

Learning to Follow Jesus: The Importance of Now

Luke 13:22-30

In 1987, Cindy and I were serving with Cru here at Kansas State, and during that summer we led a team to Hungary where we sought to meet English-speaking students with whom we could share the gospel. Before we got to our final destination in central Hungary, we were in Vienna for a couple of days with all of the other teams heading into eastern Europe for training and orientation. Once that was done, our team took a train from Vienna to Budapest.

During those days in Vienna and Budapest we got acclimated to public transportation. One of the things we were told during orientation about public transportation is that when the doors open, be ready to jump on because there isn't much time. And so one time, our teammate, Jodie, taking this advice to heart as soon the subway doors opened literally barged into the crowd streaming off the subway. She was rejected. She hit that crowd and bounced back ten feet! We learned, there is an orderly way to let people get off and then get on.

Another time, Lea, one of the college gals on our team bent down to tie her shoe just as the tram pulled up. None of us realized that Lea didn't get on the tram until the doors were closed and we saw her standing outside as we pulled away. This was pre-cell phones days. We were separated from one of our teammates in a huge city, in what was then a communist county, and we had no way to contact her. It was a bit stressful. I don't remember how we found Lea, but thankfully we did. That day we learned that when the doors open, sure you let people out first, but there is still an urgency. The doors will close. The conductor is not going to wait for you. Pay attention and get on when you can. We learned the importance of now.

A similar thing is true in the spiritual realm. If we are going to learn to follow Jesus, **we need to understand the importance of now.**

Today, begins week 3 of our *Season of Seeking*. During these six weeks leading up to Easter, we are learning to follow Jesus along with his original disciples. If you haven't been around the past two weeks, we produced a Reading Guide to help you seek God through prayer, fasting, and the Scripture during these weeks. It is not too late. You can still jump in. In our sermons and in our daily readings, we are working our way through Luke 9-24.

So far in our sermons we've seen that if we are going to follow Jesus there are going to be some ways of thinking and living that we need to unlearn so that we can learn to think and live like Jesus. Last week we saw how we need to take up the posture of a disciple and be one who gives Jesus our undivided attention. Today, as we look at Luke 13:22-30 we will see that if we want to follow Jesus as a disciple, we need to understand the importance of now.

Let's look at this passage. Luke tells us that . . .

²²He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem.

Luke reminds us that Jesus is heading somewhere. He is on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die. And as he passes through towns and villages, he teaches.

²³ And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"

Apparently, this was a topic that was often discussed among Jewish religious leaders. The orthodox answer was that all of Israel would be saved except for the worst of the sinners and the heretics. And so most Jews believed they would be saved. But Jesus doesn't answer the question about how many; he talks about HOW. He talks about how one is saved.

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.

In focusing on HOW one is saved, Jesus says, *strive to enter through the narrow door*. As we look more broadly at Jesus' teaching, we understand that the narrow door is entered by coming to Jesus in genuine repentance and faith. It is entered by turning from our desire to live life on our terms, and instead submitting to Jesus as one's Master and beginning to follow Him. That's the narrow door. No one enters salvation on his own terms. It is always on God's terms. It is always and only through the narrow door of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

We are to *strive* to enter this door, which means to strain, to exert much effort. We don't just stumble into salvation. It is something we must seek. Jesus is addressing any kind of thinking that someone might have that they are automatically part of God's kingdom just because of who they are or where they are from. And so, for the Jewish people hearing him, they must not assume that just because they are Jewish that they are in.

There can be a similar kind of thinking in our day, right? "My grandparents and parents were all believers. I grew up in the church. I was there every Sunday." And because of this we can assume that surely, we are good with God. But the whole flow of this passage says that we must not assume that we are part of God's kingdom because of our history, or our family, or anything like that. We must personally strive to make sure we enter the narrow door.

Now, let me be very clear. Striving is not about earning. Scripture is clear that no one can earn salvation. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

We are saved *by grace* through faith. It is a gift. It is *not a result of works*. And so, Jesus isn't urging us to get busy striving to earn salvation. Striving is about making sure that you have truly entered the narrow door of repentance, faith, and following Jesus. We simply will not do this if we are resting on our family connections, or church attendance, or that we grew up in the United States, or anything like that.

Now, in Jesus' command to *strive* we begin to **understand the importance of now**. *Strive* is in the present tense, which means that we are to do this now. We must not wait for a future day to get serious about the narrow door.

Sometimes we think this way. "I'll get serious about God once I'm out of high school or college, or once I start my family." Or we think, "I want to have some fun, and then later I'll get my life with God on the right track." This is an incredibly dangerous way to think. Now is the time to strive to enter that door.

And the reason now is the time to strive, is because there will be a day when the door will be closed. This is why *many . . . will seek to enter and will not be able*. They will not be able once the door is closed. And the door will be closed. Jesus tells a short parable to make this point.

²⁵ When 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.'

As we read this and the following verses, what is pictured is a host welcoming people into a great banquet. At some point, however, the host will *shut the door*. This suggests the brevity of time to enter the door. It does not stay open forever. We need to understand the importance of now.

When Jesus says, *and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door*, he is referring to any who did not respond to the call to enter the narrow door. And now that the door is closed, they call out, *Lord, open to us*. But it is too late. Jesus makes the point that he has no relationship with them. *I do not know where you come from*. In other words, "I do not know you."

This will come as a shock to those shut outside. They will have a sense of, "What do you mean you don't know us?" They will protest and say:

²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.'

"Jesus, we spent time with you. We had meals together. We heard you teach." They had personal contact with Jesus, but they had no relationship with him. They heard him but didn't follow him. They had no true spiritual connection to Christ.

And so again, the master of the house will say:

²⁷ But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!'

Jesus gets really clear here. Those standing outside are there because they are *workers of evil*. They had never repented of their sinfulness. They had never sought forgiveness. And so, they

had no relationship to God. The door is closed and they are shut out. And as this reality sets in, verse 28 tells us of the anguish that they will experience.

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.

It's like they have a little peep hole through which they glimpse what is going on inside the banquet hall. They will see the patriarchs of the Jewish nation – Abraham, his son Isaac, and Abraham's grandson, Jacob. And they will also see *all the prophets*. And so, they will see fellow Jews from all points in history in the *kingdom of God*.

They will also see people *come from east and west, and from north and south*, who will *recline at table in the kingdom*. These are Gentiles who are gathered into the kingdom of God (Psalm 107:3; Matt. 8:5-12). To a Jew who thought he had the inside track with God, this would be unfathomable. They are outside, while Gentiles are inside?! But that is the reality. And when they understand this, there *will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*. They will be filled with grief and even rage because they thought they were insiders, but as it turns out they are outsiders.

Jesus sums all this up by saying:

³⁰And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

The Gentiles are those who *are last*. They didn't have all the privileges of the Jewish people. They were far off from God. They were last. But because they believe in the Gospel of Christ, because they did strive to enter through the narrow door, they *will be first*. Whereas those from the Jewish nation, who were first in the sense that they had all the spiritual privileges. They were God's chosen nation. They had the law and the prophets. And yet so many of them failed to believe and so though they were first, they *will be last*. And they will be shut out from the great feast.

If we are going to learn to follow Jesus, we need to understand the importance of now. There are things that simply must not be put off until tomorrow. And so here is the point for us: **Now is the time to make sure we have entered through the narrow door**. Again, entering the narrow door is about turning from self to Jesus. It is about repentance. It's about turning from your sin and seeking forgiveness. Now is the time to be sure you have done this. The door of opportunity will be closed at some point. Have you entered through the narrow door? Are you sure?

Jesus tells all of us to strive, to do the hard work of making sure. Again, striving is not about earning. We can't earn salvation. It is a gift. The work that Jesus is calling us to do is to make certain that we've entered through the narrow door of faith in Jesus.

Please, don't assume just because you come from a long line of believers in your family that you've entered the narrow door. Don't let the fact that you've grown up in the church make you

assume you are inside. And don't let the truth that you know a lot about Jesus make you think you are inside. In the parable, those outside had spent time with Jesus and heard him teach, but they didn't know him. Make sure.

As well, don't think, "Someday I'll get serious about this issue." That day will come sooner than you think. Understand the importance of now and settle this question. Enter through the narrow door. Make sure of it!

This is something that you can settle this morning. You can enter that narrow door through faith. You enter that door by realizing that you are sinful and separated from God and in need of a Savior. You enter that door through repentance. You turn from sin; you turn from living life independent from God and you turn to him and submit to following him. You enter that door by trusting Jesus to forgive you. You enter that door by choosing to follow Him.

If you are ready this morning to enter that narrow door, I want to lead you in a prayer that is a way to express faith in Jesus. The issue here is not about mouthing the right words. It is about faith and trust. And so if you want to trust Jesus this morning, please pray along with me silently in your heart to God:

God, I acknowledge that I am sinful and that I have lived in rebellion against you. And because of this, I need your forgiveness. Thank you for sending Jesus into this world. I believe that he lived a perfect, sinless life and that he offered himself as a sacrifice for my sin. Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross for me. God, please forgive me. Wash me clean. Jesus, I yield my life to you now and choose to follow you as your disciple. Teach me how to follow you. Amen.

For those of you who made this decision of faith, Jesus has answered your prayer. You may feel something; you may not. What matters is faith. When we respond to the Good News by faith, God honors His word. He forgives you. He makes you alive spiritually. He makes you his child. You have entered through the narrow door.

Now, here's the deal, when you make this decision, it is not the destination, it is the starting point. You have entered through the narrow door and in the future a great banquet awaits. But between now and then what Jesus wants from you is that you would learn to walk as his disciple. There are things you are going to need to unlearn about how to do life. You need to begin learning from Jesus. And the way you do that is by taking up the posture of a disciple. You listen to Jesus. You immerse yourself in the Scriptures. You make sure you are connecting closely with others who are truly following Jesus.

And here's what you can look for in your life. As we understand the Scriptures, we believe that anyone who has truly entered the narrow door and who is walking as a disciple of Jesus will see love grow in their life. They will grow in their love for God, for other believers, and for their neighbors (i.e. those who do not yet know God). And so look for that growth of love. For anyone

who is not seeing love grow in his or her life, it is like a warning light on the dashboard indicating that possibly you haven't truly entered through the narrow door.

Now, I want to consider a second implication of understanding the importance of now. Go back to the story about Lea our teammate who missed the tram. As you think about that story, it is sort of sad that none of us on the team were looking out for her. And so we didn't notice that at the critical moment she was bending down to tie her shoe. If we were paying attention to her, we could have grabbed her and helped her get to the door.

In a similar way as believers, if we understand the importance of now, **we should seek to help others enter through the narrow door.** There is urgency to this. The door will be closed. But for many of us, myself included, it is so easy to live without urgency. We are busy with our own lives and we fail to think about the spiritual condition of others. Or we just tend to think that there is plenty of time. I have been to three funerals in the past five weeks or so. Thankfully, all of these were believers, but it is a reminder that we never know how much time we have with anyone. We need to understand the importance of now. One day the host will rise and close the door and it will be too late for any to enter. That should create some urgency especially as we understand the agony of being outside – weeping and gnashing of teeth; separation from God, and his kingdom, and all that is good.

Now, you can't make anyone enter through the door. That is a choice that each one must make. But make no mistake, if we are going to walk as Jesus' disciples, helping others find the narrow door is one of the most important things that any of us can do. This is for everyone who is seeking to follow Jesus. And because it is, I want to give you one specific thing that everyone can do, young or old, introvert or extrovert, new believer, or long-time believer, to live out the importance of now. You can pray for someone who doesn't yet know Jesus.

I want to ask you to write down the name of at least one person who doesn't yet know Jesus. And then pray for them regularly. Pray that they would have a heart to seek God. Pray that God will reveal himself to this person. Pray that the devil would not be allowed to blind them from spiritual truth. Pray for opportunities to speak about Jesus with this person. Pray!

And then I want to ask you to consider one other action in light of the importance of now. Consider inviting this person to join you for worship on Easter Sunday. That will take courage to do that. But who knows, they may say yes. They may show up and hear the good news about Jesus. They may find out how to enter the narrow door. And they may respond.

If we are going to follow Jesus as his disciples, we need to understand the importance of now and join him on his mission to seek and save the lost. Amen.