

The Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 21, 2016

Prayer of the Day: Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increase of faith, hope, and love; and that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! Jesus Christ has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Alleluia! (1 Timothy 1:10)

Sermon Text: Luke 13:22-30

Did you follow the Olympics this year? Athletes from all over the world gathered in Rio de Janeiro to compete in all sorts of track, field, and swimming events. Out of the 11,551 athletes stood a very special group: defending Olympic champions.

Did you watch those champions compete? Michael Phelps swam to his way to several more gold medals. Usain Bolt sprinted 100 and then 200 meters to record a triple-double (that is, gold medals in each of the two events for a third straight Olympics). The United States gymnast team bounced and flipped, twisted and spun for another team medal. Do you recognize what those former champions did? They defended their title of "Olympic champion."

Technically speaking, if they won gold in their respective events in 2012, then they entered the Olympics as the reigning champions. The funny thing is, even though they were reigning champions, they had to compete again just to keep their reign. That means, from 2012 to 2016 they had to train for hours each day. Then they had to place in their nation's time-trials in order to make the national team. When they reached the Olympic city, they had to run semi-finals just to qualify for the finals! Then, they had to finish in

Luke 13:22-30

²² Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

He said to them, ²⁴ "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

²⁶ "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

²⁷ "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

²⁸ "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

first place just to get another gold medal! Defending champions do not automatically receive a gold medal just because they won their event four years ago. They keep training and competing in order to keep their title!

You and I are making every effort to keep our title— and we are striving for something far better than a gold medal. We are racing to receive that golden crown of eternal life stored up in heaven! Just like those athletes, Jesus gives us warning and encouragement not to give up our training. **STRIVE TO ENTER HEAVEN'S NARROW DOOR!** *Soon it will be shut. Today it stands open.*

Maybe that does not sound like so much of a warning. Take for example, the response to Jesus' teaching and preaching. **Someone** [in a crowd] **asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"** Maybe this person watched thousands gather around Jesus, but realized only a few actually paid attention to his teachings. Perhaps this man had heard different teachings about entering heaven and really did not know who was telling him the truth.

Yet, Jesus does not really answer his question, does he? Nowhere does Jesus unveil this magical number of how many people will be in heaven. Instead Jesus shoots an arrow straight into the heart. **"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to."**

Jesus' words really do not sound like much of a warning—at least not on the surface. Look at his command again. Continue *striving*; continue *struggling*— just like those Olympic athletes keep their bodies in shape for competition! Because the greatest enemy to a defending champion is complacency.

The Jews in Jesus' day were confident they were all automatically going to heaven. Understand how they reached that conclusion. They pulled out their family trees. Jews are actual blood-descendants of Abraham ([Matthew 3:9](#)). If you remember, God loved Abraham and promised to send Jesus through Abraham's bloodlines ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)). So, if God loved your great-great-great-great-grandfather and promised to send the world's Savior through your race, then how could God not automatically love you?

Not to mention, the Jews had a church. Not just any plain old church, but a worship life that God himself started! God actually gave them blueprints for their temple. He appointed their priests. When the people sinned, they could give God a sacrifice for their sin. In their eyes, God would not be angry with them again.

A Jew could simply point out that they were, well, Jews. They are not pagan non-Jew (Gentiles) who worshipped the sun and moon or bulls and cows or one of the many Roman gods like Jupiter, Neptune or Juno. They are born into a household that knew only of one Triune God. Baby boys met God's command to be circumcised. Families made sure to attend special church services. They made sure to give their required offering. They felt if they simply completed these actions, they were on good terms with God.

Do you see where their confidence was placed? Can you see what was in their hearts? The Jews believed God did not need their hearts; he just wanted outward commitment. So, they did not believe they needed Jesus to be their Savior because their actions, their blood, their upbringing would save them!

Did you hear what God says about empty hearts? Listen again— and this time focus on the pronouns. **Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ “But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ “Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ “But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’** Jesus is not pointing a finger at nonbelievers. He stands among a crowd of Jews and says: *“If you believe a Savior is not needed, you are the people who are going to be standing outside!”*

Those same pronouns are meant for your ears to hear too. If you and I believe we are going to heaven because we have met a requirement of sitting in a church building once a week for years or have added our name to a church membership book, then heaven’s door are going to be shut. If you and I hold up our baptism, our confirmation, our marriage, our burial as a sort of punch-card that we believe needed to be filled out for heaven, then expect to hear God say: *“I do not know you!”* If you and I are storing up secret sins and refusing any need to repent, then God will say: **“Away from me, all you evildoers!”**

Do Jesus’ words sound like a warning now? **STRIVE TO ENTER HEAVEN’S NARROW DOOR!** *Soon it will be shut*—and shut at time you and I do not expect. **STRIVE TO ENTER HEAVEN’S NARROW DOOR!** because *Today it (still) stands open.*

Think about why Jesus is giving this teaching at all. Why does he say: **“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door?...” [B]ecause many [...] will try to enter and will not be able to.** Many will be surprised to discover their object of trust has failed them! If our hearts are not set on Jesus being the only Way into heaven ([John 14:6](#)), then our objects of trust will fail us too. Our baggage of sin is much too bloated to carry through heaven’s narrow door. Our puffed-up self-pride in the things we have done keep us from squeezing into heaven. We need someone whose heart carries no baggage of sin. We need someone who humbly, sincerely obeys God with a pure heart. We need the precious blood of Jesus to purge away our pride; we need Jesus’ life of no-sin to be our life of no-sin.

That is why Jesus is travelling through cities and villages; he is pressing on to Jerusalem! His eyes are locked on the cross. That object of torture unlocks the narrow door into heaven. Since our sin-covered hearts cannot unlock that door, Jesus sets out to conquer death for us!

On the cross, Jesus suffers. Yes— his body is wracked with pain, but the pain pierces far deeper than physical. The Son of God is treated as though he thumped his chest and boasted in his efforts to earn heaven. Jesus waves our punch-card of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial in God’s face, only to hear the Father shout: *“I do not know you!”* The perfect Son of God is locked out of heaven because far too often we grow complacent in our Christian lives.

The Son of God carried your sins, paid with his life to remove them, and opens heaven for you! Jesus goes to Jerusalem, dies and rises again. Forty days later, his feet leave Jerusalem as he rises into heaven. Now he reigns as the narrow door into heaven!

That is why he says: **STRIVE TO ENTER HEAVEN'S NARROW DOOR!** With a command like that, it is easy to misunderstand it. Jesus is not commanding you to invite him into your heart as your personal Lord and Savior ([1 Corinthians 12:3](#); [John 15:16](#)). He is not laying out a list of good works you must complete ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). Rather, he takes you to the reason you can strive in the first place: you are his forgiven child.

He walks you to the baptismal font. Here water splashed on your head and his command was repeated: “*baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit*” ([Matthew 28:19](#)). Your baptism opens that narrow door— not because of your effort— but because Jesus has opened that door with his death and resurrection and because the Holy Spirit has created the faith needed for you to enter through that narrow door ([Titus 3:5-7](#)).

Because you are a child of God, your heart **STRIVES TO ENTER HEAVEN'S NARROW DOOR!** This “striving”—keep doing always! Fight, train, press on just like Olympic-sprinter Shaunae Miller of the Bahamas did this past week. In the final 50 meters of her race, USA runner Allison Felix sprinted to catch her. Shaunae Miller could very well have given up her race. She was tired, weary, exhausted; she could have quit. With the finish line in sight Shaunae Miller literally dove across the finish line to get the gold medal.

Your sights are set on the everlasting crown of eternal life waiting for you at life's finish line. Continue pressing; continue striving in your Christian life. Many things can distract you from your object of trust. Sin creeps up in the heart. Sometimes it looks acceptable. So, we can defend our human-made ideas of relationships or the need for worship or even what we think the Bible says. We can grow careless in our Christian life and lose sight of Christ our Savior! Life outside of God's Word can snare our hearts and drag them away from entering heaven's narrow door.

You have this fire of faith already kindled inside of you! Do not put it out; continue feeding it! Make every effort to hear the Word! Read your Bible and your Meditations. Take out your Catechism book and read one chapter each day! Continue training; continue striving! Continue trusting in Jesus, your narrow door to heaven and the unfailing object of your trust!

The time to run this race is now! The narrow door into heaven will be shut soon. When? The Bible does not tell you the exact moment when your life will end. The Bible does not give you the specific day when Jesus will return. Those who have emptied their hearts of trust and love for God will be locked out of heaven.

Today the door stands open. Today is the day to see what God says about sin and forgiveness, about relationships and love, about trust and truth. You are running to a place where **People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.** When the door is shut, you will be found inside—all because of Jesus.

Jesus is the Narrow Door into heaven. With the faith God created in your heart you will enter through that narrow door. Continue training for that glorious day! **STRIVE TO ENTER HEAVEN'S NARROW DOOR!** *Soon it will be shut. Today it stands open.*