

LUKE 13:22-30
THE STORY OF ENTERING

In his book, “What’s So Amazing About Grace?”, author Philip Yancey ponders this place we call “earth.” We look and live on the earth, and we see and experience such heights and such depths. If you stand at the foot of Mount Everest, you will strain to see all the way to the top. If you could peer down to the bottom of the sea, you would be stunned to see the depths of the deepest places. You walk up or down a steep hill, and the earth seems anything but flat.

But, wonders Yancey, what if you could look at the earth from afar? What if you joined those fortunate astronauts who saw the earth from the moon? It would still be amazing and inspiring, but it would seem more like a billiard ball - as smooth as can be. Yancey is using this image to remind us that our perspective is just one perspective. We may see things one way, but God may seem them very differently.

In this third of five scenes in the story of our God, our world and our lives, Jesus is meeting people and revealing the truth about his redemption: his rescue from sin, and his rescue to a new life before God. Today we read of Jesus meeting a man with a simple question: “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” Maybe you have asked that. If we could capture the question with numbers: how many out of every one hundred people will be saved? One? Ten? Twenty? Fifty? Seventy-five? All one hundred? What would you say? What would your neighbor say?

As Jesus often does, he answers the question in a way we do not expect. He uses not the image of the earth, but the image of a door. He describes a closed door and declares a narrow door. He moves us from our perspective on this question, to God’s perspective on this question, so that we may see our God, our world and our lives, in a new way.

Much of Jesus’ answer is about **THE CLOSED DOOR**. The image of the door is an image for the eternal kingdom of God - everlasting life with God in the new heavens and new earth. Jesus says “many” will “try to enter and will not be able to.” Like the man, we wonder why Jesus would say this. Let’s capture Jesus’ answer with two phrases: many will not enter, because God will say, “I don’t know you,” and “You don’t know me.”

I DON’T KNOW YOU. To understand why Jesus says what he says, we have to learn a little about Jesus’ audience. This man is likely Jewish, and the people with him are probably Jewish. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he is very close to Jerusalem. In places like Jerusalem, this is an important question of the day, for this is a season of Jewish history when small, exclusive groups have arisen, claiming to be “the” saved remnant of God’s chosen people.

In the Jewish way of thinking, most everyone is sure non-Jews will not be saved. After all, they are not part of God’s chosen people. But what about the Jews themselves? Will all of them be saved? Will most of them be saved? Or will just the most devoted be saved?

Jesus is speaking to a man who is part of a group whose members could easily presume that they will be saved, so his words attack the sin of presuming. As Jesus constructs the scene, he envisions the owner of a house getting up and closing a door. God is the owner, and we might say the door is the door to his eternal kingdom. But people are still outside, and they are knocking and saying, “Sir, open the door for us.”

We read these words in the translation I have used, and we have a sense that these people are desperate. But if you read the original language carefully, that is not necessarily the case. They are simply knocking and asking to enter. “Sir, open the door for us.” While this may be a knock of desperation, it could be a knock of presumption. “Sir, let us in. Of course, you will. You must let us in, because of who we are. Now let’s get to it!”

It’s kind of like those news stories you hear sometimes about famous politicians, entertainers or athletes. One of them is in a restaurant, at a party, or maybe even at the ticket counter at the airport, and there is a problem. The famous person says, “Do you know who I am?” They presume that once the person with

the privilege knows the answer, the door will open.

Then Jesus announces the owner's response: "I don't know you or where you come from." I will not let you inside unless I know you, and I don't know you.

I don't know you, and *YOU DON'T KNOW ME*. Jesus begins with the sin of presuming, and he continues with the sin of performing. Again, remember who is listening to Jesus. This man is part of a Jewish religious system that is built on performance. Even if this man is not one of those leaders, he has surely been influenced by them.

What do I mean by performance? It is the idea that I will faithfully perform certain outward religious rituals, and those rituals will please my God so much, that he will be glad to let me enter through his door and into his kingdom. I may presume, but I may also perform.

As we see all through the gospels, Jesus sees right through this performing. You may give the appearance of outward godliness, but you are hiding inward godlessness. In the words of the prophets, you may honor God with your lips, but your hearts may well be far from God. You can fool all of the people some of the time, and you can fool some of the people all of the time, but you can fool God none of the time.

These religious leaders admit their need of some grace. They know they sin. But they would add their performance of works to that grace, and they believe those works will ensure their righteous standing before God, and their entry through that door and into the kingdom of God. So Jesus is speaking to a man who is part of a group that may presume entry into the kingdom because of their membership in the group, but this group may also seek to close the deal on that closing door by performing for God.

After all, they say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." We have been around you, God. We have done godly things. We have performed. But God says, "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers." The word to highlight here is "evildoers." You can perform all you want, but you are still evildoers. If you knew me, you would not be such doers of evil. Your religiosity has not changed that reality. Not only do I not know you, but I know you don't know me, for you continue to live in the muck and mire of evil that repulses and repels me.

Pastor James Boice used to compare our performance of good works to Monopoly money. It may look good, and it may spend pretty well in the game. But from the perspective of God, it is worthless, because God sees its real value. As he looks deeper than everyone else in the "game", he sees you do not have real money behind that fake money.

The closed door: I don't know you, and you don't know me. Then Jesus closes the door even more tightly. We might say he locks the door and throws away the key, because he goes on to describe the feast of the eternal kingdom. This is the day when the fathers of the Jews - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - will join all the prophets as they rejoice in God's redemption. But, Jesus says, you who presume and perform will be thrown out.

This is hard truth! I want to take this truth and shape it for our stories, but we cannot arrive there until we consider the other door that Jesus presents to us. Even as he describes the closed door, Jesus declares **THE NARROW DOOR**. If we are to understand this narrow door, we have to discover the "who" of this door, and the "when" of this door.

Indeed, Jesus openly describes the closed door and only declares the narrow door, but if you are familiar with more of his teaching, you know he is declaring that he is the *WHO* of the door. In John 14, Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Do you want an open door to the eternal kingdom of the Father? That open door is not wide. There is only one way through it, and that way is this person named Jesus.

You may presume. You might perform. But such presumption and performance will never permit you the entry you desire. Only through Jesus will you walk through the door from eternal death to eternal life. He must ensure for you, what you cannot secure for yourself.

What an astounding claim! In our culture, it may be the claim that offends more than any other. Pastor,

are you telling me that Jews who reject Jesus, and Muslims, and Buddhists, and Hindus, and New Agers, and Trekkies, and everyone who does not know Jesus as Savior and Lord, will be barred from entering the door to the kingdom of God? I am saying exactly that, because Jesus said exactly that. We may wish the door to be wide, but Jesus declares the door to be narrow. Come to God through me, he says, but when you come to me, confess and profess that you come to God only through me.

It is like in the Narnia story, where young Jill meets Aslan the Lion by a stream. She is so thirsty. But she is also afraid of the lion. She says she dare not go to the stream. Aslan tells her she will die of thirst if she does not go. She says she must look for another stream. Aslan says, "There is no other stream." No matter what you may presume, and no matter how you may perform, you must come to God through Jesus Christ. You enter by faith in this One who has lived without sin, died for sinners, risen from the dead, and now reigns in heaven until his return. There is no other stream. There is no other way. There is no other door.

Jesus says this, too: you are wise to enter now. His words about the narrow door not only declare the "who" of the door, but the *WHEN* of the door. He starts one sentence with these chilling words: "Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door..." A time is coming when the door will be closed. Either Jesus will come this way, or you will go that way. We live once, we die once, and then we face judgment. When the time is up, there is no overtime period or extra innings. In ignoring or rejecting Jesus, we risk the day when the door will be closed, and it will never, ever be opened again.

It is a frightening word to us, and it is meant to be. Jesus speaks of weeping and gnashing of teeth, and these are images for despair, distress, grief, and even anger. Jesus is offering a tough but true warning to every person. It may irritate or offend us. But it is truth from the One who has come from the Father, and we are wise to hear it and heed it.

Yet there is also an invitation in this idea of "when." Jesus mentions the day of the feast of the kingdom, when people from east, west, north and south will gather to rejoice in their entry into the kingdom. He is showing this man that the kingdom is not just for Jews, but for people of all nations. When he speaks of the first and the last, he is telling this man that those with all the privileges of the Jews will lose those privileges if they reject Jesus, and those without all those privileges will gain the blessings of Jesus, if they believe in Jesus. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, enter the kingdom through Jesus. But do it now.

I am reminded of the Gettysburg Address. A few months after that awful Civil War battle, President Abraham Lincoln was asked to speak at an event recalling the blood spilled and the lives lost in that little Pennsylvania town. The speaker before Lincoln orated for two hours. The photographer for the event was sure Lincoln would also speak for a long time, so he started to do this and that with his camera. By the time he was ready to take pictures again, Lincoln's two-minute speech was over. So there are no photographs of Lincoln delivering the most famous speech in American history. The man presumed that he could perform. But he ran out of time.

The closed door: I don't know you, and you don't know me. The narrow door: the "who" is Jesus, and the "when" is now. Let's bring these truths into our stories in three simple ways.

First, I ask, do you know? Do you know Jesus Christ? Jesus speaks strongly to this man and his culture, and his words must reach us in our culture. We breathe the air of a culture of religious presumption and religious achievement. Of course I know Jesus Christ. I have been going to church for years. Or I went to church when I was young. Or I prayed a prayer after a revival meeting or Vacation Bible School. Or I have done this and that and this and that, and God must be so pleased with this and that and this and that.

We need the heart of Paul. As he poured out that heart to the Philippians, he recalled the days when he presumed he had the favor of God, because of his religious background. He replayed all the religious duties he had performed, all for the favor of God. Do you remember how he described all that presuming and performing? He said, "I consider them...rubbish." Trash. They rise as a stench before God, for I presume and perform to impress a holy God.

In Paul's heart, they are rubbish compared to the joy of knowing Christ. To know him is to believe

fully in him to be your righteous way to God, because of his perfect life, his atoning death, his glorious resurrection, and his powerful rule and pending return.

As you sit here this morning, is that your hope? Or do you hang on to even a shred of faith in what you think you can presume, and how you believe you have performed? I cannot answer that for you. I can only ask it to you. And I can earnestly plead for you to wrestle with that question - not ten years from now, not tomorrow, not even this afternoon, but right now.

Do you know? If you know, you will grow. We start to feel a tension here. We know that our performing will never secure God's favor. Yet we realize that God wants us to live before him as doers of good, not doers of evil. How do we strive to live holy lives, without a mentality of performing for God?

We resolve the tension when we realize that when we know Jesus, we have his Holy Spirit, who is in the business of changing first our hearts, then our lives. Because we are being transformed "from the inside out," we start to move away from the hypocrisy of the good outward deeds and the bad inward heart. From the heart, we want to love God, and from the heart, we want to do what truly pleases him. Because we have the Holy Spirit who provides true growth, we are genuinely growing, inside and out, in all the grace of Jesus. We are not performing to get God to love us. We are loving the God who loved us first.

This growth provides comfort and peace. How do you know you know you are saved? You know, and you know you know, because you can see how you are growing. You can look back and see how Jesus has changed you. Can you do that? Or might you need to return to the question of whether you know Jesus at all? If you know Jesus, you are growing in Jesus.

Then, finally - if you grow, you will show. In his answer to this man, Jesus takes us where we do not want to go. He ventures into the subject of hell - a real place, where we suffer the everlasting judgment of God, and we are separated from the eternal love of God.

Is Jesus speaking the truth here, or is he lying? If this is the truth, then as you know Jesus and grow in Jesus, you will long to show Jesus to the people around you - people who are prone to presume salvation and perform for salvation. If you ask your neighbor how many people out of a hundred will be saved, the number you hear will probably be pretty high, because we are good presumers and performers.

This morning and in the days to come, will you live like you believe the words of Jesus? Last week, I asked if you have a vision for God's kingdom. Yet we need more than just a vision of the glories of heaven. We need a vision of the horrors of hell. Jesus does not answer the numbers question, because that is for God to decide and know. But Jesus gives his people the mission of being kingdom "showers" - people who know Jesus, grow in Jesus, and show Jesus in word and deed. Is that in your heart? Is that on your mind? Is that how you will live out your story?

With the earth, we have one perspective, and God has another. He does not see as we see. With salvation, we tend to have one perspective, and God has another. We do not see as he sees. The door is narrow, and the door will close.

Will you open your heart and mind today, have God change your perspective, and see him change your story into a story of knowing, growing and showing?