

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”

He said to them, ²⁴ “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’

“But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’

²⁶ *“Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’*

²⁷ *“But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’*

²⁸ *“There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” (Luke 13:22-30)*

Make Every Effort to Enter Eternal Life

“The few, the proud, the Marines.” You know that slogan, right? Relatively few people enlist in the Marines and even fewer make it through the training. They are proud of what they’ve accomplished. You could say the same thing about elite units in the other branches of the military, like the Navy SEALs, or the army’s Delta Force or the air force’s Thunder Birds. Multiple service men and women apply for every slot in those elite units. Those units can take their pick. There are similar things in civilian life. There are elite universities. “I went to Harvard” opens doors and often makes people a little jealous. Exclusive clubs limit their membership to just a few who make the grade. So, if you make it in, being one of the few is a good thing, right? But if you don’t, that exclusivity can be frustrating, even painful. When there isn’t enough of something to go around, when people have to stand in line to get scarce resources, they may even fight over the little that is available. Last week, when people were being evacuated from Abaco Island in the Bahamas, I imagine lots of people wondered if there would be enough space on the ships, or would only a few get on? Would there be food and clean water in the capital, or would most people have to go without?

This morning, Jesus is asked a question about a scarce resource: eternal life. Someone asked him, **“Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”** Jesus answered the question with an exhortation: **“Make every effort to enter.”** Of course, for those who do get in, being one of the few is a wonderful thing. But Jesus inserts a note of urgency into the need to get in, a sense of urgency that sometimes feels like it’s lacking in our world today. My friends, take advantage of Jesus’ words this morning to refocus your faith on the most important thing in your life. **Make every effort to enter eternal life.**

I.

That effort is needed. Jesus’ full answer was, **“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”** What did he mean? “A narrow door” would be a small door, a door that’s hard to find and hard to get through. Jesus goes on to picture the owner of the house locking his door and going to bed. Then you’re standing outside, banging on that barred door trying to get in. And he won’t get up and open it. In fact, the owner of that house says, **“I don’t know you or where you come from.”** Getting into that house is getting into heaven. And it’s hard. There’s only one entrance and once it’s locked, you can’t get in. That entrance can even be hard to find. The owner of the house is God himself. What a terrible thing to have God say, “I don’t know you or where you come from.”

The Bible sometimes pictures hell that way. When you and I think of hell, what’s the first thing we think of? Fire, right? And with good reason, the Bible uses that picture for hell a lot, to remind of us of the extreme pain those in hell suffer. But it uses other images, too. Darkness is one. And separation from God is another. Being shut out and wishing we could get in. Being locked on the wrong side of the door and knowing that the people inside are safe and warm and cared for, but we’re outside in the cold, in danger, alone and unloved forever. That’s what Jesus was warning us about. We need to make every effort to get in because being left outside is terrible.

Of course, we're not really worried about that, are we? We're believers. We're in, right? Yes, we are. But Jesus was making an important point here about complacency and about forgetting why and how we get in. He said, **"Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' 'But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'"** Whose streets did Jesus teach in? Whom did he eat and drink with? He was talking about the Jewish people, the people God sent him to save. Lest we miss the point, he said that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets come together in the kingdom of God but his Jewish listeners were thrown out. He talks about people coming from the east and the west and the north and the south and feasting in place of his listeners. That's us, the gentiles. This was a warning to the Jewish people that they were losing their place in God's kingdom.

Why? Because of their unbelief. Because they thought they had checked all the right boxes and they were good. Because they were self-righteous and complacent and they were letting their faith die. While it is an incredible gift of God's grace that Jesus points to us and says that we will feast in his kingdom, God didn't record these words so that we can feel superior to the Jews. Jesus didn't say these things to justify centuries of Christian racism. He wasn't talking to us. He was talking to them. But the warning he gave them applies to us because it's just as easy for us to our way. It is just as easy for us to get complacent. To think, "I know that gospel stuff. I don't need to hear it again." To think, "I'm a good person. Look how much I do for other people. Look how much I give to church. Look how good my kids turned out." My friends, the door is narrow. And it will be locked and never opened again. When we die or when Jesus comes back, the time of grace will be passed. And if we spend eternity locked outside that door, weeping and gnashing our teeth alone in the darkness and pain, unloved by God forever, what comfort will we have in all the things we think we've done to get in?

II.

"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." Who are the people who try to enter eternal life? Aren't they religious people? Aren't they good and moral people? Aren't they the people we think are good neighbors and good examples for life? Jesus says that many of those people will not get in. But he didn't give us this warning to cause us to despair. He wants to refocus us on what's important in this life. My friends, **make every effort to enter eternal life. That effort will succeed.**

Of course, being successful means getting into heaven. But how do we do that? How can our effort get us in? Doesn't that go against everything that I've ever taught you? Yes. And no. Yes, it is true that we can do nothing to get to heaven. Jesus did it all. No sinner can ever do enough to make it to eternal life. But when Jesus told these people to make every effort to enter eternal life, he wasn't telling them to try to earn their way in. He was telling them to feed their faith. That is something we can do. That is something we must do.

The narrow door to heaven is the gospel. The gospel says that Jesus has taken away our sin. All that complacency, all that thinking that we're good people who deserve to get in, all the self-righteousness that tallies up the checks we've written to church and compares our church attendance with our brother-in-law who's never here, and that takes pride in how great our kids turned out – all that sin deserves God's punishment in hell. God should bar that door and call us evildoers just like he called the Jews evildoers. Jesus didn't mean that they were not following the Ten Commandments. He meant that they were doing it for their own sinful pride and it was all evil because they were still sinners. The same is true for us if we think that God has to let us in because we do so much and we're just such good people.

But the gospel says that Jesus paid for all that pride and sin. The Son of God came down and took human form so that he could stand in our place. He lived the life of perfect love and perfect humility that we can never live. He never sinned once. And God counts that for you and for me. Then Jesus went to the cross and paid for all the evil our sinful, prideful hearts do every day. He went to the cross and suffered hell there when God shut him out and Jesus cried, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Then Jesus died. All in our place. He paid for every drop of sin and pride in our hearts and on our lips and in our lives. He rose to tell us that is true. He rose to tell us that we are forgiven and loved. He rose to promise us that we will indeed come from the east and the west and the north and the south to feast in the kingdom of heaven. And making every effort to enter the kingdom is coming back and hearing that gospel again and again. It's coming to communion and receiving the body and blood of Christ to remind you that he paid for your sins and they are

gone forever. It's confessing those sins and hearing that Jesus died and rose for you. It's a life of living in repentance and striving to reflect that forgiveness in your words and deeds until you do indeed take your seat at the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Why is it so important that we make that effort? Because there are so many things fighting against our faith. The devil wants to destroy our faith. He pulls out every stop to do it. We send our kids to college and their faith is assaulted over and over again. I know because I've heard the stories from my kids and seen a little bit of the challenges they've faced. We go through life and people we love, people we respect, people that we want to like us, invite us to sin or they mock Christian faith or disagree with God's word, and it's hard for us to take a stand. I know, because I've had those people in my family and in my circle of friends. We face pain and sorrow and it challenges our faith. I think you know that I now know that better than I have ever known it before in my life. And the devil doesn't back off just because we hurt. He attacks us when we're weary and sad and we don't want to fight anymore. That's often when he hits us the hardest. And you know what? If we had to fight him with our strength, he would always win. If our best efforts all go into me standing firm, me refusing to give in, me digging deep and being strong, we are doomed.

But when Jesus said, "Make every effort," he didn't mean, "Reach deep inside yourself and find the strength to withstand the devil." He meant, "Come and drink deeply of my word and sacrament. Hear again that I love you. Hear again that I forgive you. Hear again that I will never leave you or forsake you. Hear my promise that even when I send pain and sorrow and loss, I am working for your good. I will bring you through that narrow door. I will keep it open and unlocked until you come from the east and west and north and south and sit with me and feast forever. Come and let me heal you. Come and let me serve you with my love. Come and find the only strength your faith can ever find: the good news of forgiveness and life and love." That gospel sustains our faith.

But faith is not painting smiles on our faces when our hearts are broken. It doesn't mean that life won't hurt. It doesn't even mean that our sinful hearts won't struggle here. They will. Faith means that we trust God's promise and we find our strength in him to hang on until at last we enter that narrow door and take our seat at his feast.

Many years ago, I knew a lady whose husband had died suddenly. Her children were grown. She was alone and sad. She started to drink. She came to church and Bible class, but she never got past her grief and pain. God called her to feed her faith – and she did, even though it often looked to the rest of us like she was cycling down into an endless pool of despair and self-pity. One day, God called her home. He knew how much her faith could take. He knew exactly when to bring her through that narrow door. He will do the same for us. Even if we haven't taken advantage of the opportunities to hear the gospel like we should have, Jesus still loves us and forgives us. As long as we live in this world, we have a new opportunity every morning to feed our faith, to make every effort today to enter eternal life. Our success does not depend on how hard we work at it. It's a miracle of God's grace. Make that effort trusting in that grace. Amen.