

Sermon for September 25, 2013 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 13:22-30

Theme: The question is not “who” but “will you” be in heaven.

²² *And He went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.* ²³ *Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them,* ²⁴ *"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."* ²⁵ *"When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,'* ²⁶ *"then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.'* ²⁷ *"But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'* ²⁸ *"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out."* ²⁹ *"They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God."* ³⁰ *"And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."*

There is a saying that there is no such thing as a stupid question. Maybe, but there are seemingly “harmless” questions that, when answered, can lead a person down the wrong path.

Jesus was asked one of those questions in our text – a harmless question that I am sure all of us have wondered at one point or another: *"Lord, are there few who are saved?"* Scripture answers this question in other places, but Jesus knew that there was a danger in asking this question. If Jesus answered, “Heaven will be filled with a great multitude which no one can number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues (cf. Rev 7:9)”, some might misunderstand and think (as the way many moderns do) that it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe in God. Theological differences are of no consequence. We are all headed to the same place.

Jesus knew such thinking can land a person in hell. This is why he answers a different, far more important question that He should have been asked – and that question is "How are we saved?" Let us pay close attention to Jesus’ response, under the theme: **The question is not “who” but “will you” be in heaven.**

Our text finds Jesus during his last year of ministry. He was in a region call Perea, and was journeying to Jerusalem for one last Passover celebration – for it would be at this Passover that He would be sacrificed as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

As He walked towards Jerusalem, Jesus stopped to preach at the cities and villages along the way. His theme was undoubtedly the same: Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near. Believe in Him for eternal life. At such an occasion someone *said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them,* ²⁴ *"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."*

Contrary to popular belief – all roads do not lead to heaven. There is only one way to heaven. Jesus said on another occasion: *"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved (John 10:9 NKJ).* And on another occasion, Jesus said: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6 NKJ)*

Jesus is the door, the gate – the only way of salvation. All who wish to enter heaven must go through him. But how does one do that? What does it mean to strive to enter through him? It means that we must repent and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Only such people will have eternal life.

Jesus says *many . . . will seek to enter*. Everyone loves the idea of heaven and wants to be there, but Jesus says *many will not be able*. Why is that? It's because, even though everyone wants to go to heaven, most people don't want to enter through the narrow gate of Jesus. People love sin. They don't want to give up the things they enjoy but know are wrong. They think: "Maybe later I will repent, but I am enjoying life too much now." Many love the idea of forgiveness, but they want it on their terms. They want to get into heaven their own way at their own time.

How sad the sight is for God. He wants all men to be saved and has even opened the way for them; but most refuse to come through the narrow gate. They refuse to bend themselves low before God in humble repentance. They refuse to strip off their clothes of worldly pursuits and sin. They refuse to repent. This is why Jesus urges us to *strive to enter through the narrow gate*. Our striving is not with other people, but against our own sinful flesh that wants us to take our pet sins with us into the kingdom of God. We strive against our own sinful flesh by asking God for true humility, true sorrow over sins, and true faith in Jesus – a faith that is willing to go to heaven naked of all worldliness and be clothed in the blood and righteousness of Christ. Can we accomplish such humility and faith on our own? No, but as Jesus said on another occasion – when the disciples ask who can be saved: "*The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.*" (Luke 18:27 NKJ)

Through Scripture, the LORD's prophets and evangelists call us to this impossibly narrow door. Heaven is on the other side. God invites us to enter and promises to take hold of us and pull us through. And, as we humble ourselves before him, we soon find that this door is not your ordinary door. This door is Jesus – the Son of the living God who welcomes us, helps us and clothes us with the precious garments of his blood and righteousness as we crouch through in humility. On the other side we see the countless multitudes from every corner of the globe who have all come through this narrow gate of Jesus – as Jesus says later in our text: "*They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God.*"

But back to the people outside – the people who hear the prophets and evangelists calling everyone to this gate. Most people ignore the call. Some don't like how narrow this gate is, so they strive to find another way in. Others see the gate, but they don't want to go in just yet. Regarding such people, Jesus continues:

"When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,'"

Parents – when you call your children to dinner, you expect them come immediately, don't you? It's disrespectful when they don't. The same is true regarding God's call to repentance. When he calls us to come and enter his rest, to partake of the costly feast of salvation he has prepared for us, he expects us to come now. But if we don't? If we – through our actions – say: "Go on and start without me God, I will join the feast later. I'll be fine with the leftovers. . . .", then we show that we don't care about God and his salvation – a salvation He paid for with the precious blood of his Son. Then God will close the gate, and we will be locked out forever.

But the people outside think that is unjust. *They will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.'* They are in effect saying: "God, you know us. We lived near the Church – and even came on Christmas and Easter. Through your minister, you preached and taught Bible class to friends of ours. Lord, we know that you were at Immanuel whenever there was worship and Bible class. We live in Kewaunee and it's a small town. Don't you know us? "

Notice, however, what they don't say: "Lord, we listened to your preaching and took your Word to heart. Lord, we treasured your salvation above all else. Lord, we believed in you." And this is why Jesus says: *'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'*²⁸ *"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out.*

The LORD wants *all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* (1Ti 2:4 NKJ) Sadly, the people of this world do not desire the same thing. They don't take the LORD's salvation seriously. They put so many things ahead of the Gospel, like sports, sleep, leisure, selfish pursuits, etc. . . . God has provided a way into heaven for all people, but many choose to ignore it. It doesn't fit their lifestyle or time table. And so, when the door is closed, when a person is damned to hell due to no fault of God's what do people do? They blame God for not caring, for not knowing them.

But God is not the one to blame. He took your salvation so seriously that He sacrificed His Son for you on the cross – allowing nails to pierce his precious hands and feet. He watched His Son die an agonizing death in order to save you. He took your salvation so seriously, that He planned it out from eternity and every moment and action he took was to save you. This is how seriously God took your salvation. How seriously do you take your salvation? Are you willing to strive to enter through that narrow gate of Jesus by stripping yourselves of all sin and worldly pursuits through repentance and faith in the forgiveness Jesus won for you? Or is that too inconvenient?

There is a great blessing for all who follow Jesus in repentance and faith. *"They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God.* They will enjoy God's saving presence forever. There will be no more mourning or pain, no more death or sorrow. All these things will be gone, because sin will not be there. God, their Father, will comfort them forever.

Jesus concludes his instruction by saying: *And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: take Jesus' words seriously. Many Jews, who had a rich heritage of God's Word and promise, who had the Messiah physically preaching to them, didn't take his call seriously. They were the first in that they had all the advantages. But most of them became "last." They lost their salvation due to unbelief. The Gentiles, who did not have this rich heritage, received the Gospel with great joy and faith. This is why they are now first and will inherit eternal life.

Immanuel has a rich heritage of proclaiming the Gospel. Many of you have had the advantage of Christian parents and a Christian education. Do not let these advantages be wasted through complacency. Do not become "last" by neglecting Jesus' Gospel call to learn from him in Bible Class and be united with Him in the Lord's Supper. Heed Jesus call and come to him in repentance and faith. Enter through the narrow gate, and join the countless number of fellow Christians who are now enjoying their fellowship with God. Amen.