

The Unconverted “Believer” (8): Striving to enter the Kingdom

Although true believers are presently citizens of the kingdom of God¹, the fullness of the kingdom will not arrive until the Lord Jesus returns and we are delivered and exonerated as true believers through the general judgment of mankind². We initially entered the kingdom of God through our new birth shown forth in our repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ³, and one day we will receive and enjoy the full realization of the kingdom in the New Jerusalem in the new heavens and new earth. And just as we were to give forth all our effort to enter into the present kingdom through our initial conversion through repentance and faith⁴, so we are to give forth great effort in our Christian lives in turning from sin and living unto righteousness—i.e. a life of true saving faith—in order to enter the kingdom that will come at the end of the age. And so, there is a sense in which we have entered the kingdom of God, but in another sense we will yet enter the kingdom that God has prepared for us (cf. Matt. 25:34). Let us turn in our Bibles to Luke 13 in which we will read of our responsibility to live devout and holy lives as we anticipate our future entrance into the kingdom of God. But first we will provide summary of what we have addressed of late.

In recent weeks we have shown that the gospel of salvation that is often proclaimed to the world and believed upon by many in the churches does not reflect the fullness of what the Holy Scriptures set forth to be the way of salvation. There is much that has a show and claim of Christianity, but is of little true substance. Paul warned Timothy that in the last days, which is this entire church age, this would be a commonplace matter for which Timothy would need to contend. Paul wrote,

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: ²For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ³unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, ⁴traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵*having a form of godliness but denying its power*. And from such people turn away!

There is much that claims to be biblical Christianity but it denies the necessity of living a transformed life of holiness and obedience unto the Lord. Saving faith is too often assumed to be the single act of faith of one who trusted Jesus Christ to be God incarnate, who paid the penalty for sin through His life, death, and resurrection. It is assumed that if one truly believes and only believes these facts, then he or she has become saved once for all time. But we have shown that the Scriptures set forth saving faith to be more than just believing truths about who Jesus is and what He did. Saving faith in Jesus Christ the Lord is transformative in that it shapes and directs the way one lives in the light of the truth of Jesus Christ. As the Scriptures declare in four places, “The just shall live by faith.”⁵ This means *the just*, that is, those who are truly justified through faith alone, *shall live by faith*, that is, faith is the means by which righteous ones live. Saving faith is not simply what one believes, but saving faith shapes and directs the way the believer lives before God.

Saving faith is evident in the fruit of faithful obedience to Jesus Christ the Lord. Saving faith embraces Jesus Christ as Lord in which the believer becomes a devout and dedicated disciple of Jesus Christ. Saving faith places the Christian on a new path of living that leads to and ends in eternal life. This is what

¹ See Col. 1:13.

² See Matt. 25:34.

³ In our new birth we were wholly passive, our regeneration being the sovereign work of God. In our repentance and faith, we were personally active and responsive, but only because we were enabled by God’s grace to seek and believe on His Son.

⁴ See Matt. 11:12.

⁵ Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38)

we recently considered in our Lord's words that He declared in Matthew 7:13 and 14. This biblical understanding repudiates what is commonly referred to as "easy believism." It was the 19th century evangelist, **Asahel Nettleton** (1783-1844) who said,

No preacher ever made the way to heaven more difficult than the Son of God who said, "*Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, which leadeth to destruction, and many go in thereat, and Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and not be able.* If any preacher attempts to show an easier way to heaven than by the strait gate and narrow way of regeneration, you may know that he does not preach the way of salvation.⁶

The life of the true believer, the one who exhibits saving faith, has repented of all sin when He came to Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior. His desire and commitment to follow the Savior became the preeminent concern of his life. There are some sinners who seek salvation, but they do not do so wholly. Again, **Asahel Nettleton** wrote:

They do not seek it as a thing of the *first importance*. *The direction is, seek first the kingdom of God.* Let it be the first and leading object of your pursuit. Everything must give way—and lie in subordination to this object. Whatever may come in competition, however dear, you must be able to renounce it without a sigh. *The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.*⁷

We have also sought to show recently that this life of faith that leads unto eternal life is a *difficult* way, a way which few find and few travel. To walk in this way requires humbling oneself, subordinating one's interests and desires to do God's will, submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It involves the responsibility to remain true and faithful in obedience to the Lord Jesus even through suffering for doing so. We addressed this last week in which Jesus said,

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works..." (Matt. 16:24-27).

Today we will consider another occasion when our Lord taught His disciples their responsibility to fight and overcome all obstacles of life in this world in order to enter the kingdom of God at the end of a life of faith. 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.

And He went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?"

And He said to them, ²⁴"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are 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 you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' ²⁸There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. ²⁹They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. ³⁰And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last." (Luke 13:22-30)

⁶ Asahel Nettleton, **Sermons from the Second Great Awakening** (International Outreach, Inc., 1995), p. 138.

⁷ Ibid, p. 134.

We had actually addressed this passage one year ago, the second Sunday of our corona virus lockdown in which we had an almost empty sanctuary and we were airing our sermon via the internet.⁸ On that day we gave the sermon entitled, “The Unconverted Believer.” When preparing for that Sunday I was first moved to address this present sermon series of which this is the 8th Lord’s Day. On that occasion we addressed this passage somewhat, but not as thoroughly as we hope to do today. Here before us we read of our Lord pressed His disciples of their responsibility to “strive to enter” the kingdom. In this passage we read of our Lord giving His hearers a sense of urgency of their responsibility to respond to His message, by turning from sin and following Him.

The excellent commentator on the Gospel of Luke, **I. Howard Marshall** (1934-2015) described this portion of the Gospel in the context of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.

The section opens with a reminder that Jesus is evangelizing the people and is on His way to Jerusalem, the city of His passion. This provides the context for both the following sections, the first dealing with the danger of not responding to the message of Jesus, and the second with the inevitability of the rejection of Jesus and His death at Jerusalem. A question by an enquirer introduces a saying of Jesus stressing the importance of entry to the kingdom by the narrow door before it is too late and the door is shut. Two thoughts are juxtaposed. The one is that the periods of opportunity is limited by the imminence of judgment. The other is that entry to the kingdom depends not merely on hearing the message of Jesus and having fellowship with Him but above all on turning from evil in repentance. The unrepentant Jews of Jesus’ own time are contrasted with the faithful men of OT times and believing gentiles who will find their way into the kingdom. The Day of Judgment will produce surprises with its overturning of human expectations.⁹

And so, our Lord and His disciples were proceeding on His final journey to Jerusalem. Luke recorded this final journey to Jerusalem as having begun with Luke 9:51, which reads, “Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.” Jesus taught the crowds along the way. With the arrival to his destination, Jesus would meet His destiny, to die upon His cross and then to be raised from the dead. He declared in Luke 13:33, “Nevertheless I must journey today, tomorrow, and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem.” 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. In this same passage Luke recorded Jesus pronouncing judgment upon Israel for their rejection of Him as their Messiah. Jesus said,

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! ³⁵See! Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’” (Luke 13:34f)

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. It was 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.

I. The details of our passage

A. What is it to be saved? (9:23)

⁸ See FBC1037, March 29, 2020, “The Unconverted Believer”

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, **The Gospel of Luke** (William B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 562f.

A man asked Jesus, “Lord, are there few who are saved?” 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 sin and all of its damning consequences. As we have repeatedly stated, salvation includes God delivering us from the guilt of sin, the alienation of sin, from the power of sin, and the finally from the presence of sin. 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. Our full and final salvation will be realized when we are delivered from the wrath of God on the Day of Judgment which would have been poured out upon us believers had it not been for Jesus Christ bearing God’s wrath for us on His cross.

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 concerned with the matter of how many will be saved; rather, be concerned that you be one of them. You strive to enter the door which leads to life.” Although one man asked Jesus the question, Jesus’ answer was addressed to all who were before Him.¹⁰ Jesus said,

“Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.
²⁵When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open for us,’ and He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know you, where you are from’...”

Let us now consider that...

B. The narrow “gate” is actually a narrow “door”

We first must address the English translation of Luke 13:24, which reads in the New King James Version (NKJV), “Strive to enter through the narrow *gate*.” The English Standard Version reads, “Strive to enter through the narrow *door*.”¹¹ Here Jesus was not speaking of going through a narrow gate to enter a difficult roadway as in Matthew 7:13ff, but He was commanding them to strive to enter a narrow door that allows entrance into a building or a house. The details of our Lord’s words make this clear.¹²

More specifically, to what does this “narrow door” refer? Some say the “narrow door” is Jesus Christ Himself. They would refer us to John 10:9: “I am the door; whoever enters through me shall be saved.” Now certainly Jesus Christ is the “door” the only way through which one may enter salvation and obtain eternal life. 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. Here entering the door is entering into eternal life at the end of a life of faith.

¹⁰ The verbs and pronouns our Lord used were plural in number.

¹¹ The translated Greek word in the ESV is *thuras* (θύρας). But there is a different word in the Greek text that stands behind the KJV and the NKJV; it is *pulay* (πόλυ). *Pulay* (πόλυ) is the word used in Matthew 7:13, in which Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow *gate*; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction.” Probably a scribe at some point in church history changed the Greek word in Luke 13:24 from *thuras* (θύρας) to *pulay* (πόλυ), perhaps to conform the Lukan reading to the Matthean reading. But the result of this word change is that many have mistakenly viewed the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 7:13ff to be the same as recorded in Luke 13:14ff. But this is incorrect. Jesus was speaking of two entirely different metaphors. In Matthew Jesus was speaking of a gate, but in Luke He was speaking of a door.

¹² Perhaps we could even say that this door is the future entrance into “the Father’s house” (cf. John 14:1).

We may draw a difference and distinction between the narrow gate of Matthew 7:13 and the narrow door of Luke 13:24. **I. Howard Marshall** wrote, “The metaphorical picture of the narrow door in v. 24 differs considerably from that of the narrow gate and difficult way in Matthew 7:13f.”¹³ In Matthew, we have the Lord telling his hearers to enter a small *gate* which leads unto a narrow and difficult 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 aggressively striving to enter the door to the house. And so, the narrow gate is a metaphor of the beginning of the life of a true disciple; the narrow door is a metaphor of the end of the life, in which only true disciples are admitted entrance into the fullness of the kingdom of God.

C. *Striving to enter the narrow door*

Striving to enter the door is not an allusion to the initial entrance into a life of discipleship; rather, *striving to enter the door depicts the entire life as striving 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 at the end of their life. We might say that the door of Luke 13:24 is the door that we are striving throughout our life to enter. We are laboring to enter into the presence of God with His people in eternal life.

John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote, “When he bids them *strive*, or labor, he conveys the information, that it is impossible to obtain eternal life without great and appalling difficulties.” To strive to enter this narrow door is to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ forcing oneself 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.

This entering is depicted in terms of a great struggle. The Greek word translated “striving” is *agonizesthe* (ἀγωνίζεσθε). Grammatically speaking, it is a present tense, middle voice, imperative, or command. It is a command to be continually or continuously exerting every effort, to stretch every nerve, in order to enter “the narrow door.” The Greek word is the etymology or the source for the English word to *agonize*. The life of the Christian is one of striving, and we might say, even agonizing in order to enter the door unto eternal life that is before us.

This word translated “striving” is used elsewhere in Scripture. The apostle Paul used this word to describe his own strenuous effort with view to his own salvation.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;²⁰ and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;²¹ to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;²² to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.²³ Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, *that I may be partaker of it with you*.

²⁴Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.²⁵ And everyone who *competes* for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but *we for an imperishable crown*.²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (or, a castaway--KJV).

¹³ Marshall, p. 563.

The verb translated “competes” is the same Greek word, *agovizomenos* (ἀγωνιζόμενος). It conveys the thought of rigorous and strenuous effort, in that he gave his entire focus and strength to compete so as to win the prize. And here the prize is his own salvation, which is, of course, received by God’s grace alone, but given by God upon the completion of a life of holy living born and sustained through faith.

Similarly Paul wrote to Timothy of his great devotion and effort to live for God and to serve Him.

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; ⁸for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, *as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come*. ⁹The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. ¹⁰For to this end we toil and *strive*, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim. 4:7-11)

Here Paul used the Greek word, *agovizometha* (ἀγωνιζόμεθα), which is translated “strive”, to describe his own effort to attain to godliness in this life for God has promised eternal life for those who are godly.

D. 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). This is what our Lord meant when He said in verse 29, “They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God.” 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 for 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 biblical 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 this was the hope of Israel, that *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 **Luke 14:15ff**:

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. ²⁴For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.'" (Luke 14:15-24)

The messianic banquet is referenced in the last book of the Bible, **Revelation 19:9**. There is set forth as a great marriage feast. 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 non-biblical writing which dates to the first 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)

What our Lord Jesus was saying before these people would have resonated with their future hopes and aspirations for when the Messiah would come and save them from their sins.

In consideration of what our Lord Jesus taught these people...

II. Let us always be striving to enter the kingdom

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."

John Bunyan (1628-1688) conveyed this idea in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. There was a scene that Christian witnessed while in the house of the Interpreter (i.e. the Holy Spirit). The narrator (the dreamer) described Christian being led through different rooms in the house of the Interpreter, each room depicting some aspect of the Christian life that would instruct and encourage Christian in his pilgrimage to the Celestial City. But at one point he showed Christian the view of a palace and of one who would fight fiercely to enter it.

I saw also, that the Interpreter took him again by the hand, and led him into a pleasant place, where was builded a stately palace, beautiful to behold; at the sight of which Christian was greatly delighted. He saw also, upon the top thereof, certain persons walking, who were clothed all in gold.

Then said Christian, 'May we go in thither?'

Then the Interpreter took him, and led him up towards the door of the palace; and behold, at the door stood a great company of men, as desirous to go in; but durst (dared) not. There also sat a man at a little distance from the door, at a table, with a book and his inkhorn before him, to take the name of him that should enter therein; he saw also, that in the doorway stood many men in armour to keep it, being resolved to do the men that would enter what hurt and mischief they could. Now was Christian somewhat in amaze. At last, when every man started back for fear of the armed men, Christian saw a man of a very stout countenance come up to the man that sat there to write, saying, 'Set down my name, sir;' the which when he had done, he saw the man draw his sword, and put a helmet upon his head, and rush toward the door upon the armed men, who laid upon him with deadly force; but the man, not at all discouraged, fell to cutting and hacking most fiercely. So after he had received and given many wounds to those that attempted to keep him out, Matthew 11:12, Acts 14:22, he cut his way through them all, and pressed forward into the palace, at which there was a pleasant voice heard from those that were within, even of those that walked upon the top of the palace, saying,

'Come in, come in,
Eternal glory thou shalt win.'

So he went in, and was clothed with such garments as they. Then Christian smiled and said, 'I think verily I know the meaning of this.'

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 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.” (vol. 5, pp. 726,727).

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

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. But 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.”

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: “If this is true, how can anyone be sure of his salvation?” “Suppose someone strives for a while then ceases, does he lose his salvation?” “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 had saving faith. 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: “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. We have been saved -- “It is by grace you have been saved” (Eph.

2:5, 8). 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, and shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10). But we will yet be saved -- “He who endures unto the end shall be saved” (Matt. 10:22). These 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.

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

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

It does not mean merely that you *listen* to the Word of God regularly (13:26). It does not mean merely that you *believed* what you have heard (13:26). 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.” 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.

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

1. Because 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. Because 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. Because 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. **John Calvin** wrote regarding these words of Jesus:

This was added, that we might not be deceived by a vain hope, as if the multitude of our companions would be of any avail to us. The flesh is willing to flatter itself, and many who now give themselves every indulgence, promise to themselves an easy entrance into life. Thus men practice mutual deception on each other, and fall asleep in wicked indifference. To shake off from His own people those flattering hopes, Christ declares that those who calculate that their possession of life is already certain, will be shut out.

We will close with an illustration 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 upon them. 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."

Consider the consequences of failure to enter are so severe (13:28-30). There will be many tears of great disappointment due to missed blessing. There will be many tears of great regret due to neglected opportunity. And there will be many 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? There is no place for a spirit of complacency in the Christian life. We must 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.

"Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,

¹⁴I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. (Phil. 3:13f)

“Self-Exertion”

a chapter in his book, **Practical Religion**,
by J. C. Ryle,
pp. 17-34.

In the following text Ryle addressed the command of our Lord Jesus to be “striving” throughout life in order to be saved. He translated the verb “striving” from Luke 13:24 as “Make every effort.”

Here is a plain “command.” Jesus says to us, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.” There is often much to be learned in a single word of Scripture. The words of our Lord Jesus in particular, are always full of matter forethought. Here is a word which is a striking example of what I mean. Let us see what the great Teacher would have us gather out of the words “Make every effort.”

“Make every effort” teaches that a man must use means diligently, if he would have his soul saved. There are means which God has appointed to help man in his efforts to approach Him. There are ways in which a man must walk, if he desires to be found by Christ. Public Worship, reading the Bible, hearing the Gospel preached--these are the kind of things to which I refer. They lie, as it were, in the middle, between man and God. Doubtless no one can change his own heart, or wipe away one of his sins, or make himself in the least degree acceptable to God; but I do say that if man could do nothing but sit still, Christ would never have said “Make every effort.”

“Make every effort” teaches that man is a free agent, and will be dealt with by God as a responsible being. The Lord Jesus does not tell us to wait, and wish, and feel, and hope, and desire. He says, “Make every effort.” I call that worthless religion which teaches people to be content with saying, “We can do nothing ourselves,” and makes them continue in sin. It is as bad as teaching people that it is not their fault if they are not converted, and that God only is to blame if they are not saved. I find no such theology in the New Testament. I hear Jesus saying to sinners, “Come--repent--believe--labor--ask--knock.” I see plainly that our salvation, from first to last, is entirely “of God;” but I see with no less clarity that our ruin, if lost, is wholly and entirely of ourselves. I maintain that sinners are always addressed as accountable and responsible; and I see no better proof of this than what is contained in the words “Make every effort.”

“Make every effort” teaches that a man must expect many adversaries and a hard battle, if he would have his soul saved. And this, as a matter of experience, is strictly true. There are no “gains without pains” in spiritual things any more than in temporal. That roaring lion, the devil, will never let a soul escape from him without a struggle. The heart which is naturally sensual and earthly will never be turned to spiritual things without a daily fight. The world, with all its opposition and temptations, will never be overcome without a conflict. But why should all this surprise us? What great and good thing was ever done without trouble? Wheat does not grow without plowing and sowing; riches are not obtained without care and attention; success in life is not won without hardships and work; and heaven, above all, is not to be reached without the cross and the battle. The “kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it” (Matt. 11:12). A man must “Make every effort.”

“Make every effort” teaches that it is worthwhile for a man to seek salvation. If there is anything that deserves a struggle in this world, it is the prosperity of the soul. The objects for which the great majority of men “make every effort” are comparatively poor and trifling things. Riches, and greatness, and rank, and learning, are “a corruptible crown.” The incorruptible things are all within the narrow door. The peace of God which passes all understanding--the bright hope of good things to come--the sense of the Spirit dwelling in us--the consciousness that we are forgiven, safe, ready, insured, provided for in time and eternity, whatever may happen--these are true gold, and lasting riches. It is right and good that the Lord Jesus call on us to “make every effort.”

“Make every effort” teaches that laziness towards Christianity is a great sin. It is not merely a misfortune, as some fancy--a thing for which people are to be pitied, and a matter for regret. It is something far more than this. It is a breach of a clear commandment. What will be said of the man who violates God’s law, and does something which God says, “You will not do?” There can be but one answer. He is a sinner. “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). And what will be said of the man who neglects his soul, and makes no effort to enter the narrow door? There can be only one reply. He is omitting an explicit duty. Christ says to him, “Make every effort,” and behold, he sits still!

“Make every effort” teaches that all those outside the narrow door are in great danger. They are in danger of being lost and tormented forever. There is but a step between them and death. If death finds them in their present condition, they will perish without hope. The Lord Jesus saw that clearly. He knew the uncertainty of life and the shortness of time: He would rejoice to have sinners hurry and not to delay, lest they put off the business of their soul till it is too late. He speaks as one who saw the devil drawing near to them daily, and the days of their life gradually ebbing away. He would have them be very careful that they would not wait too long: therefore He cries, “Make every effort.”

Those words “Make every effort,” raises solemn thoughts in my mind. It is full of condemnation for thousands of baptized persons. It condemns the ways and practices of multitudes who profess and call themselves Christians. There are many who neither swear, nor murder, nor commit adultery, nor steal, nor lie; but one thing unhappily cannot be said of them: they cannot be said to be “making every effort” to be saved. The “spirit of slumber” possesses their hearts in everything that concerns Christianity. They are very busy about the things of the world: they rise early, and go to bed late; they work; they labor; they are busy; they are careful: but the one thing they need to accomplish they never do—they never “make every effort,” towards the things of God.
