

March 14, 2010
Matthew 13:11-17 / John 17:1-3 / Luke 13:18-21
The Door to the Kingdom is Narrow

Last week I was listening to a message by Tim Keller, where he points out that one of the biggest struggles for people in the last century, for people contemplating the Christian faith, was the whole issue of miracles.

Our culture, on a large scale, from the 1940's to the early 1970's (and in some pockets even into the 1980's) adopted a very pro-science, anti-supernatural bias (sometimes a very militant anti-miracle bias) where one of the biggest obstacles to the faith were the miracles recorded in the Gospels — the virgin birth / the feeding of the 5000 / Jesus walking on water and His resurrection from the dead.

In fact, simply getting people to believe in the possibility of miracles was difficult. Which is why C. S. Lewis and other Christian apologists felt the need to write entire books simply trying to undermine the then prevalent notion that one had to hide their head in the sand or throw their brains out the window, simply to believe that miracles could happen!

Yet, Keller went on to point out that that particular issue doesn't seem to be the main point of people's struggle any more. It was a change that caught him off guard a few years back, when 250 twenty to thirty year old people (mostly seekers or non-believers) came forward during the question and answer time (after an Easter Service). And to his great surprise, NOT ONE had any problem at all with the possibility that Jesus rose from dead. They didn't seem to struggle at all with the possibility of miracles!

Rather, as he goes on to point out, the biggest struggle they had was with the concept that Christianity is exclusive. That Jesus is the only way. / That salvation is limited to those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus. / That the Scriptural version of Christianity is not willing to concede that "all paths lead to God," or that "all religions, and the salvific schemes they propose, are equally valid."

And because of that cultural shift, the average person today (and especially the average young person) will find a text like the one we have before us today far more difficult (both emotionally and intellectually) than any text on miracles — Which wasn't so much the case just one generation ago.

So, with all that in mind, I want to look at what Jesus has to say to us today about the door (or gate) into the kingdom of God being “narrow.” Because as we do, I think you’ll be surprised at what we find in that regard.

So what do we find? **FIRST** we find that everything Jesus says in vv. 23-30, comes in response to the question put to Him by one particular person in the crowd, who says: *“Lord, are only a FEW people going to be saved.”* And the emphasis, of course, is on the word “few” — that is, few, as opposed to “many.”

And what we need to know to correctly understand the passage, it that the Rabbis (as Leon Morris points out) frequently discussed this issue of how many people, in the end, would be saved (4th Ezra 7:55ff / Sanhedrin 97b / and Sanhedrin 10:7 being just a few of the recorded instances in Jewish literature dating from the time of Jesus).

And the firmly held consensus (as he points out) was that, *“all Israel would be saved, except for a few blatant sinners who excluded themselves.”* That is, the number of the “saved” would be limited to Jews only, and even then, only the morally upright, virtuous, synagogue going type. Which meant that at least in terms of the world’s population, very, very few would ever be saved (a minute, minute fraction of the world’s population).

In fact, knowing that assures us this question is most likely to TRAP to see if Jesus (like most of His contemporaries) would hold to the “orthodox” understanding, and limit the quantity of the saved to the Jews, or better yet, Jews who had their moral and spiritual act together.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing we can see from this passage: That Jesus doesn’t answer this person’s question (except in a vague way near the end of His discussion in v. 29). He instead turns and proceeds to tell everyone present what was necessary in order to be one of the saved. “Strive,” He says (or as the NIV puts it, make every effort) to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you will try to enter and not be able to.”

So what does Jesus do? *Interestingly, He avoids any discussion about mathematical sums or definitive numbers in regard to the SIZE OF THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO WILL BE SAVED, and talks instead about the SIZE OF THE DOOR through which one must enter in order to be saved.*

Which ultimately tells us nothing whatsoever about the number of people that WILL get through into the kingdom and be saved!

Just because “many” will not get through, does not preclude the possibility that just as many, if not far, far more than those many, will indeed get through!

In fact, verse 29 implies that a great number of people from all over the globe (north, south, east and west) *“will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* A statement which is in perfect harmony with Rev. 7:9, where we are told that the number of the saved standing before the throne of God in eternity is so enormous it is too large to count!

And let me tell you (just in case you haven't already figured it out) THAT was an absolutely radical idea! Far too liberal and unorthodox for the typical Jew to accept! Because the typical Jew limited salvation at most to the Jews, and even then, not all of them. The Gentiles, in their minds, didn't even have a chance!

So what do we find? We find that a text which at first glance seems to heavily limit the number of the saved, was actually intended to do just the opposite, expanding it in ways that most likely would have offended just about everyone listening to Him (especially since He would go on to “add injury to insult” by saying to everyone present that they themselves would be “thrown out” (v. 28) while the Gentiles would come in).

Believe me, Jesus did not win any brownie points on this occasion! Because far from limiting salvation exclusively to the morally upright Jews (as His contemporaries did) He opened up the possibility of salvation to ANYONE who would “strive to enter the kingdom of God by the narrow gate and thus be saved.”

Which brings us to the **THIRD** thing we need to see from this text! The stipulations Jesus lays out for entering the kingdom of God. Not how many will be in the kingdom, but how they can get into the kingdom!

And what does He tell them? Essentially this (to their great surprise): That simply being a Jew, or being religious, or moral, or spiritually-inclined was not enough! That simply attending synagogue or reading the Bible or saying prayers or offering sacrifices or making pilgrimages wouldn't do it! Something far more important was necessary. Something far different.

So what is it? Look at what He says. “Make every effort to enter by the narrow gate, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and not be able to.” And the word Jesus uses here in reference to “making every effort” is the imperative (or command form) of the Greek word *“agonidzomai,”* from which we get our English word “to agonize.”

It's a term that was used most commonly in the sports arena, where athletes would push / and strive / and agonize / and press forward with all their might / to cross the finish line first! *"It denotes whole-hearted action,"* as Leon Morris points out.

Yet, please, do not hear Jesus wrong! He's not saying that salvation is simply a matter of strenuous human will effort. Or that it only comes to those who work the hardest or try the most intensely to lay hold of it by some gargantuan human effort!

If that were the case, then this passage would be the worst of all possible news! Because if that were the case, it would mean that the kingdom of God would only be populated by these proud, spiritually muscle-bound jock types, slapping each other on the back, or high-fiving each other, because they, unlike most others, had mustered up enough strength to successfully squeeze their way into the kingdom! The thought is not only deplorable, it's totally contrary to everything we know about the Gospel!

So what does Jesus MEAN when He tells us the door is Narrow and we must strive to enter by it?

LISTEN: *He means its narrow in the sense that if you expect to get through, you must cast off everything that makes you BIG (spiritually) and thus keeps you from getting through! In fact, He says it's so narrow that one must strive or agonize or make every effort to get through — because it's such a tight squeeze! It's a door you would probably have to turn sideways / and suck in your stomach / and possibly divest yourself of all your outer garments in order to squeeze through!*

That's the picture Jesus paints for us. Take, for instance, a Roman Centurion. He has a sword / and shield / and a big metal helmet with its red feathery crown / and all his armor / decked out with all his many medals of honor denoting all his grand military achievements.

What would he have to do to get through? He would have to strip down to nothing but his undergarments to squeeze through the narrow door (which we could assume would be maybe a foot wide at most)!

In fact, if you've been in third world countries, you've seen "narrow gates." Walk around the fields where cows graze, and every so often, in the stone walls, you'll see two wooden posts sunk in the ground and sticking straight up, about 10-12 inches apart at most, just enough for the farmer to slip through, but not a cow (or a person carrying something)!

Not a gate 18 inches wide or 20 inches wide that most anyone could easily pass through simply by pulling in their arms in, but a door so narrow one has to squeeze / or agonize / or make every effort to get through by tossing aside everything you're carrying and possibly some of what you're wearing to become thin enough and small enough to fit through!

Alexander Maclaren, the great Scottish Baptist, puts it so well when he writes:

"The door of faith (or the door to the kingdom) is a narrow one, for it lets no self-righteousness, no worldly glories, and no dignities to pass through... We are kept outside until we strip ourselves of crowns and royal robes and stand clothed only in the hair-shirt (we would say the burlap sack) of penitence... We must make ourselves small to get into the kingdom. We must creep on our knees, so low is the door frame. It's so narrow, we must leave everything outside. And we must go in one by one, as in the turnstiles at a place of entertainment. The door opens into a (huge) palace, but it is too narrow for anyone to enter who trusts in himself."

It's a door far too narrow for anyone whose CHEST is puffed up with pride regarding his own self-estimation / or whose HEAD is held high like a strutting rooster admiring all her accomplishments / or whose CLOTHES are adorned with their proud medals of personal achievement.

If merit or works or pride or thoughts of worthiness or trusting in our own flawed attempts at being righteousness constitute our clothing, we must leave it all outside the gate if we are ever to enter the kingdom. Because like our American Express Card at certain venues, it's neither wanted there nor accepted there! It's not only worthless for gaining entrance; it actually prevents us from ever having the possibility of getting in!

That, I believe, is what Jesus means when He says: *"Many will try to enter by the narrow door, but will not be able to do so."* Why? Because they're trying to squeeze through with their helmets and shields and bulky armor and medals of achievement still pinned on their puffed out chests! And you just can't do it!

Which means the DOOR to the kingdom isn't "narrow" simply in order to prevent people from getting through! It's NARROW because its meant to prevent people from getting through SO LONG AS they continue to CLING TO THEIR PRIDE / and PUFF THEMSELVES UP WITH VAIN FANTASIES THAT THEY ARE WORTHY or DESERVE TO BE SAVED / or REFUSE TO DEFLATE THEIR EGOS ENOUGH TO ADMIT THEY ARE SINNERS WHO STAND IN DESPERATE NEED OF GOD'S GRACE.

“There must be effort in order to get in,” says McLaren, “but it’s the effort fight against our old, self-confident, self-centered nature which kicks against the conditions of entrance. The main struggle of our lives is to cultivate a self-humbling trust in Jesus Christ.”

You see, the greatest struggle of the Christian faith (as most of you are well aware by now) is not the struggle to work hard, but the struggle to believe that God in Christ did all the hard work that was necessary for us to enter the kingdom!

It’s the struggle to crucify pride / and rid ourselves of the erroneous belief that we can earn our own salvation / and simply rest in the finished and fully sufficient work of redemption which Christ accomplished for us.

It’s the struggle to believe, as Milton Vincent points out in his Gospel Primer for Christians, *“that my righteous standing with God always holds firm regardless of my performance, because my standing is based solely on the work of Jesus and not mine. On my worst days of sin and failure, the gospel encourages me with God’s unrelenting grace toward me, and on my best days of victory and usefulness, the gospel keeps me relating to God solely on the basis of Jesus righteousness and not mine.”*

He’s right. That is the Gospel. And our greatest struggle is simply to believe it! To believe we don’t have to bring a long list of all our efforts and achievements before God in order to be accepted and loved by Him, but must actually leave them outside in order to enter the kingdom!

The hardest thing for a proud sinner to do is simply believe the Gospel! Because it demands that we see ourselves as “spiritual welfare recipients,” instead of proud, confident, “I did it myself,” “I don’t accept any handouts from anyone,” wage earners of our salvation!

Which brings us to the **LAST** thing we need to see in this text: The other reason that people are prevented from entering the kingdom. And this time it’s NOT because the gate is narrow. It’s because the people waited too long before seeking to enter. At some point, says Jesus, by a decisive act in the future, the door to the kingdom will be entirely shut and will not open again for anyone who has failed to enter through it by that time (v. 25).

It’s Jesus way of warning people that it’s very unwise (in fact it can be utterly disastrous) to think we have all the time in the world to get right with God, or divest ourselves of our pride, and repent of our sin, and trust in Christ alone for our salvation.

Its Jesus way of saying, "Don't wait, my friends. The time to "strive" or "agonize" to enter the kingdom is NOW! His favor is being offered NOW! Don't let the opportunity PASS! And it's not simply because one day be slammed shut. It's because the longer one waits, the more hardened and resistant and comfortable and apathetic they become in their unforgiven and unbelieving state.

I know salvation is not a matter of statistics. I know that! But I also know it is unwise to ignore the fact that of all people who say they experienced conversion to Christ, 85% came to Christ before the age of 19, and only 15% came to Christ after 19 years old (after the age of 30 your chances drop to 2% and after 60 less than 1%).

Why? Because waiting creates a settled complacency and a hardness of heart creeps in and an unwillingness to change and a skepticism about the need to be saved. Which means that those who wait (thinking they will come to Christ later in life) usually never do! The longer one waits the harder it is to fit through the narrow door to the kingdom.

You see, the Jews thought that just because they were Jews, or descendents of Abraham, or religious, moral, church going people who knew about God, they were a shoe in for the kingdom!
Yet Jesus says no!

To all the Jews standing right in front of Him He says: ***"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom, but you yourselves thrown out"*** (v. 28).

And you can just hear them protesting: "Us? We're God's chosen people! We're Jews! We can trace our lineage back to the patriarchs! / We've studied the prophets and go to synagogue every Saturday! We never miss! / We pray three times a day, and my goodness Jesus – we hung around with You! / We ate and drank with You and listened to You as You taught us in our streets! / You are joking, right?!"

But He's not! And here's the reason why. Here's the key to why they'll be shut outside. He says it twice: ***"I don't KNOW you"*** (v. 25) / And again in verse 27 ***"I don't KNOW you."*** You see, they did know many things ABOUT Jesus. They could have told us what He liked to eat, and what He liked to drink. In fact, they could have told us many of the things He taught, since unlike us, they were right there listening to Him as He taught!

But they lacked the most important thing of all: They didn't KNOW Him. Or better yet, He didn't KNOW them! / There was no intimacy of relationship. / No close relationship of love. No experiential fondness or spiritual intercourse between them and God or Christ.

You see, if someone said to me: "You know Donovan McNabb?" I'd say, "Of course I do! Everyone in the Philly area knows who Donovan McNabb is!"

Yet therein lies the problem! Because in Scripture, the word "to know" (when used in this way) is actually one of the most intimate of all love terms. In fact, it frequently refers to the act of sexual intercourse between a husband and wife.

That's the case in Gen. 4:1, we are told that, "***Adam (literally in the Hebrew), KNEW Eve, his wife, and she conceived a child.***" / The same is said of Mary and Joseph in Matthew 1:25, where we read in the literal rendition: "***And Joseph KNEW her not, until she had bore her firstborn Son, and she gave him the name Jesus.***" In both those contexts (and many more) the word "know" carries that deep, intimate, personal connotation.

And thus we see, it's not enough to know things about Jesus, we must know Him intimately and be known personally by Him in that close hallowed relationship of spiritual union and communion with God!

In fact, that's why Jesus can say in John 17:3: "***Now this IS eternal life, that they may KNOW you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.***" It's a verse which assures us that eternal life is not simply living forever! All people will live forever – some in heaven and some in hell.

Eternal life differs in that it's living forever in intimate, caring, holy, experiential union and communion with God, through Christ. It's life that begins the moment we are converted and is lived from that point on and forever more in a relationship of love with God! In intimate spiritual union and holy fellowship with Jesus Christ as Redeemer, Lord and Friend!

So I ask you: ***Do you KNOW God and Christ in that way? Because that's what salvation is! It's the by-product of KNOWING Jesus!***

Too often we have simply encouraged people to be "SAVED" (as if it can happen apart from knowing Jesus), when what Jesus Himself does is tell them they must know Him and be known by Him the result of which is eternal life or salvation. So, my friends, know Him!