

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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Strive to Enter in at the Strait Gate

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Dear Radio Friends,

If you have your Bibles at hand, I ask you to open them to Luke 13:24. Today we will look at these words of Jesus: “Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.”

These words are the first part of Jesus’ answer to a question in the previous verse. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem for the last time. And as He goes, He speaks of the kingdom of heaven and the related subjects of salvation, eternity, heaven, and hell. And one in the audience asks Him this question: “Lord, are there few that be saved?” Jesus does not deny the premise of this question but uses the question as an opportunity to address everyone in His audience with the words of the text: “Strive to enter into the kingdom.”

The great danger for the Christian in every age is that he has a false sense of security, in which he says, “I have arrived,” in which he trusts, perhaps, his membership in the church or his act of worship or his good works or his Christian upbringing or his knowledge of the Bible or his correctness in theology. And then his mindset is: “I have a place in the kingdom.” We should never have that mindset based on those things. Rather, the Christian life is a constant calling and struggle and battle. There are enemies that we must fight. There are trials that we must go through. And, as the apostle Paul says in Acts 14:22, “It is through much tribulation that we enter into the kingdom of God.”

Jesus addresses these words in a very personal way to everyone in His audience. The man asks a general, abstract theological question: Are there few that be saved? Jesus is saying, “That’s the wrong question. That’s too general. If that’s all you ask, you miss the point. Every one of you needs to consider this question with regard to yourself: Are you in the kingdom? And even more than this: Are you striving to enter into the kingdom?”

This is more than just thinking that you are in the kingdom. This is more than just wanting to be in the kingdom. Jesus will contrast in the text the idea of those who seek to enter in and striving to enter into the kingdom. The question is not: Do you want to be in heaven? Do you want a place in the kingdom? But: Are you striving, in your life daily, to enter into the kingdom? Many, and those are very shocking words of Jesus, many will seek to enter in and shall not be able.

And so we should see the words of the text as a calling that Jesus lays before every one of us. The calling is: Strive to enter in at the strait gate.

What is this gate? This gate is the gate or the entrance into the kingdom of God. That is evident from the verses that follow. In verse 25, Jesus gives a parable of the master of the house shutting the door and many standing without. And from without, in verse 29, they will look in and they will see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and the Gentiles from the north, south, east, and

west sitting down in the kingdom of God.

What is the kingdom of God? It is also called in the Scriptures the kingdom of Christ, and the kingdom of heaven. Jesus speaks very often of this during His ministry. The kingdom of God is the kingdom of Christ's rule of grace in the hearts of His people. The citizens of this kingdom are God's saved people. And the king in this kingdom is Jesus Christ exalted at God's right hand.

The Bible looks at entrance into the kingdom from a couple of different perspectives. The first is God's work of regeneration. In Colossians 1 we are told that God has translated us out of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son. That verse, obviously, has in mind the time when God comes by the sovereign work of His Spirit and transforms the heart of one of His elect people from being unregenerate and serving Satan to being a new heart in which he loves and serves God.

This is important for us as we seek to understand what it means to enter into the kingdom. When Jesus says, "Strive to enter into the kingdom," He does not mean that we must do something to save ourselves. The Bible looks at the entrance into the kingdom of heaven also from the point of view of a continual, lifelong, daily entrance into the kingdom, and also from the point of view of the final entrance into the kingdom on the last day. It is these last two that Jesus has in mind in the text.

The question that we need to ask is: What is the gate or entrance into the kingdom? And the Bible makes it plain that Jesus Christ Himself is the gate or entrance into the kingdom. In John 10:7 Jesus says: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep." And, again, in verse 9: "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture." We enter into the kingdom by faith in Jesus Christ. The entrance into the kingdom is our standing before God especially on the Judgment Day, but also in our daily life. And how is it that we can stand before God and be accepted by Him, but by Christ and His righteousness. That is the meaning of entrance into the kingdom. It is trusting in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, His sacrifice, as taking our place before God.

In Matthew 5 Jesus will contrast this to the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. In Matthew 5:20 Jesus says, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." The scribes and Pharisees thought that they had an entrance into the kingdom of heaven. They trusted themselves, and their birth, and their heritage, and their tradition, and their good works, and their circumcision, and their practices. And Jesus says, Our righteousness must exceed theirs; it must be different from theirs; it must go beyond theirs. That is, we must not trust ourselves and rely on what we do, but we must trust in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice as the only way of entrance into heaven and standing before God.

This is what it means to enter into the kingdom: to trust in Jesus Christ by faith and not to rely on ourselves. This is something that we must do every day of our life.

Now, to enter into the kingdom requires a great deal of effort. This is not easy. It is very difficult. That is suggested in the text, both in the description of the gate as a strait gate or a narrow gate, and also in the words of Jesus, "Strive to enter in." When Jesus calls the gate into heaven a "strait gate," He means, in the first place, that this is the only gate, the only way into the kingdom of heaven. There is no side door. There is no back door into heaven. The only way is through faith in Jesus Christ. He said Himself, "I am the way; no man cometh unto the Father but

by me.”

But that the gate is strait also means that the gate is very difficult to enter. We should think of a tight spot through which we must squeeze to get to the other side of the wall. When Jesus says that we should strive to enter in, He is saying, literally, in the Greek: we should agonize to enter into the kingdom. The idea is that this requires great effort, great sacrifice, great trial to enter into the kingdom.

Why is it so difficult to enter into the kingdom? The first reason is that this requires total self-humiliation and sacrifice. When we say that Jesus Christ is the door, that means that we must let go of ourselves and we must let go of our desires for pleasure from sin. And that is something very difficult to do. We simply do not want to do this. It goes against our nature. We enjoy the pleasures and the company of sin. To let go of them is to be alone. It is to say “No” to things that we enjoy and that others enjoy. To come before God in confession and humility, to let go of our works—we do not want to do these things. We are so proud. This is humiliating. This is painful. Think of how difficult it is to say the words, “I was wrong.” When we come, in faith in Jesus Christ, not trusting our own righteousness, then we must say, “I am wrong. My nature is wrong. My heart is wrong.” And we must be willing to admit our sin.

We must also let go of taking any credit for ourselves. Standing before God in Christ means that we trust His righteousness and not our own.

This is what it means to strive to enter into the kingdom. And this is not an easy calling.

We have an example of one who strives to enter into the kingdom in Philippians 3. Paul here speaks of himself as he was formerly a Pharisee. He says that if anyone has anything to boast concerning the flesh, he does above them all. He was circumcised the eighth day. He was of the stock of Israel. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Touching the law, he was a Pharisee. That means that he kept the law very carefully. He was a zealous man. He was blameless. But Paul says that all these things that were gain to him he counts loss for Christ. And he says, “I let go of all these things and I count them but dung that I may win Christ and be found in him; not having my own righteousness, but that which is through faith in Jesus Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” And Paul speaks not only of letting go of himself, but of the effort that is required in this. He says that he has not attained, but that instead he presses toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. He speaks of entering into the kingdom as a daily activity in his life that is difficult and requires great effort.

Another reason that it is difficult to enter into the kingdom is that this is a way of trial and persecution. It is not an easy road. Jesus speaks in another place of the broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads into glory. The broad way is the easy way, and many find it. The narrow way is a way of difficulty and trial. When we enter into the kingdom by Jesus Christ, that is a life of cross-bearing. This is difficult, not only in regard to our godliness and the obedience that are required, but added to that is persecution. And added to that is the fact that we must bear patiently in many trials that God sends our way. The Christian life is not an easy life. If you are a Christian, you are going to have resistance in your life; you are going to have daily struggles in your life with sin. You are going to have people say hard words against you. You are going to be scorned and mocked. And so you must strive to enter into the kingdom. We should think of an athlete, striving to attain the prize in a competition.

This means that we must not be lazy as Christians. We should not think that we have arrived. That is the obvious implication of the text. Being a Christian puts on you many obligations and requires much diligence of you, especially now in spiritual things. We enter the kingdom by faith. And God has given to us the means to faith, the means by which we come to Him in Jesus Christ. These are the means of public worship, of reading the Bible, of prayer, of hearing the preaching, of participating in the life of the body of believers in the church. These are things that require much effort in our life.

Today, we find that much effort is put into fleeting things—into money, into sports, into labor, and into the gain of material things. But how many take pains for these spiritual things necessary for entrance into the kingdom?

What about you? Do you strive, do you make every effort, to enter into the kingdom? This is much more than having a form of religion, being a respectable church member, knowing the Bible, and those things. Satan has no problem with somebody who merely has those things. He will let you sit comfortably in church. He will let you say and do nice things. But are you striving to enter into the kingdom? That is what Jesus lays before us as our calling. We must strive to enter in.

Jesus presses on us the urgency of this in the text. At the end of verse 24 He says, “Many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” He explains what He means here in verses 25-28 that follow. There is a day coming when the master of the house, that is, Jesus the King, will rise up and He will shut the door of the kingdom of heaven. On that day there will be a group of people, not just a few but many, who will stand outside the kingdom, beating on the door, saying to the master of the house, “Let us in.” The day of which Jesus speaks is the day of judgment. And Jesus the King, the master of the house, will say to these standing without, “No, I know you not whence you are.”

The question is, to whom is Jesus referring when He speaks of those “many who will stand without the kingdom and not have entrance”? Jesus is not referring here to the world of ungodly men. The Bible pictures these as running from the wrath of God in the day of judgment and crying to the rocks and the hills to cover them. They will not stand at the door of the kingdom and try to gain entrance in. They will know their guilt and they will run from God and His wrath.

These many who will stand without are those who think in this life that they are in the kingdom but are not. These are the ones who know the gospel. These are the ones who enjoy many privileges in the church, but who always say, “Tomorrow. I will repent tomorrow. I will believe tomorrow.” It is clear from verse 26 that these are the ones who stand without. In verse 26 we read, “Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.” These are people who pin their hopes of entering into heaven on their proximity to Jesus. They are acquainted with Him and His teaching.

Jesus is speaking directly to the Jews of His day. They will say, “But, Lord, we were right there. Don’t you remember? We ate bread with you when you fed the 5,000. We heard your sermon on the mount. Weren’t you there? Don’t you remember us?” And the equivalent today are people who say, “Wait, I went to church. I listened to sermons. I went to a doctrine class. I learned catechism. I confessed my faith. I jumped through every hoop that was required in the church.”

According to verse 27, Jesus will say to them, “I tell you, I know you not whence ye are.” This,

of course, does not mean that Jesus does not know who these people are. He knows them. He is the omniscient One. But this means that for all their religious practice, all their external religion, there never was an intimacy between them and the Lord. Jesus will say, "I never knew you. You never loved Me. You never truly served Me. Yes, you were in the church. Yes, you knew doctrine. Yes, you ate My bread—you partook of My sacraments. But we didn't know each other in a relationship of love." And so He will say to them, in the end of verse 27: "Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity."

What does Jesus mean by "workers of iniquity"? Again, Jesus does not mean those who are outside of the church, those who are vile committers of sin and open transgression. Certainly this includes hypocrites in the church, whose lives are marked with evil deeds and in whom there is no repentance. But Jesus means, when He speaks of them as workers of iniquity, that these are people of good standing and reputation in the church who did not live out of faith. (And the Bible tells us that whatsoever is not of faith is sin.) To all these, Jesus will say, "Depart from me."

And in verse 28, we read that "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." That is a description of hell. No one in the Bible talked about hell so much as Jesus. Perhaps that is because Jesus faced it and Jesus knew the experience of hell Himself. Here hell is described as a place of perpetual torment. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell is a real place. Many who suppose that they are heaven-bound will find themselves in hell. That is Jesus' warning here.

And so there is an urgency for us to strive to enter in. We should not leave off spiritual exercises and faith in Jesus Christ for another day. We should not be lazy in the things that God has given us to do as believers, difficult as they may be. We should strive to enter into the kingdom. That is the force of Jesus' command in verse 24. "Strive to enter in." Jesus uses the future day, the day of judgment, to impress us with our present responsibility. We should lay hold on Jesus Christ today. And we should live a life appropriate to that.

For those who do, Jesus promises a great blessedness in verses 28 and 29. In verse 29 Jesus speaks of people coming from the east and the west and the north and the south and sitting down in the kingdom of God. He means, not only, that they will sit with Abraham and Isaac and the fathers. But He means that they will sit with Him in His kingdom to eternity. To these, Jesus will say, "I know you. Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." And these will live in eternal blessedness with Christ in heaven.

You ought, we ought, to strive to enter into the kingdom today.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Jesus Christ, Thy Son, who is the way into Thy presence. We thank Thee for translating us, by the work of the Spirit, into His kingdom. We pray, give us grace daily to strive to enter in at the strait gate. We need this grace, for this is such a difficult calling. For Jesus' sake, Amen.