

Enter the Right Door

Luke 13:22-30

I've got a vague memory of, as a kid, watching some TV game show that involved doors. Contestants would face these doors. I think there were three of them – but I'm not really sure. They'd have to choose one. Behind one of the doors was a really great prize – that's the door you wanted to pick. Behind the other doors were consolation prizes – they were OK things, but they weren't anywhere near as good as the main prize.

Jesus here tells people:

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door ...

I suspect some people read that and they think in terms of that game show – or something similar to it. There are three doors and they've got to choose one. Get the right door and they've got it made – they've hit the jackpot, they're on easy street, they're set for life. Get one of the other doors and they're stuck with the consolation prize – nothing particularly horrible, but just some useless bauble that looks nice but isn't the main prize. They're slightly embarrassed – they're a winner, but not the real winner.

The Setting

That's not really the picture Jesus has in mind – but to understand that, we need to go back to the beginning. Verse 22:

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as He made His way to Jerusalem.

Back in 9:51, Luke tells us:

As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

Luke takes this opportunity to remind us that's where

Jesus is heading. He's still teaching. He's still healing. But He's resolutely on His way to Jerusalem.

And while He's doing that, He gets a question. Verse 23:

Someone asked Him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

Interesting question. What's behind it? The idea of being saved is the idea of getting through God's judgment. A time of crisis was coming – a time when God would step in to establish His perfect future. The saved were those who'd enter that future – they'd get into God's kingdom; they'd get eternal life.

Presumably, the person asking this question was a Jew – since Jesus spent most of His time with Jews. The general feeling among the Jews at the time was: If you're a Jew, you're in. Now, there were exceptions. Some Jews wouldn't make it:

- Those who denied the law of Moses.
- Those who uttered charms.
- Those who were particularly wicked.

They wouldn't be saved. But the rest would be.

This person begins to question that. He's listened carefully to Jesus. He's heard the warnings Jesus gave. He's sensed the urgency of Jesus' call to commitment. He begins to wonder about his assumption that all Jews will make it. He begins to wonder about his assumption that he's already in God's kingdom.

Imagine a typical Australian non-Christian started coming along to our services week after week. After they'd been here a month or so, they asked:

Do you mean to tell me that all religions don't get you

to heaven after all?

Or imagine a teenager growing up in a Christian family. They've gone to church all their life – Sunday School, youth group, the works. They're part of the family. They assumed they're in. But as they mature and listen more carefully, they begin to understand the gospel. They realise their own sin. And they ask:

Do you mean to tell me that not everyone who goes to church will be saved?

That's the thrust of this guy's question.

Are only a few people going to be saved?

Do you mean to tell me that I can be your average religious Jew and yet miss out on God's kingdom?

Strive to Enter

Jesus' response begins in verse 24:

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

There's that picture of a door. In order to get into God's kingdom or God's blessing, you have to go through the door. There is an entry to God's banquet – some will get in and some won't.

What's the Door?

So then, what is the door? Jesus doesn't really define it at this point. Clearly, it's some sort of entry-point into God's kingdom. And fairly clearly, it's metaphorical. I don't think anyone listening to Jesus that day was going to go out and race around Palestine looking for a physical narrow door – sort of knock on anything that looked like a narrow door and see if God's kingdom happened to be

on the other side.

As Jesus' answer goes on, we get another clue as to what this door is. Skip over verse 25 for the moment and have a look at verses 26 and 27:

Then you will say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets."

But he will reply, "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!"

It becomes apparent that Jesus Himself is the One who has control of this door. He's the One who says whether or not a person gets in. These people have a conversation with Jesus.

You know us, they say. We used to follow You round. We were in the crowd when You fed the 5000. We listened to Your marvellous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Remember the time we had that great feast at Matthew's house? Those were the days. How about letting us in so we can sit around, have a few glasses of wine and reminisce about the good old days?

And Jesus says: No, you're not My friends. Sorry, you don't get in.

At this point, the guy's presupposition is well and truly in tatters. Here are some average, everyday Jews – the sort of people who rubbed shoulders with this guy each day. Just like him, they're in the crowd listening to Jesus – the sort of people this guy's been taught are in God's kingdom. But Jesus says: These people don't get in. These law-abiding Jews are on the outside. They miss out.

The point is that Jesus requires commitment – to Himself, to God's kingdom. Large crowds of people followed

Jesus around. They did it for all sorts of reasons.

- Some enjoyed the free lunches.
- Some came to be healed.
- Some liked the way He made the religious leaders squirm in their shoes.
- Some came for the novelty of His teaching.
- Some thought it easier than ploughing their fields.

You could do all those things simply from curiosity. It's new. It's interesting. Why not go along and check it out? No promise. No obligation. No commitment. No real relationship with Jesus.

They may think of Jesus as perhaps being the door – open to explore that possibility further – but they haven't actually walked through. They haven't taken the step of aligning themselves with Jesus.

Do you Earn your Entry?

Now, at this point, I want to deal with the question of human effort. Jesus uses quite strong language here – words of command – strive, make every effort. For those of you who've been round Christian circles for a while, you may want to ask: Is Jesus teaching that I need to save myself? Is it all down to me and the effort I make in finding this door? Or, to put it in more technical terms: Is Jesus teaching salvation by works?

At first glance it may look that way.

- It's a narrow door. Perhaps it's easy to miss. Maybe it'll require some real skill on my part to find it.
- Or maybe the trick is that it's so narrow I'll need to go on some sort of weight-loss program before I can squeeze through.
- Or become like Alice-in-Wonderland and eat the

right cake so I can be small enough to get through.

- And Jesus does encourage me to effort. That means I've got to do something. I've got to work hard to make sure I qualify.

But that's not the point Jesus makes.

He's simply saying: Make this your priority. On the scale of things that are important for us humans, where does God's kingdom fit? Which is more important:

- to be a party animal or to enter God's kingdom?
- to be admired by others or to enter God's kingdom?
- to show off your beauty or to enter God's kingdom?
- to have enough superannuation or to enter God's kingdom?

Nothing – and I do mean nothing – is more important than getting to God's feast. Make sure you make it your number one priority to be there.

Earlier we read from Proverbs 2 – part of a poem about wisdom. Verse 4 stated:

*and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure*

That may very well give you the impression that getting wisdom will take a lot of hard effort on your part – that it's something *you've* really got to work at if *you're* going to achieve it. But again, that's not the point being made. Solomon's simply telling us to make wisdom a priority. Wisdom herself is freely available. He says that in 1:20

*Wisdom calls aloud in the street,
she raises her voice in the public squares;
at the head of the noisy streets she cries out,
in the gateways of the city she makes her speech*

Wisdom's not hidden. She's not hard to find. The reason people miss her is because they don't make her a high

enough priority. They don't value her as much as they would a hidden treasure. They give lesser things a higher priority.

And that's what it's like with this door to God's banquet. So what could stop you from entering? What could cause you to miss God's glorious kingdom?

- For some, it's a matter of not finding the door. The door's there – it's out in the open for all to see – but they're distracted by other doors that look more important or more attractive: family, friends, fame, wealth, pleasure, popularity, success. They think pursuing these things is more important than finding the door to God's kingdom.
- For some, it's a matter of not recognising the door. They have preconceived notions of what the door should look like. For some, the door should be all about meeting a certain minimum level of morality and goodness. For others, the door should be all about observing the right religious rituals. There were many Jews in Jesus' day who thought that's what the door should look like. That's where they put their effort – and they missed what Jesus offered.
- For some, it's a matter of not walking through the door. This is the door to God's kingdom. It's where God's will is done. It's where God's absolute boss. They don't want to be part of that. They don't want to give up their autonomy. They don't want to submit to anyone else – not even to God.

In a very real sense, going through the door's a breeze. It's not hard. It requires no real effort. The kingdom's there. God's provided it for you. He gives it as a gift.

Just step through the door. No effort in that. No merit. No sense of earning your salvation.

Yet, in another sense, going through the door's incredibly difficult – for it hits at the very heart of our sinful, self-centred, rebellious natures.

- The proud, self-made person has to humble themselves and admit their total failure. They have to admit they can't save themselves. Not only can they do nothing to earn their place at God's table – they actually deserve to be excluded.
- The autonomous, self-focused person has to enter someone else's kingdom and submit to God. They have to give up control and surrender their desires and their attitudes and their ambitions and their will to another.

Those who Don't Enter

And so why do it? Two reasons – one positive, the other negative. The positive one: this is God's kingdom. This is the thing you really don't want to miss out on.

- Most children, when they're growing up, face disappointments. Maybe they're not invited to a birthday party. Maybe they miss out on a part in the school play. Maybe they're too late booking tickets for that concert they really wanted to go to. What's mum say?

Don't worry. There'll be a next time – another party, another play, another concert. Here, have a Mars Bar to take your mind off it.

Is God's kingdom like that? Will another substitute come along later?

- Have you noticed the extremes in advertising these days? Everything's the latest and the brightest and

the biggest and the best and whatever other "est" they can think of. But we all know that next year – or next week – there'll be an even better one in its place.

And so, maybe you think like that in relation to God's banquet. It sounds good now – it sounds like the thing you really can't miss out on – but it's just like everything else. Something even better will come along later. That's wrong thinking.

- There is nothing better. Not next week. Not next year. Not for all eternity.
- There won't be a new improved version when God's Kingdom II hits the stores.
- And the competition isn't going to bring out some better version of the same thing – like how PlayStation and Xbox keep improving on each other's product. With God, there is no competition – at least, no one who can compete on the same level as Him.

This really is the best-est thing in the universe – for all eternity. You really don't want to miss out on this.

People will come from all over for this. Verse 29:

People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

That was probably a bit of a surprise for our Jewish friend who asked Jesus this question. He was probably thinking only of Jews – or people willing to become Jews. But for Jesus, there aren't any restrictions on who can get in. It doesn't matter your nationality, your tribe, your social status, your economic status or whatever – the door's open to all-comers. Just make sure you enter. That's the

positive reason.

The negative reason's in verse 28 – speaking of those who don't enter the door:

There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.

The consolation prize isn't so good.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth describes the emotional reaction to the traumatic news of their rejection.

- It's great sorrow at the loss that must be endured.
- It's the bitterness of the great opportunity missed.
- It's the corrosive envy of those inside – even non-Jews made it ahead of them.
- It's the anger and rage that they've been excluded from what they believe to be their birthright.

These people have missed out big time and they know it.

Some parents discipline their children by sending them to their room. Have you ever stopped to think that such discipline only works because of the child's sinfulness?

- It's only because the child wants something that's not in their own room that they feel some sense of being deprived.
- It's only because the child's will wants to battle with yours that they feel resentful.

If the child could put aside such self-centredness, there'd be no discipline in it. After all, there are other times they can quite happily play in their room for hours on end. Their room is full of all sorts of pleasures and diversions. Why can't they simply enjoy those when they're sent to their room for being naughty? It's because of their own

wills. Being in their room is not their choice. They want to be somewhere else doing something else – and you've stopped them.

There's an element of that here. There's no repentance in these people who are excluded. There's no surrendering of their wills – no giving up of the steering wheel of their lives. That habit's become permanent. It's not repentance. They're simply bitter and angry that they can't get what they want.

Yet, the expression is also more than that. This phrase – the weeping and gnashing of teeth – came to describe the place of God's judgment. It's not just a matter of exclusion; it's also a matter of punishment. In terms of the game show, the other doors don't have consolation prizes. They've thumbed their nose at God – they've refused to enter the door He had open for them – and now they suffer the promised consequences. We'll come back to that when we get to chapter 16.

Enter while you Can

The message Jesus wants to reinforce is: Enter the door while you have the opportunity. Make this your priority. Don't let anything get in your way. For the time will come when the opportunity will cease. Verse 25:

Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, "Sir, open the door for us."

But he will answer, "I don't know you or where you come from."

The invitation to God's banquet is now open. The invitation's freely given to all. But the time of the banquet will

come. The door will be closed. Once that happens, it won't be possible for anyone else to get in.

These words were first spoken to Jewish people – and especially to the one who asked:

Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?

Jesus doesn't answer that question directly.

- Perhaps you could argue He says: Yes, it's a narrow door – only a few will get in.
- Perhaps you could argue he says: No, people will come from every direction to sit at God's feast – many will be there.

The more important point is that Jesus turns the question back on the one who asked it. Effectively, He asks:

Are you sure you'll be there? Have you gone through the door?

For Jewish people, that was pretty unsettling. They were Abraham's descendants. They had the great miracles of God's dealings with their nation. They had God's word. They had God's promises. They assumed they were in already. They just waited for the dinner bell to be rung. Jesus says: No, think again. Being Jewish doesn't guarantee your entry. Having Me walk through your streets doesn't guarantee your entry. Even claiming you asked Me a question doesn't guarantee your entry.

- Certainly, there'll be Jews at the feast – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the prophets.
- But there'll also be non-Jews – people from the four points of the compass.
- And there'll be some Jews on the outside weeping and gnashing their teeth.

We can face exactly the same danger today – assume

we're already in and thus miss entering the door. Darrell Bock tells of spending some time in a Scottish village with a population of 800. Each week, about 35 people attended the church service. Twice a year, the church had communion services. People had to attend one of those services to keep their name on the church roll. On those weeks, nearly the whole village turned up. They had to hold three services to cope with the crowd.

- How many in that village think they'll be at God's banquet?
- How many will Jesus tell He doesn't know them?

People have all sorts of reasons for thinking they'll be at the banquet.

- They were born in a Christian country.
- They've got Christian parents.
- They went to Sunday School as a kid.
- They got baptised.
- They did their confirmation.
- They gave money to charity.
- They were good.
- They didn't murder anyone.
- They recited their prayers.
- They own a Bible.
- They went to church at Christmas and Easter.

All sorts of things make the list. But none of those things get you through the door.

Even outright pagans think they'll be there. Listen to what they say at each other's funerals. None of them think their dearly departed is weeping and gnashing his teeth in a place of punishment. Even though their friend's ignored God all his life and treated His name as a swear word, they all think he's up there with the Big Fella

pouring a glass of vintage wine and cracking a joke full of sexual innuendo.

This is not something to leave to chance. Jesus says: Make every effort to enter. Make sure you give this the attention it deserves. Nothing is more important.