

The Narrow Gate



Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. (Luke 13:24)

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²² He passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” He answered them, ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. ²⁵ After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’ He will say to you in reply, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ ²⁶ And you will say, ‘We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷ Then he will say to you, ‘I do not know where (you) are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!’ ²⁸ And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:22-30)

Warnings and Admonitions

Here in Year C readings, our gospel suddenly moves from Luke 12:49-53 (last week) to this gospel, passing over 12:54-13:21. In between, the warnings and admonitions regarding the coming judgment that began with 12:1 reach their conclusion with a sobering call for repentance. Just as the debtor on the way to court (12:59) is warned to make every effort at reconciliation, so also Jesus uses the sayings about calamity in 13:1–5 and the parable of the unproductive fig tree in 13:6–9 to make the same point:

- read the signs of the time and judge correctly;
- repent now, the time is short; and
- be assured of the full measure of judgment.

The sayings from this gospel of Jesus follow upon the parables of the kingdom (Luke 13:18–21) and stress the same points as above, adding, that great effort is required for entrance into the kingdom (Luke

13:24) and that there is an urgency to accept the present opportunity to enter because the narrow door will not remain open indefinitely.

One should also note that the stability of teaching in the synagogues has given way and returned to the travel motif that began in 9:51 when Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. Again he is passing *through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem*. (12:22)

Another element lurking in the background is the 1st century Jewish understanding to the eschatological banquet described in Isa 25:6–9, whose images and vocabulary are mirrored in the Lukan scenes. “Isaiah had described the end as a lavish banquet, a feast fit for royalty, yet prepared for all peoples; on that day it will be said by all the nations, including Gentiles, “Let us be glad and rejoice in our salvation” (v 9, LXX). Although Israel did not lose sight of Isaiah’s vision of the eschatological banquet, the question of its participants did evolve in Second Temple Judaism, narrowing considerably in some instances. The Targum [Aramic translation of the OT], for example, maintains the notion of a meal for all peoples, but transforms it into an image of judgment against them—a conclusion echoed in 1 Enoch 62. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls (wherein testimony for the tradition of the messianic banquet is strong) one finds evidence of the boundaries having been drawn even more tightly so as to exclude not only Gentiles but also blemished Jews. Taking into account this trajectory of interpretation, the query, ‘Are only a few people being saved’ may well be understood with reference to who among the Jews are to be regarded as the saved remnant.” (Green, 528)

Might the parable for this Sunday seem a contradiction of the one Jesus told only two chapters ago in Luke’s Gospel (17th Sunday of the year). The question there was: if we ask, will we receive? Is there a difference between the asking (11:1-13) and the asking for admittance to the banquet in our text (13:25 ff.)?

Being Saved

This section continues Jesus’ formation of his disciples for their time to take up the mission of the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus makes several references to the seriousness of the proclamation of God’s reign and to the need for a sober decision of discipleship to undertake the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, a journey that will end in suffering and death (9:22–23).

The question that initiates Jesus’ response is short, pointed, and seems to summarize the unnamed disciple’s impression of the verses that have come before this Sunday gospel passage. A short summary of the preceding messages might be: (a) courage under persecution, (b) warning about foolish acquisition about what matters not to God, (c) remaining vigilant because judgment is coming, (d) reading the “*signs of the time*,” and (e) a direct call for immediate repentance. Is it any wonder that...

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It has been quipped that most young people are said to believe in a hell where nobody goes. Among the middle aged there are those who think hell is largely populated by enemies. And among the old are believers who nervously wonder if hell might be populated by the likes of themselves. They, like St. Paul at some moments, consider the question of their salvation “*in fear and trembling*.”

“On the one hand, Jesus’ answer may seem ambiguous; after all, his first image, the narrow door (v 24), gives way to the door slammed shut (v 25), and, in the end, he acts as though there are infinite doors allowing entry to just about anyone (v 29 - people coming from East and West)! His answer may seem ambiguous in another sense, too, insofar as it appears to avoid the question about how few people might be saved only to focus on the many who will be lost (v 24)” (Green, 528) This seems to have been a

common question as evidenced by the non-biblical “The Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come for the sake of only a few” (2 Esdras 8:1)

It should be noted that how one reads this gospel passage depends on one’s view of Luke’s soteriology (theology dealing with salvation especially as effected by Jesus Christ), in which the weight of emphasis is placed on the present which is consistent as Luke stresses the communal dimensions of the experience of salvation, inaugurated by a decision to reorient oneself around the purpose of God (repentance) and to join with the community of God’s people being formed around Jesus. For Luke, life with God in the eschaton is directly related to identifying fully, personally, and in the present with the redemptive aim of God manifest in Jesus’ mission.

Jesus’ answer did not likely comfort the person who asked. Rather than responding to the question of how few will be saved, Jesus remarks instead on how many will not be saved: *for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough*. Strong enough in what way? Strong enough to revisit your understanding of the meaning of Scripture and the Law? Strong enough to risk ridicule as you follow the itinerant preacher from Galilee? Strong enough to persevere even during persecutions?

To this image is added an image of the narrow gate standing in contrast with the broad way (e.g. Mt 7:13-14). This was an ethical teaching image common in Jewish and Christian thought (Jer 21:8; Ps 1:6; 4 Ezra 7:1–9; Didache 1–6) often cast as a choice between life and death.

What was presented as a question about the future, is suddenly turned into a response about what is happening at this very moment. “*“Strive to enter through the narrow gate.”* As many commentaries point out, the verb tense of “strive” is in the present tense using a common athletic metaphor. Both Greek and Hellenistic Judaism used the term with respect to the practice of virtue and obedience to the law of God. [Green, 530] The image of an athlete striving to win a race is also found in 1 Tim 4:10; 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7.

Strive to enter now

How many will be saved? Jesus does not answer directly, but urges his questioner and others (“*strive*” is plural) to make sure that they are in the number, however large or small it proves to be (v.24). The word “strive” is derived from a technical term for competing in the ancient Olympiad pointing to a full-hearted effort. This word is in the present continuous tense and contrasts those who “*will attempt to enter*” but when the door of opportunity is finally shut it will be too late (v.25). People must strive to enter now. There is inevitably a time-limit on the offer of salvation. *After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door* - The gospel text continues to indicate that the time is short, the kingdom is arriving even now, and thus it is important that a decision be made. Jesus’ parable of the narrow and soon shut door makes it clear that making a decision, and the right one, is crucial. It is a theme that has been consistently present since the beginning of Luke chapter 12.

How many will be saved? The question was relevant in Jesus’ time when there was a growing divergence of religious views. There is evidence that it was widely discussed (e.g. 4 Ezra 7:55ff.), and that the rabbis held widely differing views (e.g. *Sanhedrin* 97b). But it seems to have been firmly held that all Israel would be saved, except for a few blatant sinners who excluded themselves (*Sanhedrin* 10:1). In our day, this same question speaks not only to the individual decision, but also to the proclamation of the community. Here at the beginning of the third millennium, especially in the West, many people believe that there are many ways to God – perhaps.

Jesus envisages some of those rejected as pleading that they had known the Lord (v.26). They *ate and drank* where he was; he taught where they were. But, they cannot claim that they ever entered into understanding of what he was teaching. There was no evidence of their acceptance, no response; or their response was insincere, if at all. It is a sad case that, in every age, there are people under the illusion that they were following Jesus. While they claim that they ate and drank with him, they fail to understand they had no intimate fellowship; they heard his teaching but did not accept it as the word of God to be put

into practice (“*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it.*” 8:21).

As a consequence, in the end they will know complete rejection. The householder says that he does not know where they come from and he brands them as *you evildoers* (cf. Ps. 6:8). No specific evil deed has been mentioned, but in the end there will be only two classes, those who acted on the word of God and those who did not - even if they did nothing inherently evil. Since these people did not take the necessary steps to get inside, they are to be numbered with the evildoers outside. The result is there are those inside and those outside. There is no “in between.”

On the outside people will understand the finality of their rejection, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the pain that comes from knowing one has been excluded from blessing (Mt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). Contrary to some popular perceptions of God, He can and will say “no.” Those on the outside will see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and then know that God has, in every age, provided his Word of salvation – but in these last days has given us a Son (cf. Hebrews 1:2). The pericope warns us not to assume membership in the kingdom on the basis of knowledge of Jesus, attendance at church, or on the basis of elect ethnic origin. The patriarchs of Judaism will be there, but that does not mean every physical descendant of Abraham will. Only the true spiritual descendants of Abraham will be at the banquet.

“In this respect, it is significant that, to the list of the great ancestors of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are added ‘*all the prophets.*’ This echoes earlier material in Luke, material where the emphasis had fallen on the propensity of some in Israel to oppose those who served God’s purpose and spoke on His behalf—both in Israel’s past and in its present (6:22–23; 11:49–51). In those earlier Lukan co-texts, woe is pronounced on those who persecute the prophets; such persons are promised mourning and weeping (6:22–26; 11:45–52). This, indeed, is their fate in the judgment: excluded from the joy of the eschatological feast, theirs is the lot of mourning, rage, despair. Jesus thus insinuates how some from Israel might be excluded from the kingdom banquet. Opposing God’s prophets, they oppose God’s purpose; opposing God’s purpose, they fail to comprehend who Jesus is and the nature of his divine mission (foretold by “all the prophets,” 24:27; Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43); consequently, they do not reorient their hearts and lives around the word of God and, in this way, they demonstrate that they are not children of Abraham after all.” (Green, 532-33)

There is another surprise: people will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. This means that all the nations will be blessed at God's table. The blessed of God coming from everywhere echoes promises already proclaimed in Isaiah (cf. Isa. 45:6; 49:12). The disciples did not immediately grasp this truth and its implications. The special vision of Acts 10 was needed to reveal how it would work. Even though Israel has a special place in God's plan, others are not excluded from blessing. We all have equal access to God's blessing through Jesus (Eph 2:11-22). Even the promise to Abraham stressed how the world would eventually be blessed through the patriarch's seed (Gen 12:1-3).

So Jesus closes his words of warning with a note of eschatological reversal. Expectations are overturned as there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last. Many will get to the table, including some surprises. All are on the same footing. In today's context the warning of this passage might be that those who are first (who have exposure to Christ through attendance at the church) may turn out to be last (excluded from blessing) if they do not personally receive what Jesus offers through the community. Simply put, Jesus is the key to the door of salvation

Luke’s Gentile audience would listen eagerly to these words, but they would also be challenged not to take for granted themselves their eating and drinking with Jesus at the Eucharist. The pronouncement closing this speech guards against both presumption and despair; as long as the journey is underway, some may fall away and others may still join.

Reflection

Alan Culpepper, at the end of his commentary [277-78], provides an interesting story from Franz Kafka:

His parable "Before the Law" is the story of a man from the country who seeks admission to the Law. When the doorkeeper tells him he may not enter, he looks through the open door, but the doorkeeper warns him that he is just the first of a series of doorkeepers, each one more terrible than the one before. So the man waits for the doorkeeper's permission to enter. For days and then years, the man talks with the doorkeeper, answers his questions, and attempts to bribe him, but with no success. The doorkeeper takes the man's bribes, saying he is only doing so in order that the man will not think he has neglected anything. As the man lies dying, he sees a radiance streaming from the gateway to the Law. Thinking of one question he has not asked, he beckons the doorkeeper and asks him why in all those years no one else has come to that gate. The doorkeeper responds: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. Now I am going to shut it."

There is an incompleteness one experiences after reading "Before the Law." It seems as though the man from the country is caught in a terrible institutional "catch-52," unable to enter the very gate prepared only for him. Some might quickly focus on the gatekeeper as representative of the worst parts of organized religion, or the trap of fear implied in a series of other terrible gatekeepers, or other parts of the parable.

There is also an incompleteness - or better said - mystery in Jesus' parable in which the who and how many are never answered to the reader's satisfaction. But Jesus is clear on several points: one must strive. As noted before, striving with an athlete's power and intention is seeking an Olympic medal. The man from the country in Kafka's parable waits for "the Law" to come to him.

All of this points to questions that have bedeviled Christianity since its foundation: what is the balance of grace, election, free will, the action to which people are called, and so much more. Perhaps even if Christian denominations will never agree on the theological balance or answers, we can agree that one should never presume upon God's grace or God's gifts.

Perhaps this parable asks us to take this attitude in life: strive as though admission to the kingdom depended entirely on your own doing, but know that ultimately it depends on God's grace.

Notes

Luke 13:23 *saved*: The Greek contains the present participle which means "being saved" (present progressive) is the more technically correct translation.

sōzō [to save], *sōtēria* [salvation], *sōtēr* [savior]. In the LXX *sōzō* is used to translate the words of the Hebrew stem *yšc* ("to save," "to help," "to free"). This verb first means "to be roomy." Bringing into a more spacious place confers the idea of deliverance. A stronger being brings deliverance to the weak or oppressed by superior intervention. Personal relationships are stressed as there is rescue from situations brought about by the hostile intent of others. All salvation that is not divinely validated is limited. Idols and astrologers cannot save (Is. 45:20; 47:13). God, not an angel, rescues from Egypt, brings into the land, and wins victories over enemies (Is. 63:8-9; Ps. 44:3-4; Judg. 7:2, 7). The people must wait on God for salvation (Is. 30:15). It is a sin to reject the God who saves and to seek a king (1 Sam. 10:18-19) or to avenge oneself (25:26ff.). Human intervention is legitimate only if God works in and through it, as in the case of the judges (Judg. 2:18). God also helps and saves directly as the one best equipped to intervene or protect or preserve. He is the true hero and king (Pss. 80:2; 44:3-4). Israel conquers through him (Dt. 33:29). He saves and helps her (1 Sam. 11:13). If she is faithful, he promises aid (Num. 10:19). He is the hero who brings victory (Zeph. 3:17). In the Psalms God's help is thus invoked against public or personal

foes. He is asked to save against legal attacks, against injustice and violence, against sickness and imprisonment, and against external attacks. There are also references to comprehensive deliverance or salvation. God has established and preserved the people, and its members may thus hope for his help (Ps. 106:4). By forgiveness the garment of salvation replaces their filthy raiment of sin (Is. 61:10; Zech. 3:4-5). They can thus raise the cup of salvation (Ps. 116:13). To the humble who know their littleness, call on God with contrite hearts, and follow his will (Pss. 24:5; 34:6; 119:155), God grants his general help and salvation. Although he denies help to sinners, salvation may at times be from merited judgment. He rescues the oppressed even though they, too, are sinful (Ezek. 34:22), and he frees Israel from all her sins (Ezek. 36:29). Repentance is a prerequisite (Jer. 4:14). The liberation from exile is a form of salvation (Is. 45:17). God alone can effect this (43:11). This redemption points ahead to the final redemption when the age of eschatological salvation dawns (*cf.* Is. 43:1ff.; 60:16; 63:9). The Hebrew stem covers both the deliverance itself and the salvation that it brings. The eschatological deliverance includes rescue from attacking nations (Zech. 12:7) and the gathering of the dispersed (Is. 43:5ff.). The end-time community will draw on the wells of salvation (Is. 12:3), and all the world can share its salvation (45:22). The messianic ruler, as God's representative, will help Israel so that it may dwell in safety (Jer. 23:6), and he will himself be divinely preserved in the wild eschatological attack of the nations (Zech. 9:9).

More strictly religious is the use in Lk. 1:68ff., which follows an OT model. In 1:77 the Baptist will give knowledge of salvation in the remission of sins. The explanation of the name of Jesus in Mt. 1:21 makes a similar link. Elsewhere the group is not common in the Synoptists. Mk. 8:35 and parallels refer to the saving and losing of life with an eschatological reference. In Mk. 10:26 being saved is equivalent to entering the kingdom or entering or inheriting life. Mk. 13:13 and parallels speak of deliverance from messianic tribulation. Lk. 13:23 equates salvation with entering the kingdom. In Lk. 19:10 saving and finding take place in the present (*cf.* 19:9-10). *sōtēria*, then, has both a present reference as finding and a future reference as entering the kingdom. [TDNT 1133-35]

will only a few be saved?: In his discussion of the question of how many will share in the salvation promised in the kingdom (13:22–30), Jesus asserts that entry into the kingdom depends on the master of the house, who is indirectly identified in 13:26 as Jesus himself. The question in 13:23 has no parallel in the OT but was often addressed in Second Temple Judaism; note *4 Ezra* 8:1: “The Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come for the sake of few” (see also *4 Ezra* 7:47; 9:15). Isaiah 37:32, a text that is sometimes referred to in this context, speaks of a “remnant” and a “band of survivors” who shall go out from Jerusalem, but the context in Isa. 37 is limited to a temporary restoration of fortunes for Jerusalem.

Luke 13:24 Strive to enter: Greek (*agonizomai*), suggests great labor and struggle in the effort to get through the door. The verb is used in other contexts of an athlete in training (1 Cor 9:25).

Luke 13:25 arisen and locked the door: This recalls the image from Matthew 25:10-12 (parable of the foolish virgins). In Luke there are two terms used for “rise” – *anistēmi* for the sense of rising in order to accomplish something (*cf.* 1:39; 4:29; 6:8) – and *egeirō* for “rise up” which is the term Luke uses here and for the prediction of the resurrection (9:22). Is this then an intentional allegory?

Luke 13:27 I do not know where (you) are from: The answer given to those who stand outside the door appealing to the householder as contemporaries who shared food with him and who listened to his teaching, has two parts, both containing OT allusions. The statement in 13:27a, “I do not know where you come from,” recalls OT passages that speak of people being known by God (Jer. 1:5; Hos. 5:3; 13:5; Amos 3:2)—that is, people who are chosen by God (*cf.* Ps. 138:6). The second part, ‘*Depart from me, all you evildoers!*’ alludes to Ps. 6:8 (6:9 LXX), “*Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping,*” to emphasize not only that Jesus does not know them, but also that he positively excludes them.

Luke 13:28-29 when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God...at table in the kingdom of God: The image of the joyous banquet of the kingdom echoes OT passages that describe, first, a gathering of Israel from all corners of the earth (Ps. 107:2–3; Isa. 43:5–6; 49:12; Zech. 2:10 LXX); second, the worship of Yahweh by the Gentiles (Isa. 45:6; 59:19; Mal. 1:11); and third, the eschaton as a great banquet (Isa. 25:6–8; 55:1–2; 65:13–14; Zeph. 1:7).

Luke 13:28 wailing and grinding of teeth: This corresponds to the woe in 6:25, *penthesete kai kalusete*, “you will mourn and weep.” The expression found in this verse is more common in Matthew (Mt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) but found only here in Luke. The “gnashing of teeth” appears in the LXX as an expression of hatred (Job 16:9; Ps. 34:16; 36:12; 112:10; Lam. 2:16), here resembling Ps. 112:10 (111:10 LXX) more closely: “The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.”

Luke 13:29 from the east and the west: The ingathering of the people in a prophetic motif (see Isaiah 11:11–16; 60:1–22) which Luke refers to in Act 2:5–13.

will recline: this is the image/posture of the banquet

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