

Who's In? Who's Out?
By Jason Huff
Psalm 118:19-29, Revelation 19:4-9, Luke 13:22-35

The third Scripture reading for the week is Luke 13:22-35. Listen now to God's Word. "Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. 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.' 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!' 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. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Back when I was a kid, I was always interested in learning how things worked. I started off with books like Richard Scary's *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go*. When I got older, I had a few of these great big oversized books that told you everything about, well, everything...from medicine and science to machines and trains. I could spend hours looking at those. I always wanted to know new stuff. I think all of us are that way about certain things. We've got something we're curious about, whether it's a certain genre of novels or cars or a certain sport or movies or whatever. Faith is sometimes just like that.

But one of the problems of human nature is that we want to understand God; we want to wrap our minds around God. We want God to explain Himself. And part of the reason is because we think if we can understand God, maybe we can control God. If I truly understand how my car works and what tools to use, I can fix its problems. Same goes for my computer. And a lot of people would like to be able to use God to fix their lives and get what they want. So many preachers today claim that God is the way to lots of money or success; even well-meaning preachers often tell you that God is the key to something else – a better life or happiness.

But God isn't the means by which we can accomplish some other purpose...relationship with Him is our purpose. And because of that, God doesn't seem all that interested in explaining Himself so that we can understand Him. Instead, He keeps pointing us away from a philosophical understanding of an impersonal "God" and pointing us towards being in a true relationship with Himself. In today's passage, Jesus does exactly that.

Today's passage starts with a man asking Jesus a question – “Lord, are there only a few people that are going to be saved?” In that day and age, the Jews assumed that salvation was part of their birthright; as God's chosen people, they were the ones to be saved, and everyone that wasn't a part of Israel either by birth or by conversion was out of luck. They believed that salvation was for the few, and they happened to be part of that few. Rabbis debated whether the whole nation would be saved or just Jews who observed the law faithfully. They wanted to know – who's in? Who's out? But it was an intellectual debate rather than a life-changing one.

Jesus doesn't answer the question the way the man asked it, as a philosophical inquiry. Instead, He makes it personal. He says, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.” The narrow door is a symbol for relationship with Himself, which is the way into the Kingdom. The word in Greek for “make every effort” is *agonizesthe*, which is where we get the word to “agonize.” Jesus is saying, “Go to great pains! Struggle! Fight! Do everything you can to go through the one true doorway to the Kingdom, and do it now!” Jesus says that many will try to enter the Kingdom but won't be able to do it. They're trying to get in, but they aren't willing to go in by the narrow door, the one way that actually works. He still doesn't answer the man's question; the word Jesus uses for “many” means a lot of people, but it doesn't mean most. It could mean “almost everybody” or simply “a big crowd.”

Jesus' parable is most interested in why the many can't get in. By the time the crowd starts looking for the narrow door, it's already locked; it's too late. These people expect to be able to get in based on a superficial relationship with the owner of the house; they say, “Hey, yeah, you taught here, we ate with you down at Joe's house. Remember us?” And the owner of the house says, “I don't know you! Go away!” They couldn't get in because they didn't really know the owner of the house at all. The people who've entered into the house know the owner of the house; He made sure they knew how to get in, and they obeyed His instructions. The people left outside heard the owner's teachings; they had been told the door was there. They just chose not to go in that way, and now they're let outside.

Jesus keeps expanding the story. All sorts of people are going to be at the banquet in God's Kingdom, people that the Jews would never expect to be invited, people like you and me, people from the farthest reaches of the earth. And folks who thought they were automatically included in the Kingdom because they were born into a Hebrew family find out it's not true. Jesus isn't worried about answer the question, “How many people are in the Kingdom?” He's more concerned, “Are *you* going to be in the Kingdom?”

The rest of the passage illustrates that one's heritage as an Israelite doesn't equal automatic entry into the Kingdom. The Pharisees try to convince Jesus to flee from King Herod, who's been making threats against Him. Herod was a Roman puppet, but he'd killed John the Baptist, so it wasn't an idle threat. But in essence, Jesus says, “It doesn't matter what Herod thinks – I'm doing the will of God and he can't stop it.” In rebuking Herod, the king of Israel, Jesus rebukes all of Israel. Jesus does the same thing when He rebukes Jerusalem. Jerusalem was *the* holy city, the center of Jewish religious life. When Jesus rebukes Jerusalem for murdering the prophets, He's speaking to the whole Jewish nation Jerusalem represents. He's saying, “You are being rejected just as you have rejected God.” Salvation isn't found in being Jewish; it's found through Jesus, the One who is the narrow door into the Kingdom of God.

It's easy to get wrapped up in the whys and hows and what-ifs, and what's going to happen to other people. But God isn't a philosopher. Time and again we see God asks not for complete understanding but faithful obedience. In the ancient story of Job, when Job loses everything despite his righteousness, he demands God answer why. God answers Job with a bunch of questions, all asking him, "Where were you when I made everything?" Job repents at the end, saying, "I spoke of things I didn't understand." At the end of John's gospel, the apostle Peter finds out a little about his own death. Peter then asks Jesus what's going to happen to John. Jesus answers, "What is it to you? Follow me!"

The question today for us is not one of figuring out who's in and who's out of the Kingdom. That question leads us to decisions and judgments that are only for God to address. Who knows what God has planned? The person outside the Christian faith today may be inside the faith tomorrow! Who is to say what will happen when the atheist, the Muslim, or the Buddhist is confronted with the truth of Christ? We can't. The two things we can do today are answer these questions: are we striving for the narrow door, relationship with Jesus Christ, that leads to the Kingdom? And are we leading others to that same door?

The first question is the hardest for us because it calls us to personal accountability. And like the Jews of Jesus' day, many people who were born into "Christian" families believe salvation is theirs by birthright. They believe that by being baptized as an infant and going to confirmation class when they were a teen and attending a church service once in a while, they've done their bit. And sadly, from Jesus' own teaching we know that many of those supposedly Christian folks are going to wind up in the exact same situation the Jews He describes find themselves in, weeping as they find themselves outside the Kingdom of God. We aren't saying who those exact people will be; we're not judging anybody. We simply know that Jesus said that many who think they are just fine with God, if they don't change, will be outside the Kingdom.

I also don't want to shortchange this by saying that the level of activity you have in the church is the gateway to the Kingdom of God. You could be here every single day of the week and write down everything I say and go to every Bible study and still wind up outside the Kingdom. Because relationship with Jesus is the narrow door by which we must enter the Kingdom. It's talking with Him and following Him and listening to His voice. Information about God might be good, but never saved anybody. The people on the outside in Jesus' story were His contemporaries, people who literally sat and ate in His presence, people who probably could have told you Jesus' teachings first-hand. But knowing about God and knowing God are light years away from each other.

Jesus said to strive for that narrow door that opens into the Kingdom. If relationship with Him is that doorway, then make relationship with Him the reason you exist. Let everything else flow out of that struggle to become the son or daughter of God He has already claimed you are! Spend time with Him in prayer. Read the Bible. Don't make it just an intellectual exercise; make it a heart exercise. Get to know this God who has offered you salvation. We don't have to understand how salvation works; we simply have to accept the gift through faith in Jesus. And you'll find that when you have that faith, the rest start to flow from it. When you truly *become* a member of the Kingdom of God, you become more and more interested in *acting* like a member of the Kingdom of God. It never stops being work, but it becomes a natural part of who you are.

There's that other question: are we leading others towards the narrow door? Jesus is very clear that *He* is the way to the Father, that no other door leads to Him. We are called to bring people to Jesus because the other ways people attempt to get into the Kingdom simply don't work. Eventually, it will be too late and the door will be shut. We don't know when that will be for what people. Now is the time to be leading people to Christ.

What we've learned today tells us that while we lead people to the door, when we lead people to Jesus, we aren't judging them based on who they've been before then or the paths they've taken or the sins they've committed. Only God knows how our past can make us ready to accept Him in the present. John Fischer is a Christian musician I've enjoyed for a long time, and one of his songs puts the attitude perfectly: "I'm not one who's got it all in place telling you what you should do...no, I'm just one old hungry beggar showing you where I found food." When we take this attitude, we don't share the message of Jesus only with people we think will receive it well; that's a judgment we're not qualified to make. We tell *anybody* who'll listen!

God is bringing a huge group of people together from every portion of the world, every tribe, every tongue, every nation, every color, every race. In a couple of minutes, we are going to celebrate communion together, which is a foretaste of the banquet that awaits us when God's Kingdom comes in all its fullness. As a part of God's Kingdom, as part of His family, we want everyone possible to come and sit at the seat Jesus has reserved for them. We have the privilege of pointing the way to Christ and His feast. So let's do it!

This morning, we've had the chance to welcome new members into the church. God has led them here to be a part of this congregation, and we are so thankful for them and for God's grace in bringing them here. And they are just the beginning. There are so many more who need to know God, and He has given us our marching orders. We don't need to worry about the details; God knows what He is doing. He just asks us to be faithful...faithful to enter through the narrow door that is Jesus Christ, and faithful to point others to it. Let us be bold and do it today, not because we have all the answers, but because we know the One who is the Answer.