

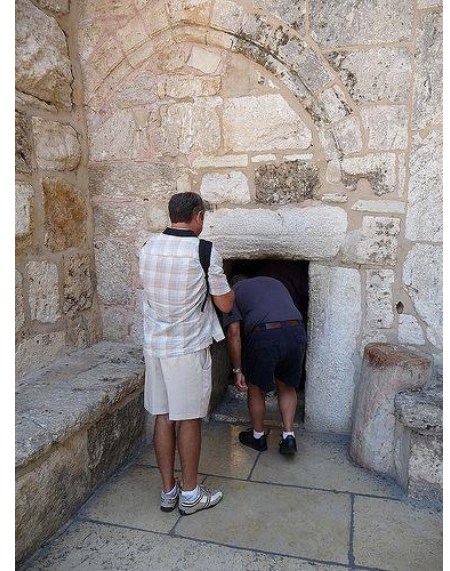
## Service Theme: Followers Come from All Nations

## “Struggle for the Narrow Door” Luke 13:22-30

You know the Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”? Well, “little” isn’t an exaggeration. The city of Bethlehem is only about 4-square miles. But, although it’s small, Bethlehem draws millions of visitors each year, mostly to tour what’s called

the Church of the Nativity. As the name suggests, this church was constructed in 330 A.D. around the cave traditionally believed to be the site of Jesus’ birth.

For such an important and popular place, you’d expect a huge, elaborate main entrance to wow and easily welcome the crowds that flock to it. But, this is the main entrance to the Church of the Nativity. **(Show picture)** Standing a whopping 4-feet tall, and 2 feet wide, you might wonder, “Why make the door of such an important place so small?” In ancient times, the door was built so small to prevent thieves from driving carts and horses into the church to steal valuables. But the small door also serves a symbolic purpose. From the most powerful king to the helpless beggar, everyone must crouch and humbly bow their head to enter the place where Jesus was born. Thus the name, “The Door of Humility.”



In today’s Gospel, Jesus also talks about a narrow door; the narrow door of Heaven and eternal life! Again, you might wonder, “Why make the door of such an important place so small?” Especially when many believe that everyone goes to heaven, no matter what they believe. Especially when today we’re celebrating that followers of Jesus come from all nations. Wouldn’t we expect the door to be huge, so everyone can stroll in without any struggle?

The truth is, the narrow door of Heaven is open to all. But it’s also true that as followers of Christ, entering that narrow door is never a leisurely, complacent stroll. There is always a **Struggle for the Narrow Door.**

In our sermon text, Jesus was teaching as he traveled through the towns and villages in Perea, the region east of Jerusalem, across the Jordan River. One day, as Jesus was teaching, a man asked him, **“Lord, will those who are saved be few?”**

Maybe this man had seen the large crowds Jesus always drew, but also noticed how few truly followed him. Maybe he’d heard Jesus teaching the need to “deny yourself” and “take up your cross and follow Jesus” and assumed few could pull it off. Rather than directly answering the question, Jesus basically tells the man, “Don’t worry about how many will be saved. Worry about whether you will be saved!”

A typical Jewish person in Jesus’ day would have confidently responded, “Of course!” It was a widely held opinion, endorsed by the Jewish rabbis, that the whole nation of Israel would be saved. After all, they were God’s specially chosen people! The descendants of Abraham! What did they have to worry about? In their minds, entering heaven would be like a carefree stroll through a wide gate.

So Jesus’ response must have shocked them. He tells the crowd, **“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able to.”** Instead of a leisurely stroll through a wide gate, Jesus tells them that they must “strive” to enter eternal life through a narrow door. The Greek word for “strive” is **ἀγωνίζομαι**. You can hear that our word, “agonize” comes from it. Jesus says we need to scrap and

fight like an athlete in competition; to exert ourselves with great force and concentration; to struggle. Entering through the narrow door will be an intense struggle!

But what kind of “struggle” is Jesus talking about? It might sound like you have to strive to do enough good works to earn your way into Heaven. But Scripture makes it very clear we’re saved by God’s grace alone, not our good works. ***“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works so that no one can boast.”*** So if Jesus doesn’t mean a struggle to earn our way through the narrow door, what kind of struggle is it?

We don’t earn salvation by struggling for it. But we can certainly lose that salvation if we don’t struggle and fight against the enemies who try to tear us away from Jesus and salvation. Enemies like the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature, which constantly try to make us trust in ourselves for salvation, instead of Christ. If we cease fighting and struggling against those enemies, they will accomplish their mission.

Jesus knew the Jews needed this warning about the narrow door because they’d grown complacent about their spiritual lives. They weren’t struggling against their spiritual enemies, because they assumed the door to Heaven was wide, and wide-open for them, no matter what, because of their Israelite heritage and outward good works.

To alert the Jews to the spiritually dangerous position they were in, Jesus described a man hosting a gathering at his house. For a long time, he stood with the door open, calling to the guests to join him, but they ignored him. So, he eventually closes and locks the door. Once they realize the door is closed, they finally start caring. But it’s too little, too late. As they pound on the locked door, pleading, “Please, let us in!” the heartbreaking answer comes from inside, ***“I do not know where you come from. Depart from me all you workers of evil!”***

Imagine how that thought must have struck Jesus’ audience. These people thought they were shoe-ins for heaven because they went through the motions of God’s commands. But instead, God called them “workers of evil.” These people were confident they’d enter eternal life because their ancestors were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Jesus says they would ***“see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out.”***

But that’s the reality for all people, us included. Eventually, the day will come when God shuts the door. God gives every person a time of grace, calling everyone to come to faith, and enter heaven through the open, narrow door. Whether the door to our time of grace slams shut at death, or when Jesus returns at Judgment Day, if we depend on anything besides Jesus to get us through that narrow door, we end up locked outside. If we’re so overconfident in ourselves, that we grow complacent in our struggles against sin as a result, we’ll be the ones pounding on the door, begging to be let in.

So, how goes your struggle for the narrow door? Is your life a struggle and fight against our spiritual enemies? Or is it a life of complacency, because you’re confident in your titles, or outward actions. “I’m a Christian. I’m a Lutheran. I’m on Church council. I teach Sunday School. I mow the lawn. I attend Bible Class. I go to church. I preach the sermons. I give offerings. I do nice things for people.” Those certainly aren’t bad things. But if our confidence for salvation is found in such titles or actions, we easily grow complacent in our lives as Jesus’ followers.

In his book *The Seven Faith Tribes*, researcher George Barna reported that 79% of Americans self-identify as Christians. But only 18% of those Christians reported that they’d be willing to inconvenience or disrupt their lifestyle for the sake of Christ and biblical truth. Over 60%! The average American Christian is so confident and complacent in their title of “Christian,” that they see no need to sacrifice, submit, or struggle for the sake of

Christ. That's exactly what Jesus warned the Jews about. A relationship with Jesus is about so much more than a title or proximity!

When the people in Jesus' illustration got locked out, they begged, ***"We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets!"*** They were grasping at straws, hoping that such superficial contact with Jesus would save them. That would be like showing up at Jaguars QB Nick Foles' house, and assuming he'll let you in because you've watched football before. Mere proximity or loose connections don't establish an actual relationship.

There's only one way to enter the narrow door of Heaven. Not by pointing out vague, loose connections you might have with Jesus. The only way through the narrow door...is Jesus.

At the Church of the Nativity, you can't get through the door of humility if you're riding a horse or pulling a cart. You can't fit through if you have a huge pack strapped to your back, or if you're standing tall so everyone will look at you. The only way to enter through that narrow door is to set aside everything else you might be carrying, and humbly bow your head.

Nor can you get in through the narrow door of heaven if you still have a huge load of sin strapped to your back; or if you're trying to drag a cart load of good works behind you. You can't make it through the narrow door if you have your head held high, complacent and conceited over earthly titles, or going through the motions for Jesus. The only way to fit through the narrow door is to set aside everything else, strip off your complacency and self-reliance, and humbly and trustingly bow your head in repentance before Jesus.

Because Jesus is the only reason the door is open at all. Without him, that narrow door would be locked to everyone for eternity. Jesus was teaching in the towns of Perea, ***"as he made his way to Jerusalem."*** That was always Jesus' purpose and mission—to go to Jerusalem to die so he could take away the sin of the world. Jesus, who struggled against Satan's temptations to set aside his mission; who struggled in humility, suffering, and death; who struggled through hell when God his Father slammed the door in his face and told him, I don't know who you are, causing Jesus to cry out, ***"My God, why have you forsaken me."*** Jesus, who fought and defeated death when he rose from the dead.

The truth is, the door to heaven, while narrow, is open to all people. Not because of our titles, or our actions. But because Jesus faced the ultimate struggle for us. And in thankfulness for Jesus' sacrifice and struggle for us, we in turn joyfully fight and struggle for the narrow door. Jesus is both our motivation and our strength to struggle for following him.

And the door isn't just open to some. ***"People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the fest in the kingdom of God."*** Jesus' blood opened the door of Heaven to all people—not just those with Abraham's blood, including Gentiles like us.

That's why people from every corner of the world are flocking to Jesus—from Africa, South America, Asia and the Middle East. Willing to undergo the intense struggles of persecution, rejection, and even martyrdom. Why? Because for so long, Satan succeeded in keeping the Gospel behind closed doors. But now that they're hearing the good news for the first time, that the door to heaven is open to them, they joyfully struggle for the name of Jesus. May God so fill us with love, joy, and thankfulness for Jesus, that we too will joyfully, willingly struggle as we await the day when we'll cross the threshold of heaven's narrow open door with believers from all nations.