

Part 51: Striving or Seeking?

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The author and poet Wendell Berry once wrote a poem on hope. It's titled, "This Place That You Belong To," and in it he says that we cannot have any hope for the present or future if we do not understand from where we've come.

He ties this to an understanding of our place in nature and he describes the threat and the hope in this way: **This knowledge cannot be taken from you by power or by wealth. It will stop your ears to the powerful when they ask for your faith, and to the wealthy when they ask for your land and your work...By this knowledge make the sense you need to make. By it stand in the dignity of good sense, whatever may follow...Speak to your fellow humans as your place has taught you to speak, as it has spoken to you...Speak publicly what cannot be taught or learned in public.**

For Berry, few things are more powerful in the face of trial, more formative in how we treat others, and more profound than what we remind ourselves about concerning where we are from. Therefore, he says, we must learn to speak as our place has taught us.

For the Christian, the place in which we stand is the cross. Today, Jesus makes it clear that two of the most defining aspects of our hope is knowing from where we have come to Jesus and when we have come to Jesus. It is upon these two questions that hang the difference between those who meet Jesus with "weeping and gnashing of teeth," and those who say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

In our study of Luke, Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem, where he himself will face the cross. His teaching along the way seems to focus on the difficulties and dangers of following him. So clear that today it leaves the crowd to wonder if Christian hope is endangered hope.

Maybe you've wondered that? As you look out at your coworkers and neighbors, does it appear to you that those who live for the world have a broader road and an easier path than those who follow Jesus?

This leads the crowd to ask if the Kingdom itself is endangered: "Will those who are saved be few?" It lead others to realize that the King of the Kingdom may himself be endangered: "Herod wishes to kill you."

But in the face of hardship, Jesus makes it clear that the greatest hardship is that of not following him.

Our main point this morning is simple and it's taken from Jesus' clear command to his disciples: **Strive for the gospel because of what we are saved from and who we are saved to.**

We are going to see this in two parts. First we are going to see **The Striving of the Saved**, and in those verses we are going to see five motivations for coming to Jesus. Then we will see **The Suffering of the Savior** where the heart of Jesus and the heart of unbelievers are contrasted.

To begin let's focus on this first encounter we have in our text. Luke tells us that Jesus is making his way through towns teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem. As Jesus teaches, here and there, more people follow him on his journey. But at some point, someone looks around and says, "This is a good group, but is this all there are?"

In case you haven't noticed, in most cultures across human history there has been no such thing as "A Christian majority." Instead the Bible paints Jesus followers most often as a prophetic minority. In the face of such opposition it's easy to wonder as this person did, "Will anyone else walk this path?"

But Jesus turns the question on its head. The person in the crowd said: "Jesus how many others will be saved." Jesus turns to the individual and says, "You better be sure you're saved."

This is our first point today: **The Striving of the Saved.**

Jesus answers in **verse 24**, "Strive to enter through the narrow door."

That word in Greek, "strive," is the word *agonizomai*. You probably don't need to be a Greek scholar to pick up what that word implies. Jesus makes a distinction here though doesn't he?

When comparing efforts for salvation he says, "Many will *seek* to enter and will not be able." You though, "*agonize* to enter."

There's a difference between comfortably seeking Jesus and making every effort, striving, and agonizing for salvation in Jesus. Since sin entered the world in Genesis 3, our natural drift is not to "make every effort" but instead, "if it's easy and expedient, I'll do it."

But Jesus warns of such a tendency here and in **Matthew 7:13** when he says, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction and those who enter it are many."

When you think of your call to follow Jesus which verb describes it more? Seeking or striving? Apathy or agony? Ease or every effort? If this idea is challenging or off putting to you, then consider Jesus' parable. The energy and discomfort of following Jesus gives way to the joy of eternal salvation, but the ease of the world gives way to an agony in hell which we cannot fathom.

In this parable we see five motivations which should jump start our awareness of our own need to *strive* for the path of Jesus.

First we see ***The Danger of Time.***

The speed of time hasn't changed for any of us. But how often are we caught off guard by the passing of it? How many times have you heard, "I can't believe it's already been a year?!" But how much more ought we to realize that one day Jesus will return, and that too will catch us by surprise.

In verse 25, Jesus opens with a simple time marker: "When." Our lives are always shaped by our "whens." For many of you the past few years of your life are explained by the reality conferred upon you yesterday, "When I graduate." For others we live in anticipation or expectation of "when the baby comes," "when I'm engaged," "when the sickness goes away," "when the kids are out of the house."

But how many of our lives are shaped by this “when,” for there is no greater moment in time for any of us. Notice how Jesus speaks of the danger of neglecting this in **Luke 13:25-27**.

You see if you wait until “When once the master of the house has shut the door,” it’s too late to “begin” anything of value. Twice Jesus draws our attention to that word, “begin”: “you will begin to stand and knock,” “you will begin to say.”

But in that day it is too late to begin what should have already begun. It’s easy to assume that tomorrow will always come and then we can begin, but that’s a dangerous game to play.

Jesus’ words not only show us the danger of time, but ***The Danger of Assumption***.

Remember what these men said: “Hey Jesus, we know you! We ate and drank in your presence, you taught in our streets!” How dangerous it is for us, us who are in the church, us who are perhaps even baptized members to assume that Jesus knows us because we spent time in his presence, but never knew him in a saving way.

To be part of a church is no certainty of salvation. To know beautiful soaring truths of doctrine is no assurance of deliverance. It is only to know and be known by Jesus before this moment.

If you come to my house in the middle of the night and knock on my door, there’s a chance I won’t answer it. Why? Because I already know my family is inside. I don’t know where you come from, but I do know you don’t belong in here. My people are already safe. Salvation is for those who are joined in this age, to the family of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

In the book of Galatians Paul describes salvation in this way, “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...” (**Gal. 4:9**). To know God in a saving way is to be known by God. What does that look like? **1 Corinthians 8:3**, “But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.” Don’t assume God knows you, make yourself known to God today by giving your heart to Jesus Christ by faith. Love God, and you’ll find striving is the most natural thing to do.

We must do this because what’s at stake is ***The Damnation of Sinners***. This is our third motivation to come to Jesus.

I want you to notice how Jesus talks about the individuals who attempt to come too late, assuming that proximity with Jesus was the same as faith in Jesus. They come and what does he say to them (vs. 27)? “Depart from me, you workers of evil.”

Now remember these are people who were in the presence of Jesus. These are people who listened to Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus says that these are even people who attempted to live out the moral desires of Jesus. But what does Jesus call of them at the end? Workers of evil. Jesus already made this abundantly clear in chapter 11 when he said, “Whoever is not with me is against me.” There’s no middle ground in the game of life. Our greatest problem is not what we have done, but what we have withheld.

Brothers and sisters, the primary crime for which you will be condemned in the final day is not rape, murder, abuse or anything else against another human. But instead it is the abuse, negligence, violation and murder of God by our unbelief.

The greatest evil, the most damnable offense we could ever participate in, is a rejection to believe and to come to Jesus in faith. To not come to Jesus is to look at the Creator who made you, the King who rules you, the Groom who loves you, the Lamb who died for you, the Breath that sustains you and say: "You are nothing compared to me." Paul says in Ephesians 3 that it was in this gross misconduct that we all once walked. We were by nature children of wrath.

The just, right, and good response to those who have committed such crimes is to be forever barred from the house of the Kingdom and sent away. That's how good the kingdom is. The book of Revelation tells us that part of what makes heaven good is that the evil are kept out. Those sinners who profess faith in Jesus are welcomed into the gates of glory, but those who waited too long, those who refused to give worship and honor to the only person worthy of it will be sent away.

Here is the fourth motivation to ensure our striving: ***The Despair of Hell.***

Look at how Jesus puts it here: **Luke 13:28-30.**

Jesus says, when that day comes, there will be a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Some will be on the inside in a feast. But you, you who did not come when you should have, you will be in a different place.

We don't naturally like the doctrine of hell. Part of that is good. It speaks to the compassion innate to the image bearers of God. Part of that is because we are given far more information on the beauty of heaven than the pains of hell. As we will talk about in a moment, there is much surpassing glory in heaven, but there is also unfathomable pain in hell.

We cannot understand the scope of redemption if we do not understand from what we are redeemed. We cannot even ask, "Will those who are saved be few," if we don't care about being saved from something. Which is why the doctrine of hell is important for us not just to know, but to feel.

Jesus in the book of Luke has already spoken of hell as a place of constant hunger (6:25), condemnation (11:31), beatings and punishment (13:46), eternal imprisonment (12:59) and here weeping and gnashing of teeth. Jesus says in Mark 9 that hell is the place where "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."

There is a great irony to be a culture so incredibly driven to make every effort to eliminate discomfort in life and yet to be so incredibly unaware of the eternal, unending torments of hell.

Brothers and sisters we must be balanced. When the scriptures talk of heaven we ought not just to speak of it, but to call others to experience it in drastically beautiful language, with metaphors which match its tone. But let us not also forget that balance in the area of judgement should similarly be matched with metaphors.

Our world speaks of hell like a party with our fellow rough necks in a room where the lighting is bad and the AC is broken. But hell is a place of eternal torment. A place where the worm which eats at your rotting flesh will never die because you will never be fully done dying. A place where fire burns, but never sears the nerves. A place where we not only miss out on the beauty and glory of Jesus but a place where we are eternally acquainted with a punishment that meets our crimes.

There are some of us who fly to Jesus primarily because of his beauty, but it is just as good of a starting point for you to fly to Jesus because of hell's agony. The author Dante tried with all his artistic muscle to describe hell in his book, "Inferno," and even in the lightest sense he described hell saying: "Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled on the starless air, spilling my soul of tears."

Jonathan Edwards once preached a famous sermon where he sat on the weight of Jesus' words saying, **"Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock."**

If such ideas do not cause us to strive for salvation in Jesus Christ then there is only one thing remaining: You do not believe it. However in our age of moral outrage, we have never been more affirming of the doctrine of hell. We want to banish intellectual criminals, cancel to death those who breach the party lines, and bury those who disagree. But unlike our world, the gospel upholds the doctrine of punishment while also offering the good news of grace.

This is our final motivation ***The Delight of Heaven.***

At one moment, there will be those who are cast out. But there will be others, who sought the narrow gate. Here Jesus answers the question of "will they be few." For those in the Kingdom of God are not only the four fold representatives of the Jews—Israel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Prophets—but also the many who come from the four corners of the earth—the east, west, north and south.

This was a biting critique of the unbelieving Jews. Because on that day they will see that the hope of all their forefathers was in God's promised Messiah and they missed it. But they will also see that those dirty pagan Gentiles, multitudes of them, found the same door of grace and entered the feast.

You see the hope of heaven is that we can really say, in the difficulties of life, it won't be like this for long. For many, the final "when" will strike gut wrenching shame and terror into their hearts. But for believers, for those who in this life strive for Jesus with an exclusive commitment, that final "when" is the doorway into joy, unity, peace, fellowship and glory with the multitudes of believers and with our Triune God.

So, who can come? All who come through the narrow door.

You see this passage is meant to cause a moment of anxiety so that we might have a lifetime of peace. Do you fear being a one who stands too late? Do you fear being one who is turned away by Jesus? Do you wonder if your life is more seeking than striving?

Then come now! Remember how Jesus said, "I don't know where you are from." This isn't because Jesus doesn't know. He's God. The problem is that these people didn't know. If they knew from where they were coming, they would have come!

So we, when we approach the gates of the Kingdom today, let your place be known! Say to Jesus I have come, and I have come from the place of repentance. I have come from the cords of sin and the dust of

damnation. I have come as a sinner, a wretch and a rebel. I have come burdened with guilt. But I come to this gate covered in the blood.

To come by the blood of Jesus is to come knowing the scandal of our place of sin, but knowing the certainty of the place of grace. What will meet us on that day is not a shameful word, but instead, "I've been waiting, enter into the joy of your maker."

The door is narrow, but the pockets of grace are deep. Charles Spurgeon said that the door is so narrow, that you've got to stoop with repentance to get in. He says, it's narrow enough that someone dwarfed by the smallest grasp of grace may find room, but so narrow that none who attempt to carry the luggage of self-righteousness can enter.

In just a moment Jesus is going to quote from Psalm 118, but here I want to focus on another verse from that same Psalm, one that undoubtedly Jesus has in mind in Luke 13: **Psalm 118:19-23**.

This is the gate of the Lord. Strive to enter it.

Who can be saved? No one apart from a King who has come to make himself known. He is the door.

This is why Jesus has come. He has come so that we who come on the path of repentance might know to whom we can flee. This is what we see next in **Luke 13:31-35**.

Here we see our second point this morning: **The Suffering of the Savior**.

Remember Jesus just told us to strive to enter by the narrow door and you may find that offensive. But that's only until we see Jesus' own striving to reveal himself as that door.

Here Jesus is threatened by the Jewish ruler who wants to kill him and what does Jesus say, "He says tell that dumb animal that I've got work to do. Work to do until it is finished on the third day."

Doesn't that phrase have a whiff of prophecy to it? Jesus is committed to moving into Jerusalem even at great cost to himself. Why? Because he understands his work. If we were Jesus, if we were the eternal son of God in the flesh, if we were the undercover boss that everyone should be respecting, but everyone rejected and hated, wouldn't we see that and say, "It's not worth it?"

In fact did you notice what Jesus admitted when he identified himself with the prophets in verse 33? He said it's not right that I should perish away from Jerusalem. Jesus knew the cross awaited him. Jesus knew that rejection, opposition, hardship and agony awaited.

But Jesus was willing to strive to enter the town where he wasn't wanted so that he could accomplish the gospel that we all needed. It is as Martin Luther says in "A Mighty Fortress," "Were not the right man on our side, our striving would be losing." Your striving, your work means nothing, unless Jesus walks into Jerusalem first.

And here we see the heart of Jesus contrasted with the heart of unbelievers. Jesus knows his cross will bring salvation and also judgement, but his response to the judgement is lament! It's a song of sorrow. His heart would be to have gathered Jerusalem's children like a hen gathers her brood under her wing."

That's Jesus' heart. But what's the problem with the heart of unbelief? "You were not willing," says Jesus.

This is absolutely wild. Here we see how vastly magnificent the compatibility between God's total sovereignty and human responsibility. In verse 27 it is the master who sends the sinner away, in verse 28 it is God who casts the sinner out into hell. This is true. God damns and he is not ashamed or squeamish to do it.

But sinners also damn themselves. Everyone who rejects God does so, and earns hell, because of their own willingness. To reject the gospel of Jesus is to encounter the personal problem of hell. Hell isn't God's problem that we need to fix. Hell is our problem that only God can fix. We've chosen it. Only God can fix it.

C.S. Lewis describes this willingness for us to reject salvation and in so doing, chose hell, in this way saying, **"There is always something they insist on keeping, even at the price of misery. There is always something they prefer to joy."**

We all strive. We strive for perfect families, fulfilling jobs, satisfying vacations. But unless we heed Jesus' warning our striving might be for a joy that cannot save. It thumbs our nose at the heart of Jesus, and says as unbelief always does, "I'll do it my way."

Lewis puts it this way, **"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"**

In other words, don't be the fool who gets what he's always wanted. Do not choose the world here only to reap the reward of the world in eternity. Hell is universally part of our own choosing, but heaven is also part of God's choosing.

Jesus says he will go to the cross for those who finally see and say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Fruitless, faithless and joyless will our lives be until we see Jesus like this.

We might say to this, "Well, if Jesus must save us from hell, but not everyone can see Jesus like that, how will many be saved? How will we know if I'm saved?" In fact we return to the very question the crowd opened with "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"

And in this we return again to Jesus' answer: "Strive to enter through the narrow door."

See him today. See that this Jesus calls us to strive for him only because he has already strived for us. He has given his life in that unbelieving town of Jerusalem so that we might see and be woken from our slumber and come. Come now. Come today. To make striving our business and our savior our delight!

We who come, come from the path of the cross. May our lives show it. May our anthem be today, and when the master returns, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."