

The Unconverted “Believer”

“There is a generation that is pure (clean) in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness.” (Prov. 30:12)

This is the second Lord’s Day that our church has been unable to meet together for worship due to the coronavirus pandemic. But we are grateful to our Lord for this means of live communication with our church family. Even though it is not an adequate substitution for our corporate worship, it is a blessing that our Lord in His providence has given us for the short term. We have put on hold our weekly sermon series on the Gospel of John until we are all able to be together once again. And so, we are giving attention to other matters, just as Pastor Jason did last week, we will do so today, and every Sunday, Lord willing, until we are able to reconvene as the body of Christ.

I would like us to consider a subject today that has always been an abiding concern of mine. This is the problem of the unconverted “believer” that is found throughout our world. Just as this coronavirus has become a common plague throughout the world, so this spiritual virus of unconverted “Christians” is also a world-wide menace. But whereas the coronavirus is only of recent origin, this spiritual disease of nominal Christianity—Christians in name only—has been with us throughout this Christian era throughout the world. And this spiritual malady is not only encountered in the world, it is perhaps most prevalent within churches. The fact is that there are many, many people who profess that they are Christians, that they are believers in the Lord Jesus, but they are actually strangers to the grace of God in Christ that brings salvation. As the old adage states, they are professors of Christ but they are not possessors of Christ. They are unconverted, even while they and many others believe that they are true Christians. They are as those described in **Proverbs 30:12**, *“There is a generation that is pure (clean) in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness.”* They think that they are quite clean from their sin, but in truth they are not washed from the defilement of sin that characterizes them. They are swimming in a sea of nominal (“in name only”) Christianity. Although they think that they are treading water just fine, they are doomed to drown in their sins, for they are not in the ship that is captained by the Lord Jesus, the ship called “Mercy.” The greatest need of the day is not a cure for those infected with the coronavirus or a strategy to avoid contracting the disease. The greatest need of our world has always been the true gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the only way of salvation from sin, that remedy for that great spiritual virus that has already and has always infected us all.

Now whenever we address this subject, I am always concerned about unsettling the tenderhearted and easily troubled soul. We have stated that the most difficult task of the preacher is to awaken souls who are ignorant and insensitive to their lost condition, while at the same time attempting to comfort and encourage truly gracious (saved) souls who may be weak or easily shaken in their faith. This is especially the case because the devil is hard at work keeping the unawakened soul fast in his spiritual slumber, at ease in his condition, even as he attempts to disrupt, confuse, and torment the true Christian who may be rather weak in faith. Ultimately only the Holy Spirit can apply His truth rightly and appropriately to the people in whom He is working. But this is always a concern that weighs heavily upon me.

We address this subject because it is critically important in biblical soul work. It is important not only because we desire to awaken and alarm those in this sad condition so that they might seek and resort to Jesus Christ for true life that only He can impart, but we also address this in order to better equip true Christians in the art and labor of love of dealing with souls that they encounter frequently. The Holy Scriptures declare that “He that winneth souls is wise” (Prov. 11:30). May He our Lord enable each of us who know Him in truth become better fishers of souls, which is becoming of all of our Lord’s disciples. As Jesus told those fishermen on the shores of Galilee, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”, so may He enable us to follow Him and thereby become better fishers of men and women, of boys and girls.

Before we get to the heart of the matter, I think it important to state and emphasize the essential foundational biblical doctrine of *the sinner’s justification by the grace of God through faith alone in Jesus*

Christ alone. The reason for this is that those who question, react, or reject what we say about these matters, will commonly do so because they wrongly think that what we are saying is in conflict with this doctrine. But this would be a wrong conclusion. And so, let us affirm...

I. The sinner's justification by the grace of God alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

And so, what is meant by the sinner's justification before God through faith in Jesus Christ alone? The Word of God teaches that the only way that a guilty sinner can receive the forgiveness of his sins and granted the gift of righteousness is through his faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, the crucified and risen Son of God. Here is a good definition of this Bible doctrine:

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

This is the definition of justification set forth in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647).

Justification through faith alone answers the problem which had to be resolved if sinners were to inherit eternal life: ***How can a person who is guilty of sin be found on the Day of Judgment to be righteous before a holy and just God who judges all of His creatures according to His law?*** The answer is that the sinner may be pardoned of sin and declared to be righteous by God through faith alone in God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is at the very heart of the biblical gospel. If one is not right in this biblical teaching (doctrine), he does not know the gospel through which God brings salvation to His people. We are not saved by works, but by grace through faith. Justification is through faith **alone**; that is, our justification is through faith apart from any works that we might perform. Justification is an **act** of God in which He forgives the guilty sinner of his sins and declares the believing sinner to be righteous, the one who believes on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When God justifies a sinner, that sinner is no longer regarded as a guilty sinner who is deserving of the eternal wrath of God, but rather the God regards and treats the believer as a child of God, who is in union with Jesus Christ. Justification is **complete**, knowing of no degrees. And justification is a **once-for-all** act of God. A justified sinner cannot become unjustified. Once Almighty God has declared His verdict of "forgiven and righteous" with regard to the true believer, that verdict can never be reversed. Justification can never be rescinded. The believing sinner is pardoned and righteous before God for eternity.

Now let us address this problem of nominal Christianity by first considering...

II. A few biblical verses that speak of this spiritual pandemic of unconverted believers.

The Word of God speaks of "many" who will not discover until the Day of Judgement that they were never converted to Christ. Although they thought themselves to be true believers, they are only then discovered to have been unwashed from their sin. At the **onset** of our Lord's public ministry, at the end of His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus declared that hearing and believing His words alone would not result in salvation. There must be obedience to Him and His Words in order to be saved. These often quoted words are in **Matthew 7:21-27**.

²¹"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²²**Many** will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' ²³And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

²⁴"Therefore whoever **hears** these sayings of Mine, and **does** them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: ²⁵and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

²⁶“But everyone who *hears* these sayings of Mine, and *does not do them*, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: ²⁷and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

According to our Lord Jesus, here “the wise man” is the one who will be saved from damnation on the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. His life was characterized by righteousness. He both heard and obeyed Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior. But the “foolish man” is the one who vainly presumed that he would be saved because he wrongly thought that he knew and believed on the Lord Jesus. He will be damned forever on that day, for the Lord never knew Him. His life was not characterized by righteousness, that is, by following Jesus, ordering his thinking and living according to the words of Jesus. His life was characterized as one who “practiced lawlessness.” He did not live righteously as the Lord Jesus directed and enabled him to live, but he lived in accordance with sin, a life characterized as disregarding and transgressing God’s laws. What a sad and tragic discovery for “many” on that Day, hearing the just sentence of King Jesus, “Depart from Me. I never knew you.”

Our Lord taught these people that He had the authority to bestow salvation on them. He also had taught them that He had the authority to govern the manner in which they lived. Those who did not obey Him, did not truly know Him. He taught these things to the people at the beginning of His earthly ministry.

But also at the *end* of His public ministry the Lord indicated that there would be *many* unconverted “Christians” (so-called) who will be damned because they were unprepared in life to meet their Lord whom they were anticipating to return. Here is the **Parable of the Ten Virgins** that our Lord taught at the end of His ministry:

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. ³Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, ⁴but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. ⁵ But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

⁶“And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ ⁷Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

¹¹“Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ ¹²But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’

¹³“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.”
(Matt. 25:1-13)

We will not go into detail about the possible meanings of the various details of this parable. The main point is that only half of those who were waiting for Him were actually prepared to do so. The other half who presumed that they were waiting for His return were not prepared to face the returning bridegroom. As **Charles Spurgeon** wrote of what this parable suggested to him:

That many professors (professing Christians) are deceived is clear enough from the language of Christ Himself, both here and in other places. For instance, “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom; and five of them were wise, and five were foolish.” We hope that in our Churches we have not such a division this, for it were fearful to contemplate only one half as sincere, and the other half graceless, having the lamp of profession, without the secret vessel of spiritual life! Yet, so alarming a proportion as five out of ten should make us search ourselves very carefully, lest we be found among the virgins, and among the virgins having lamps, ay,

and among those whose lamps are burning, and yet should be cast away as having no oil in our vessels with our lamps.¹

Throughout our Lord's earthly ministry He sought to awaken and warn people to be aware of their true spiritual condition and to be always prepared for the Day of Judgment. He desired to make true disciples, His committed followers, not superficial believers only.

Let us now consider the...

II. Common errant thinking of unconverted "believers."

It is a sad reality that many unconverted "believers" enter into their false standing before the Lord due to errant views of the nature of faith that results in justification. We might identify a several common errors that are believed by many, many professing believers.

(1) Because the doctrine of justification asserts that we are justified through faith alone apart from works, *unconverted "believers" commonly believe that they may be saved irrespective of how they live.* Wrong views of works results in wrong views of what is true, justifying faith. The unconverted believer says to himself,

"Since I am saved through faith apart from works, I can choose to disregard obeying Scripture without imperiling my salvation. As long as I believe on Christ, it does not matter how I live, for I am not saved by my works."

Before they were "Christians" they were told by preachers, they read in tracts and books, they heard on the radio and watched on television, that all they had to do in order to be saved from their sin and be granted the gift of everlasting life was to believe on Jesus Christ as their Savior. And then upon a simple prayer of faith, they were assured that they were saved. Most often there was never a word said of the need of repentance from sin and the responsibility to both hear and obey the Lord Jesus in whom they claimed to believe. The Scriptures declare that we are not saved *because* of our works; but those same Scriptures teach us that we will not be saved *without* works. The lives of true believers are characterized by works of righteousness. John wrote, "Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous" (1 John 3:7).

A second error that is commonly held by unconverted "believers" is this:

(2) Although they are told that they are justified through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, *unconverted "believers" commonly fail to understand the true nature of biblical, saving faith.* Biblical saving faith is validated and vindicated by its fruit. James wrote,

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! ²⁰But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?... ²⁶For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Biblical, saving faith is known by its continuance through tribulation (1 Pet. 1:7). Biblical, saving faith overcomes the world (1 John 5:4f). It keeps the soul in fellowship with Christ and with fellow believers in Jesus Christ (1 John 3:10). Biblical saving faith is shown forth in a life of righteousness, of conscientious

¹ This is from his sermon, "Self Delusion", which is posted on our church's website: <https://thewordoftruth.net/self-delusion>

ordering one's life according to the will of God as set forth and revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Biblical saving faith is shown forth in its persistent life-long desire and commitment to grow in grace and to bring glory to God through His Son.

(3) Unconverted “believers” have commonly been taught to believe a distorted and truncated view of salvation. They believe that salvation entails the forgiveness of sins—only. This is a very common error. But biblical salvation is God saving His people from all of the consequences and manifestations of sin. Justification addresses salvation from the *penalty* of sin. But it says nothing of salvation from the *alienation* due to our sin, which is addressed in our reconciliation and adoption. Our justification says nothing of our salvation from the *power* of sin, which is our sanctification. Our justification is not often linked to our final salvation from sin in our glorification at the final judgment, when we will be saved from the very *presence* of sin within us. Salvation is declared only to address the need of God's forgiveness of sins. And the result of this is that...

(4) Unconverted “believers” commonly fail to see the full spectrum and weight of salvation as a future experience or inheritance. They view salvation as something that only occurred when they first believed the gospel. But the Holy Scriptures more often speak of our salvation as not yet received, but will only be fully experienced after we have successfully navigated and completed this life of faith. And so, the Scriptures speak of true believers who will yet receive salvation. Peter wrote to believers, “who by God's power are being guarded through faith *for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*. (1 Pet. 1:5). And a few verses later he wrote of believers “receiving the end of your faith—*the salvation of your souls* (1 Pet. 1:9). And Paul wrote, “And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now *our salvation is nearer than when we first believed*” (Rom. 13:11).

(5) Unconverted “believers” commonly fail to see that our final salvation is received upon the culmination of a life of persevering faith in obedience to the will of God that has persisted through all adversity and opposition. There is the need to persevere, to overcome the world, to withstand and conquer the devil and his minions. There is the need to overcome all obstacles and all opposition so that we are standing before Him in the faith in which we began our journey in following Him. This is emphasized in a special way in the Book of Revelation. Note in these verses our Lord Jesus promises future salvation only to those who “overcome” this world.

Revelation 2:7. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

Revelation 2:11. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

Revelation 2:17. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”

Revelation 2:26. “And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels’ -- as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.”

Revelation 3:5. “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”

Revelation 3:12. “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.”

Revelation 3:21. “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

Revelation 21:7. “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”

And similar to this idea...

(6) Unconverted “believers” commonly fail to see the need to continue in faith and obedience if they are to inherit salvation.

Consider the Apostle Paul’s words in Colossians 1

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, ²*by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you-- unless you believed in vain.* (1 Cor. 15:1f)

And to the Christians in the church at Colossae Paul wrote:

²¹And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled ²²in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— ²³*if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel* which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Col. 1:21-23)

The writer to the Hebrew Christians repeatedly pressed upon his readers their responsibility to persevere in faith and obedience. Their continuance as members of the household of God centered on their persevering faithful obedience to Jesus Christ. In **Hebrews 3:1ff**:

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, ²who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. ³For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house. ⁴For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. ⁵And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, ⁶but Christ as a Son over His own house, *whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.*

And then farther down in this chapter he wrote,

¹²Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; ¹³but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴*For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end...*” (Heb. 3:12-14)

Later still in the book of Hebrews we read,

³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:

³⁷“For yet a little while,
And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.

³⁸Now the just shall live by faith;
But if anyone draws back,
My soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of *those who believe to the saving of the soul*.
(Heb. 10:36-39)

If these professing Jewish Christians failed to persevere. It would result in their forfeiture of any hope of salvation. To refuse to believe and obey the Word of God will confirm to them that they will be damned. Note, here too, salvation of the soul is set forth as something yet to be experienced after a life of persevering faith and obedience to the Lord Jesus.

Persevering in faith through life takes *great grace* and *great effort*. It takes great grace that God has provided through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, who is also our High Priest. From Him we may receive “grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). But it also requires great effort. Attaining the salvation that God bestows by His grace involves our full attention and dedication. It requires our full devotion and commitment. And so, this life as a Christian that is moving toward our final promised inheritance is depicted in the Scriptures as one of striving, struggling, fighting, running, sowing, seeking, journeying, enduring, overcoming, and even exerting violence in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now in order to bring together these matters let us consider a parable that our Lord gave in response to a very pertinent question posed by one near Him.

III. The narrow door: striving to enter the Kingdom– Luke 13:21-30

Before us in Luke 13 our Lord pressed upon all of His hearers before Him of the importance of striving to enter into eternal life.

²²He (Jesus) went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, ²⁴“***Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*** ²⁵When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ ²⁶Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ ²⁸In that place 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 but you yourselves cast out. ²⁹And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:22-30)

Now as we have been stressing, there is no place for a spirit of complacency in the Christian life, and yet sadly, each of us has a tendency toward complacency. We tend to take matters for granted. We tend to become dull with respect to spiritual duty. We tend to become lazy with respect to spiritual discipline. We lose our alertness to spiritual danger. We become all too passive when the Scriptures urge diligence. We become all too presumptive when the Scriptures urge caution.

Our own hearts tend toward these things. Give us half a chance and we will delude ourselves and stray. And then, there is so much to help us in that direction. The devil is a real force who first “deceives” and “blinds” his prey before “devouring” them. There are false teachers all about that deceive people all about them. And then there are the sincere, well-intentioned, but ignorant teachers, who fail to instruct God’s people properly, failing to impart truth and failing to dispel error. And so, given our own propensity to err and given the forces which would cause us to fail, the Lord has given us in the Scriptures numerous passages which should counter these tendencies. We have another one before us here in Luke 13. *In this*

passage we an instance in which our Lord pressed upon His hearers a sense of urgency and responsibility to respond to His message, by turning from sin and following Him.

Our Lord and His disciples were proceeding on His final journey to Jerusalem. Jesus taught the crowds along the way. With the arrival to his destination, Jesus would meet His destiny, that was to die (**Luke 13:33**). The time was short. His hearers must not put off responding to Him. For the day of salvation would end soon and then the judgment of God would befall that entire generation of Jews--this was particularly true of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the seat of Judaism (**13:34-35a**). This journey to Jerusalem, the impending death of Jesus and the subsequent judgment on Jerusalem, provide a sense of importance to Jesus' teaching and a sense of urgency to His hearers as well as to the readers of this Gospel.

While they were traveling, one asked Jesus, "**Lord, are there few who are saved?**" This resulted in Jesus' teaching that we have recorded before us regarding the way of salvation.

The word or idea of salvation permeates all of Scripture. The basic idea is of one being "*rescued from a life-threatening situation*." But when we speak of receiving salvation from sin, we are addressing the great need of every human being to be delivered from the guilt, the power, and the presence of sin to be delivered from the wrath of God upon us due to our sin that will otherwise be poured out upon us in the Day of Judgment. And so, when we speak of the salvation that God effects for us through Jesus Christ, all of these ideas come into view. The Bible teaches that all mankind is condemned due to sin, and is under His wrath. When the Bible speaks of becoming saved, it is the idea of being delivered from sin and its consequences, escaping the wrath of God by the grace of God, through faith in God's provision--His Son Jesus Christ.

When this man from the crowd asked the question, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" His perspective was probably this: "Lord, you have been speaking of God's judgment upon us, will there be only a few of us who will escape this judgment?" "Lord, are there few who are saved?" It would do us well to hear the answer of the Lord Jesus if we desire to escape God's judgment.

What was our Lord's response to the question? Essentially this: "Do not be so concerned with the matter of how many will be saved; rather, be concerned that you be numbered among them. You strive to enter the door which leads to life."

A. The meaning of the "narrow door"²

To what does this "narrow door" refer? Some say the "narrow door" is Jesus Christ Himself. They would refer us to John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Or, John 10:9: "I am the door; whoever enters through me shall be saved." Now certainly, Jesus Christ is the only way by which one can be saved, but in the context of Luke 13:24 the Lord Jesus is not using the "narrow door" to refer to Himself. In this context, He is the Owner of the house, the Keeper of the door, who opens and shuts the door, permitting or forbidding entrance. He refuses to open the door to some even though they had heard Him teach and had eaten with Him.

To what then does this "narrow door" refer? Answer: It graphically describes the life of the Christian as a disciple of Jesus Christ--forcing himself onward in the face of trial, temptation, and resistance, to follow Christ in faith and obedience. The disciple of Christ struggles against sin, and perseveres in faith and obedience. In the face of doubts and troubles, he labors to do the will of God in spite of all opposition.

Let us consider the description a little more closely by showing that *this narrow "door" differs from the narrow gate and way of Matthew 7:13, 14*. There we read our Lord's words:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

² It is unfortunate that both the KJV and the NKJV translate this as a "gate." But it is not a gate that opens onto a way to travel as in Matthew 7:13 and 14. This is a door that opens into a great mansion. Perhaps we could say, into "the Father's house" (cf. John 14:1).

The Greek word in Luke 13:24 which may be translated either as “gate” or “door”, is different from the Greek word our Lord used in Matthew 7:13, which also may be translated “gate” or “door.” The context must determine the nuance of meaning of the words. Here in Luke 13 it should be understood as a door into a large house in which there is a great hall prepared for a banquet.

In **Matthew**, we have the Lord telling his hearers to enter a small *gate* which leads unto a narrow road, which leads to life. But in this account in **Luke**, the Lord is urging His hearers not to enter through a small gate, but through a small *door* that allows entry into a rather large house in which there is a banquet hall. In **Matthew**, entrance through the *gate* begins the disciple’s life on *a narrow road* that leads to life at the end of the journey. The straight and narrow roadway depicts persevering faith and obedience to the Lord Jesus. In **Luke**, the Lord depicts salvation as being experienced after having succeeded in entering the door to the house. The door is not an allusion to the initial entrance into a life of discipleship; rather, *the door speaks of the entire life as an opportunity and occasion to strive so as to enter one day into the presence of the Lord and His people in the future banquet hall*. It should be noted that in both contexts, “life” or salvation is pictured as something that is experienced at the end of one’s life or at some point in the distant future. But in Matthew the gate is entered once at the beginning of one’s pilgrimage. In Luke disciples are striving through their entire lives to enter the door. We might say that the door of Luke 13:24 is the door of opportunity that we have now in this life to strive to enter heaven.

B. This is a narrow “door” that leads into a large house where there is a banquet hall.

In this banquet hall is this large gathering of all the Old Testament Jewish saints as well as, amazingly, a large number of Gentiles who are all dining together at this large feast (13:28f). What is pictured by this great banquet hall is the Kingdom of God, in which the body of the redeemed of all ages enjoys peace, security, and fellowship with their King and Lord. However, on the outside of this house, are those clambering to enter, who believe that entry should be granted them, but are, nevertheless, excluded from the gathering.

The idea of a great banquet is an image which is used frequently in Scripture to depict the blessing and fellowship of the Kingdom of God. It is commonly referred to as the *messianic banquet*; it is a great feast that the Messiah provides of His people.

Eating together had a great significance in the ancient world. To dine together was the fullest expression of enjoyment of a relationship between friends. You did not really know a person if you had not sat down together had shared in a common meal. Here the full meaning and enjoyment of one’s relationship with God is to have a meal with Him. We may see the great significance in both the Old and New Testaments to this idea of a shared meal.

Now, when we think of **Old Testament sacrifices** we most often think of *an innocent animal bearing being the substitutionary sacrifice for the worshipper*; this idea of course central to the Bible idea of sacrifice. But frequently, in conjunction with this idea of a sin offering, *a sacrifice is also viewed as a meal preparation in which the priest or worshipper would sit down and feast together with God*. For example we have **Abraham** sitting down and dining with his 3 visitors in Genesis 18. **Jacob** dined on a mountain with his father-in-law Jethro in the presence of God (Gen. 31:53-55). And it may be that **Isaac** desired to dine before God prior to his death, so he sent Esau to prepare a meal. This would further explain why the blessing which went forth on Jacob could not be retracted, for it was issued before God with God witnessing the blessing.

Now the hope of Judaism was this: *one day the Messiah would come and a Golden Age would be established*. A great messianic banquet would be prepared and the people of Israel all reunited as one large family, would dine with their deliverer. We see this idea in the **Old Testament prophets**. In **Isaiah 25:6-8** we read:

⁶And in this mountain

The LORD of hosts will make for all people

A feast of choice pieces,
A feast of wines on the lees,
Of fat things full of marrow,
Of well-refined wines on the lees.
⁷And He will destroy on this mountain
The surface of the covering cast over all people,
And the veil that is spread over all nations.
⁸He will swallow up death forever,
And the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces;
The rebuke of His people
He will take away from all the earth;
For the LORD has spoken.

Also in **Isaiah 65:13-16**. Here the Lord contrasts those who are under His wrath with those who experience His salvation.

¹³Behold, My servants shall eat,
But you shall be hungry;
Behold, My servants shall drink,
But you shall be thirsty;
Behold, My servants shall rejoice,
But you shall be ashamed;
¹⁴Behold, My servants shall sing for joy of heart,
But you shall cry for sorrow of heart,
And wail for grief of spirit.
¹⁵You shall leave your name as a curse to My chosen;
For the Lord GOD will slay you,
And call His servants by another name;
¹⁶So that he who blesses himself in the earth
Shall bless himself in the God of truth;
And he who swears in the earth
Shall swear by the God of truth;
Because the former troubles are forgotten,
And because they are hidden from My eyes.

The same idea is in the **New Testament** also. In the chapter following our text we read in **verse 15ff**:

¹⁵Now when one of those who sat at the table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

¹⁶Then He said to him, "A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, ¹⁷and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, 'Come, for all things are now ready.' ¹⁸But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' ¹⁹And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' ²⁰Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.' ²²And the servant said, 'Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.' ²³Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. ²⁴'For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.'" (Luke 14:15-24)

And then it is referenced in the last book of the Bible, **Revelation 19:9**, in which John wrote, “Then he said to me, ‘Write: Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true sayings of God.’”

We also see this idea of the messianic banquet outside of Scripture in early Jewish and Christian writings. This is from a 1st century non-biblical writing which dates to the 1st century AD called **2 Enoch**:

When the last One arrives, he will bring out Adam, together with the ancestors; and He will bring them in there, so that they may be filled with joy; just as a person invites his best friends to have dinner with him and they arrive with joy, and they talk together in front of that man’s palace, waiting with joyful anticipation to have dinner with delightful enjoyments and riches that cannot be measured, and joy and happiness in eternal light and life; --and I say to you, my children: Happy is the person who reverences the name of the LORD, and who serves in front of His face always, and who organizes His gifts with fear, offerings of life, and who in this life lives and dies correctly! (2 Enoch 42:4-6)

C. This is a “narrow door” that may be entered only through “striving.”

Our Lord uses the present tense imperative form for the verb “strive” -- You are to **keep striving** until the day that you are granted entrance into the banquet hall. Jesus is speaking of the great effort that is to be expended by any and all who would enjoy eternal life. “Strive” suggests the idea of fighting, struggling, straining every nerve, to force one’s way through the door. Inside the people enjoy great peace and joy. All who are left outside the door will experience “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This idea of you and me having to strive continually in order to gain entrance to eternal life is not heard in these days. There are a number of reasons for this: (1) ***It seems to conflict with our general concept of faith*** which is seen as merely trusting, simply and solely resting in Christ and His work alone apart from the need for grace enabled effort to do His will. (2) ***It seems to suggest that one merits salvation through his works***, which we all repudiate with our whole being.

But these seeming contradictions only reveal the misunderstandings we have in these days, for it was not seen to be contradictory in former days. Listen to the words of the well-respected commentator **Matthew Henry**:

Strive to enter in at the strait gate. This, is directed not to him only that asked the question, but to all, to us, it is in the plural number: *Strive ye.* Note, (1) All that will be saved must enter *in at the strait gate*, must undergo a change of the whole man, such as amounts to no less than being born again, and must submit to a strict discipline. (2) Those that would enter in at the strait gate must *strive to enter.* It is a hard matter to get to heaven, and a point that will not be gained without a great deal of care and pains, of difficulty and diligence. We must strive with God in prayer, wrestle as Jacob, and strive against sin and Satan. We must strive in every duty of religion; strive with our own hearts, “*Be in an agony; strive as those that run for a prize; excite and exert ourselves to the utmost.*”

Take note of the different awakening considerations, to enforce this exhortation. O that we may be all awakened and quickened by them! They are such considerations as will serve to answer the question, *Are there few that shall be saved?* (1) Think how many take *some pains for* salvation and yet perish because they do not take enough, and you will say that there are *few that will be saved* and that it highly concerns us to *strive: Many will seek to enter in, and shall not* be able; they *seek*, but they do not *strive.* Note, the reason why many come short of grace and glory is because they rest in a *lazy seeking* of that which will not be attained without a *laborious striving.* They have a good mind *to happiness*, and a *good opinion of holiness*, and take some good steps towards both. But their convictions are weak; they do not consider what they know and believe, and, consequently, their desires are cold, and their endeavors feeble, and there is no strength or steadiness in their resolutions; and thus they *come short*, and lose the prize, because they do not press forward.” (M. Henry, vol. 5, pp. 726,727).

How different are words from what we here today of name it and claim it and rest in it.

1. Entrance through this “narrow door” is not a one-time decision. Again, the verb is a present tense imperative -- You are to keep striving until the day that you are granted entrance into the banquet hall.

We are infected with a spirit of decisionism in these days. Based on a defective theology, equipped with a defective methodology and a deficient sinner’s prayer, Christian workers go about leading people to make one-time decisions of faith, and thereafter assure their “converts” that, regardless of their subsequent behavior, they will be granted entrance into heaven. Sadly, these deluded, self-assured, complacent, individuals who live a self-willed existence, who say they believe but their faith seems to have little impact on their life, continue without challenge, unshakeable in their confidence that they indeed are safe. But when the Lord was asked about salvation, He emphasized “believing,” yes, but also “repenting,” “obeying,” “suffering,” “enduring” and “overcoming,” and here, “striving.”

2. No, entrance through this narrow “door” is not a one-time decision; rather, it is a life-long endeavor of striving to enter through faith, repentance from sin, and obedience to the Lord Jesus. Now when we speak in these terms some are troubled. Objections are leveled:

- a) “If this is true, how can anyone be sure of his salvation?”
- b) “Suppose someone strives for a while then ceases, does he lose his salvation?”
- c) “Does not this imply that people merit entry by their striving, teaching salvation by works?”

All of these objections are ill-founded. Yes, even while striving, one may be assured of entry. No, someone who strives for a while and then quits does not lose his salvation, he never received it. No, it does not teach salvation merited by works. It is all by God’s grace that He moves a person to strive, enables him to strive, and it is of grace that He bids free entrance to him at the last.

We might postulate one more objection:

d) “If you teach this, then you are saying that people cannot claim to be presently saved.” Let me respond to this by emphasizing that the Bible describes salvation in three tenses--past, present, and future--

- (1) We have been saved -- “It is by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:5, 8)
- (2) We are being saved -- “For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10)
- (3) We will yet be saved -- “He who endures unto the end shall be saved” (Matt. 10:22).

These do harmonize with one another. But further, if you emphasize one aspect--past, present, or future--to the neglect of the others, it will result in error, and the troubling of souls.

How do these harmonize? Now all analogies break down if pressed too far, but the following analogies will serve us, I think. Let me explain by way of two illustrations:

(a) Consider this invented story of a **young lady** who is saved from a perilous situation. -- A young lady was riding her horse late one afternoon in a rather unfamiliar and desolate place. She became lost. It became dark and a storm arose. She knew not that she had come dangerously close to a great precipice. The horse started, throwing her. She went over the side of the cliff, falling a ways, before landing on a narrow ledge that prevented her from falling to her death. At dawn she saw her danger more clearly. If it had not been for the narrow ledge she would have perished. The ledge **had saved** her. Soon, a friend arrived and **saved her** from her predicament, pulling her from the ledge that had saved her life. Now she **had been saved**. And as long as she stayed away from the edge and next to the side of the hill she would remain safe, but she was completely rescued after a time.

In a similar manner, we were falling headlong into destruction due to our sin. But our God delivered us from our death. He saved us. And now we are safe. We may be assured that indeed He has spared us. And He is coming for us when our deliverance will be complete.

But some presume upon their safety. They get up and wander around in the dark as though no danger exists. They go off into sin. They wander too close to the edge and fall into the abyss. Did they lose their salvation? I would say no; rather, their fall was only interrupted for a bit. They were no more truly saved than the false teachers in 2 Peter 2, who had escaped certain corruption for a time but thereafter plunged headlong to their fate.

Yes, God has saved you if you have embraced the gospel, but now you need to cling to Him (and even that is by His grace). You are to listen to Him, and you can rest in Him. You will be saved at the last. Entrance to His banquet will be granted you and to all who strive.

Or, salvation in its past, present, and future aspects may be described in this way:

(b) A **man** who has escaped capture and is seeking to work his way through enemy occupied territory to freedom. --Imagine a very important man having been captured and interred in a POW camp during WWII. A rescue operation was planned and executed in order to save him from his predicament. Another was sent on the mission to affect his release. He does so, enabling the man to escape his camp into freedom. And yet, although he had been saved from his captors, he is yet in enemy territory. He is assured by his rescuer, however, that he will be able to escape to safety he puts his trust in him and follows him to their safe haven. Again, this illustrates how we have been saved and yet Jesus Christ is still in the process of saving us, and we will yet one day experience the fullness of our salvation.

Now, what does it mean more specifically to strive to enter the narrow door?

D. How does one strive to enter the narrow door?

1. It does not mean merely that you *listen* to the Word of God regularly (13:26)
2. It does not mean merely that you *believed* what you have heard (13:26)
3. It does not mean merely that you had a *measure of acquaintance* with Jesus. These people had heard Him, apparently believed what He said, and some knew Him quite well, even having eaten with Him; but this is not “striving to enter the narrow door.”
4. It does involve on-going repentance from sin, a continual following of Jesus in faith and obedience (13:27). We are striving to enter the door even now, as we attend to the Word of God and as we strive by His grace to order our lives according to what we hear. We dare not be hearers only, deceiving ourselves, we hear and do as He enables us to do so by His grace. And again, it certainly does not mean that you are attempting to merit entry by your good works. That is the quickest way to be excluded.

Now the Lord not only gave the command to strive, but He also gives motivation for doing so. Le

E. Why, then, should one strive to enter the narrow door?

1. The door is small; and only admits a few at a time (13:24). Here the idea is that it takes effort, or struggle to get through the door and inside. Does the Bible present salvation in this way? Yes. It is through much tribulation that we do enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

2. The door is open only for a time, and then will be closed; that is, opportunity is now; but the time of opportunity may be short (13:25-27). We are not to delay, but to begin our entry now and continue to strive to enter. Doing so will assure our entry, but delay may imperil us, for many will at a later time, when it is too late, seek to enter, but the door will be shut to them.

3. Many are deceived. We should strive now so that we be not found among them. Jesus said, “for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” The reason people were not striving was that they were deceived in thinking they had ample time, that the judgment of God had nothing to do with them,

and that they had a perfect right, a guarantee of entry, apart from this matter of striving. In short, they had been deceived by others and they had deceived themselves.

Allow me to give an illustration, which is based on a historical event. The time was 713 BC. The place was Jerusalem. Hezekiah was king of Judah. Assyria was the world power. Isaiah was God's prophet of the day. Jerusalem was a "walled" city. When an invading army came into the land all of the inhabitants would enter the city where protection was afforded them. In 713 BC the Assyrians were completing their final conquest of Judah. The Northern kingdom of Israel had fallen in 722. Now Judah was being attacked. Rumors filled the land of the impending invasion. "Flee to Jerusalem! The Assyrians are coming!"

But here is a man in his fields. His crops are due to be harvested in just a few short weeks. A few of the neighbors have already packed up and moved to the city. But he waits. They had warned him to flee the wrath to come! But he forestalled, "I will, I will, but first I must secure my harvest. There will be time.

The day of the harvest arrives. He rises early and is in the fields. But a noise is heard, it is the machinery of war. He sees the troops coming along the hills. Quickly, dropping everything, he gathers his family together and flees to nearby Jerusalem. But as he approaches the "narrow door" which is alone the place of entrance, he sees throngs of people seeking to enter, but the gate has been commanded to be shut and barred for the enemy was now there. The man and his family find themselves shut out. Within is safety. Without is destruction. His procrastination and failure to gain entrance when there was opportunity brought him ruin.

Now the Lord Jesus was warning His hearers of the impending judgment on this people, and they were to act immediately for presently there was time, later would be too late. And He tells us that "now" is the time. Today is the day. To "make every effort to enter the door." All who do strive in this manner will gain entry, but those who refuse will themselves be refused at a later time. May God give us grace "to strive to enter."

4. The consequences of failure to enter are so severe (13:28-30)

- a. Tears of great disappointment due to missed blessing
- b. Tears of great regret due to neglected opportunity
- c. Tears of great heartache for they see that even Gentiles were admitted entrance freely, but they themselves are barred from entry.

As we close, let me ask you this question: could you honestly say that your life may be characterized as striving to enter the door? As we said at the beginning, there is no place for a spirit of complacency in the Christian life. We cannot presume on mercy. Yes have faith in God who is a God of great mercy, but do not presume upon it. It is time to awaken from lethargy and begin to strive if we have been neglectful and lethargic. Be aggressive with this matter: "lay hold on eternal life" as instructed Paul. Be alert. Be prayerful. Be diligent. Seek grace from Him who alone can enable you to do these things.
