning sacrifice is not the true faith that will gain you entrance. So, the question I'm sure everyone is asking is "What should we do?" Dr. Arthur Just answers that in his Concordia commentary this way: "The answer given is that Baptism in the

name of Jesus – a Baptism of repentance to the forgiveness of sins with the gift of the promised Spirit – provides all that is necessary for entrance.”

To wrap that up a bit more succinctly, the answer to the question of what we must do is “Nothing.” To be clear, that doesn't mean you just go home from church, wait for your forgiveness, and just go on sinning. The point being made here is that faith in the crucified and risen Savior is all that is needed for entrance through the door. After all, Paul tells us in Romans 6, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who have died to sin still live in it?" And also, "...present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness." Yet, there is no amount of work that we must complete in order to be worthy of entrance, because Christ has already done everything required to make us worthy. We have nothing to add to the salvation equation. Jesus' work is enough.

As we just heard from St. Paul, that justifying faith which the Spirit has given to you is meant to be used for God's purpose. We speak often in confirmation classes in the Lutheran church about the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification means to be declared holy, and sanctification means to be made holy. Sanctification is a product of your justification. The Spirit sanctifies you when you are justified in Christ, and you interact with that justification externally through your actions, living a life that is reflective of the faith you hold. It is a difficult balance to maintain. You must always have the understanding that your good works cannot exist without the justifying faith you share in Christ, and that those works proceed from that faith. They do not create it or make you worthy to receive God's gifts.

These good works are only good because of God's goodness to us. His love for you and for me is what drives us to share His love with others, by spreading the truth of the Gospel through word and deed. Only through Jesus can you hope to deliver good works that are pleasing to God. He has given you the gift of His justifying grace, that you might be sanctified in Christ, and spread that gift to others. And this gift of sanctification from the Spirit must always be seen as just that, a gift from God to you. It is not something that you do for Him or some price you have to pay to receive His gifts. It is something that you participate in as a believer in Christ and His redemptive sacrifice on the bloody cross, which you have been baptized into, thus marking you as a saved child of God, worthy to approach the narrow door to the Kingdom.

So, I asked earlier, “How do you strive to be small enough to enter?” You strive to be small enough to fit through the narrow door when you keep your focus solely on the redemption you have in Jesus Christ. You strive spiritually, through the promised Holy Spirit and the faith that He has worked in your hearts. When you worship, you don’t make it all about what you are doing for God. You remember that it is God who is here, serving you His gifts of His Word and Sacraments. The Supper we share at this table is a foretaste of the meal that waits for you on the other side of the door. You strive to be small by accepting these gifts with a contrite heart, knowing that you are unworthy to receive them. Yet, the Holy Spirit brings them to you by virtue of the fact that Christ has done the necessary work for you to make you worthy of this meal that brings the forgiveness of sins. As Martin Luther states in the Small Catechism, “Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’” And every time you receive that forgiveness through the Lord’s Supper and the Absolution, you will find yourselves shrinking, becoming more like Christ so that you might fit through the narrow door.

Now, having a true understanding of how to strive to enter, only through Christ and His gift of redemption, the question turns to what is on the other side. What awaits you when you pass through the narrow door? The feast of the Lamb in His Kingdom which shall have no end is what awaits you there, where you will celebrate with the whole host of saints that have gone before you. When you have striven through Christ to reach that door, you will pass through into everlasting life and salvation. The master of the house, Jesus Christ, will welcome you into eternity as a brother, to worship at the throne of the Father as you feast on His glorious meal. And having passed through it, you will see the truth of why it is a narrow door that many will seek to enter. The door to the Kingdom is not narrow because of what you must do to reach it.

The door is narrow because it is sized for Christ. Modern evangelicals want you to focus on being like Christ only in actions and deeds. You understand that you must also be like Christ by being humble in your faith that is worked in your hearts by God's doing, not your own. As Dr. Just puts it in his commentary, “The struggle through which one enters is repentance, which is a work of God in the human heart.” Christ has already striven to fit through the door on your behalf when He gave Himself up to be crucified for your sins, and in so doing, granted you “adoption as sons,” as Paul says in Romans 8:15. Through this adoption you find yourselves as co-heirs of the Kingdom of God, and your striving to enter the door has been completed through faith. As sons of God, you

will enter the narrow door that is sized for Christ, because when God sees you, He sees His Beloved Son, perfectly small, meek, and humble. Your faith in Christ and His death and resurrection, and the understanding that only through Him are you able to enter the narrow door, will gain you entrance into the paradise of the heavenly Kingdom, where you will have everlasting life in the light and love of God for all eternity. Amen.