

April 10, 2016

THE NARROW GATE

Matthew 7:13-14

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

In the Gospel of Luke, the parallel passage says, *“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door...”* (Luke 13:24) The narrow gate, or, door, is not the popular way. It’s not the common way, the way that’s easiest to go through. The setting in Luke follows a question: *“Lord, will only a few be saved?”* (13:23) The good news in Luke is that *“people will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their place at the feast in the Kingdom of God.”* (v. 29)

If joining in that feast is a sign of salvation, it sounds like many will be saved! It’s just not those who were expected though. *“Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last!”* (v. 30) *“Because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able!”* (Luke 13:24) Why? Why won’t they be able? Here’s the clue, in Luke: *“When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’ Then in reply, He will begin to say, ‘I don’t know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But He will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me all you evil doers!”* (vs. 25-27) In Luke this passage follows directly after the words of Christ where He explains, *“You will know them by their fruits.”* In Matthew, that is the passage that comes next (Matthew 7:16, 20), which is followed by the parallel about *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”* (Matthew 7:21)

You see, on the surface, they look like perfectly faithful people, but as Jesus says about the false prophets: *“They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves!”* (Matthew 7:15 *“I do not know where you come from.”*) Sometimes it’s hard to tell where someone is coming from. Their motives are mixed, and their response is sometimes minimal. Even though, in Luke, they may say, *“But we ate and drank with You, and You taught in our streets!”* *“Go away!”* We may think we know Jesus, but, does Jesus know us?

The narrow gate doesn’t seem to open that easily. It takes a greater degree of devotion. It may take some consistency on our part, ...continued knocking, ...for it to be opened for us! What if the narrow door is the door of prayer? Not a lot of people are very persistent in prayer, nor are they consistent, and the door just does not seem to open for them.

What if the narrow gate is marked by some degree of discipleship? At one point, Jesus says, *“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters!”* (Luke 11:23) The Pharisees in Jesus’ audience were against Jesus. For them, Jesus had very little positive to say. But what about those who do not gather with Jesus? What could that mean? Hmmm! Our absence from worship, our not *“Remembering the Sabbath to keep it holy,”* commandment number Four, is a sign of lack of our seriousness about our faith. Perhaps worship is what opens the narrow gate!

Another clue: There was a rich fool who thought he had it made. *"I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."* *"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is required of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"* (Luke 12:19-20) And the moral of the story (v. 21): *"So it is with those who store up treasures and are not rich toward God!"* Could being rich toward God be what opens the narrow gate? Some would never be able to enter (or go through) the narrow gate simply because they just had too much stuff!

We all know John 3:16 by heart. Only a few verses later it says, *"Those who believe in Him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the Name of the only Son of God!"* (v. 18) Is it about belief?

Hear John 6:53-64a – *"Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His Blood you have no life in you. Those who eat my Flesh and drink My Blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for My Flesh is true food and My Blood is true drink. Those who eat My Flesh and drink My Blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats Me will live because of Me. This is the Bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this Bread will live forever.'* He said these things while He was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of His disciples heard it they said, *'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'* But Jesus, being aware that His disciples were complaining about it, said to them, *'Does this offend you? Then, what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe!'"*

Could belief be what opens the narrow gate? Could receiving Communion be another factor in opening the narrow gate?

Listen to John 15:1-6 – *"I am the vine, and My Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the Word that I have spoken to you. Abide in Me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the Vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in Me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from Me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in Me is thrown away like a branch that withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned!"*

How do we abide? Is abiding another way the narrow gate might open? Maybe it's all of the above. Is this hard? Isn't it just a matter, really, of being truly faithful? How do we get through that narrow gate? Earlier, in Chapter Seven, Jesus had said, *"For everyone who knocks the door will be opened!"* (v. 8b) I preached about asking, seeking, and knocking just before Lent began. What are we asking for? What do we seek? Here's another clue: *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness...."* (Matthew 6:35) Does the narrow gate open when we are searching for the proper things?

You see, it's not a matter of just knowing who Jesus is – *"We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets!"* – It is a matter of knowing Jesus. It's not just a matter of knowing what Jesus has said, but of putting it into practice, putting the truth to work, living the life of faith, taking to heart the power for growth like the mustard seed, and taking to heart the change that comes in life like leaven to a lump of flour.

Paul said, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose!*" (Philippians 2:12-13)

Fear! My heart fears for so many people, it breaks for so many I have taught, because they have not prayed seriously, they have not worshiped sincerely, or, regularly; they have not been eager in their discipleship, they are not rich toward God; and it all expresses their unbelief, their lack of abiding, their disinterest in Communion, and that they are not really knowing Jesus Christ. Many will say they know Him, they believe in Him, but their fruit is never truly ripe. You will know them by their fruits! We need to teach them the truth about faith, about the narrow door, the hard way, the Word of faith. We need to teach them to work out their salvation!