

March 18, 2017 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Luke 13:22-30 Knowing God and Narrow Doors by Andy McDonald

There is a piece of human nature, fallen human nature, that evidences itself early. We are incredibly self-centered. That newborn infant isn't in the least concerned with making sure Mom and Dad get a good night's sleep. What they know is what they want, and what that sweet little baby wants is to not suffer hunger pains, or the discomfort of a wet diaper. These primal self-interested concerns for food and comfort are evidenced in additional forms of self-interest.

One of the early vocabulary words of a toddler is "Mine." And it isn't long before pride raises its ugly head. We hear those attention craving words, "Watch me!" And so from our early childhood there is somewhere deep in our fallen humanity a pride of performance, seeking credit, the very natural way of self-centeredness. And miss use or misapplication of today's passage can foster self-centeredness while an accurate understanding can be part of transforming us more and more into the very image of Jesus.

So maybe it's not that today's passage is so rarely preached but that it has been too often preached improperly. Preached to increase striving instead of surrender, to foster our natural pride of performance, rather than owning our spiritual bankruptcy.

Luke writes our scripture for today in his gospel chapter 13:22-30: Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he went, always pressing on toward Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

Infused with divine wisdom, and typical of his entire ministry, Jesus doesn't engage in speculation on the abstract question, but goes instead to the personal dimension.

He replied, (Luke 13:24) "The door to heaven is narrow. Work hard to get in, because many will try to enter, but when the head of the house

has locked the door, it will be too late. Then you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Lord, open the door for us!' But he will reply, 'I do not know you.' You will say, 'But we ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' And he will reply, 'I tell you, I don't know you. Go away, all you who do evil.'

And there will be great weeping and gnashing of teeth, for you will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets within the Kingdom of God, but you will be thrown out. Then people will come from all over the world to take their places in the Kingdom of God. And note this: Some who are despised now will be greatly honored then; and some who are greatly honored now will be despised then." Some translations put it this way. The first will be last and the last will be first.

Jesus is just visiting towns and villages and teaching as he heads for Jerusalem for the culmination of his entire ministry. He is on his way to die, to bear the sins of the whole world, to reconcile all of creation back to God.

Jesus who is the light of the world, the true light who gives light to everyone.

Jesus who is headed to give his life so that whoever believes might be saved

Jesus, who will be the sacrifice for our sins will take away not only our sins but the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:2

Jesus who came to seek and save the lost

Jesus who wants everyone back in harmony with the Father

Jesus gets this question, "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

Who wants to know? Who is asking the question? What's behind it?

Has the one asking the question heard something that has messed with their theological thinking? Have they picked up the subtle and not so subtle hints in Jesus' teaching that the kingdom is larger than they had been taught? Jesus has been hanging with everyone from the most religious practitioners the Pharisees, to the despised tax collectors,

prostitutes, lepers and it may have confused our questioner about who gets into the kingdom of God.

Even some of Jesus' stories have hinted at a broader base for the kingdom of God than just the Jews.

The Jewish understanding was clear. Rabbinic writings stated it unequivocally, "All Israelites have a share in the world to come." (Sanhedrin 10:1)

Commentators suggest by the wording used that it is likely that the one asking this question is a Pharisee. Maybe the question was just straight forward or maybe the questioner was seeking to engage Jesus in a speculative controversy. But Jesus won't take the bait. He redirects from the question, "Will only a few be saved," to the more important and less comfortable question, "Will you be saved?"

And then Jesus says something that has been greatly miss used. He says something similar in the sermon on the mount recorded in Matthew 7:13 & 14 "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it." Our text for today and these verses from Matthew 7 have become the mantra of those who wish for salvation to be difficult.

They capitalize on the words narrow, small, few, strive to enter, many will try to enter and not be able to. So because of miss use of the text it is critical that we seek the intended meaning.

Whatever Jesus is saying in this passage must match with his other teachings. It can't be a different way. It has to line up with his teaching, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light;" "I am the vine you are the branches, abide in me, without me you can do nothing;" "I don't condemn you go and sin no more."

In the sermon on the mount Jesus talks about a narrow road and a narrow gate. And just before those verses he has summarized all that is taught in the law and the prophets in what we call the “Golden Rule.” “Do for others what you would like them to do for you.”

In the book “Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing” commenting on this passage it says this: “The path which I have set before you, he said, is narrow; the gate is difficult of entrance; for the golden rule excludes all pride and self-seeking.”

In our passage today Jesus is teaching a slightly different angle. In essence he’s saying there is a time when you can enter but there will come a time when the door will close.

The audience of Jewish listeners to Jesus’ response to this question were sure only a few would be saved. It would their people. And then among the Jewish community there were some who ignored the teachings and so there was the understanding that only a remnant of the remnant might be saved so the number might even be smaller than a national number.

And Jesus in this teaching wishes to awaken their understanding to the reality that there is an individual opportunity, responsibility, no guarantees by being in the right family or ethnic grouping. Today we might say no guarantee just by having your name on some church rolls.

It was unthinkable that the chosen might be shut out! Jesus was trying to get them to realize that he had thrown open the door. All were welcomed. Jesus said clearly “I am the way.” “I am the door.” “No one comes to the Father but by me.” “Now is the day of salvation.”

But he is also saying there will be an end to open enrollment. But even in his teaching about the owner of the house locking the door and it being too late we hear hints of how to enter heaven.

Sometimes I've heard these texts taught and gotten the message that we must overcome sin. That the narrow way is about you and me, about us giving up our own way, giving up our own will, giving up our evil habits and practices, and while this is true an all-out frontal attack on our evil habits and practices and our selfishness, often encouraged by many, isn't the answer. While it is reality that the Christian life is a battle and a march we can't win the war by human power.

Don't you know this to be the case. No matter how many promises we make ourselves, or how much resolve we muster, or how we try and trick ourselves into not succumbing to our desires, we cannot of ourselves conquer these sins. We discover that temptation isn't out there somewhere, but like James says, "Temptation comes from within, from our own evil desires." James 2:14

What Jesus knows is that God alone can give us the victory. The battle within, the striving that must take place to enter is the battle for our consent and cooperation to let God have his way. He won't force our salvation.

Another quote from Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing says this. "The will must be placed on the side of God's will. You are not able, of yourself, to bring your purpose and desires and inclinations into submission to the will of God; but if you are "willing to be made willing," God will accomplish the work for you, even casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." P. 142

This is what it means when Paul wrote to the Philippians 2:12,13 , "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to his good pleasure."

It is so hard for us to imagine winning by surrender. Our very fallen natures know to the very core of our being that surrender is loss. Surrender is what the soldiers do when all is lost. The victors lead

those who surrendered back as trophies of war or prisoners. The winners don't surrender the loser surrenders. In all our human efforts from war to playing cards to surrender to fold is to admit defeat.

And yet in the divine order of things for us human beings what is important, what is eternal isn't won through strength but through surrender.

One of the saddest portions of today's scripture certainly isn't the people coming from all over the world to take their places in the Kingdom of God. It was an obvious rebuke to the exclusive understanding of the Jews that they were sort of it. In these words we get Jesus explaining his plan that salvation is for the world. Sure it came through the Jewish nation, Jesus was a Jew, but what he brought was for everyone not just the Jew. Today we must again abandon exclusive assurances of being the chosen and the blessed and realize that God's blessings are for everyone.

The saddest part isn't the great reversal. No, great reversals are what make great stories. The ranch is being foreclosed and taken from the poor family, because some tycoon knows there's oil in the ground. Then by a turn of events the poor family discovers the oil and they become wealthy and keep the ranch and the deceptive developer is run out of town on the rail. Who doesn't like a story a movie where there is oppression but in the end the oppressors and the oppressed switch places. A story where those who were first kind of people become last and last kind of people get first places, that's kind of fun.

The saddest portion is when the Lord replies, "I don't know you." We love the look of recognition. To hear our name. To be remembered. A huge part of our humanity is wrapped up in knowing and being known, so for me these are telling and sad words, "I don't know you."

In the story Jesus calls them workers of iniquity. Ray Stedman writes, "The noun 'workers' characteristically refers to those "doing the works of the law, carefully following the demands of the law as a way of

being right with God. And iniquity means unrighteousness. “The efforts to produce “righteousness” through conformity to the law had produced only unrighteousness.” Why because there is a reliance on one’s own character for entrance to the banquet and that character always comes up short.

But in these sad words, “ I don’t know your.” I believe we get a hint about our assignment. If we read between the lines we can understand where our efforts won’t be in vain, that about which we are to work hard to enter heaven.

Our work is to know Jesus.

And the people we know are the people on whom we focus.

Jesus said, “I am the vine you are the branches, abide in me.”

Jesus prayed, “And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.”

The writer to the Hebrews challenges us, “Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. WE DO THIS by fixing by keeping our eyes on Jesus on whom our faith depends from start to finish.”

Listen our battle is looking to Jesus. Surrender of our will as we pray Jesus prayer, “Not my will but yours’ be done.” It’s a lifetime lesson slow to be learned that instead of “watch me” we learn to watch Jesus so that focusing on Jesus will becomes our full effort to enter the narrow door as in the light of Jesus we find that he is all we need.



Where do you see self-interest and selfishness evidence themselves in small children? In you?

What are some adult forms of “watch me”?

How in our spiritual practices can “watch me” be dangerous?

What have you heard Christians say that might give the impression they are hoping only a few will be saved?

Why do you think Jesus didn’t directly answer the question?

How obvious do you think it was to the listeners that Jesus was calling out the self-righteousness of the Jewish nation?

How hard is it for you to surrender your will?

Who does Jesus not want in his kingdom? Anyone you’d prefer to not be there?

What are ways to focus on Jesus?

How can we get to know Jesus better and better?

What will it take for you to live assured Jesus is all you need?



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