

*Lakeville Christian Fellowship*

**“Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”**

**Luke 13:24**

Sunday August 31, 2008  
Morning Worship at Williams Camp  
Lakeville, Massachusetts  
www.lcfbaptist.org

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**Reading: Luke 13:22-30**

**Strive to enter**

**v.24. “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”** AGONIZOMAI (ἀγωνίζομαι), the Greek word here translated *strive* is closely akin to our own word *agonize*. Friends, how is it that the Lord tells us to enter into the kingdom of God? He says we must agonize over it. What does the word *agonizomai* really mean? It means literally *to contend*. It may also be rendered *laboring fervently, to suffer reproach*. A final help in the lexicon simply says *see FIGHT*.

Under FIGHT we find this same word, and it is defined here as “(a) to

contend in the public games, (b) to fight, engage in conflict, (c) metaphorically, to contend perseveringly against opposition and temptation.” Other uses of this word are these: “to strive as in a contest for a prize, straining every nerve to attain to the object, to put forth every effort, involving toil, to wrestle earnestly in prayer.”

Now I ask you, when is the last time you have heard the gospel preached like that? When is the last time you heard any well known preacher speak of agonizing your way into the kingdom of God? When is the last time you heard a preacher speak authoritatively of a mere few entering into the kingdom of God? The question posed the Lord in this exchange is this: “*Lord, are there few who are saved?*” His answer is that many will expect entrance in, but a few will be allowed in. Jesus said in another place: “*So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen (Matt.20.16).*” This gospel is a far cry from teaching seekers to seek ‘Your Best Life Now’. This gospel is a world away from “Just ask Him into your heart.” This is a message diametrically opposed to “Just say this prayer”, or “Just raise your hand”, or, “*If you just prayed that prayer with me we believe you got born again.*”

Jesus the evangelist instructs His disciples to *strive to enter*. He does not say, ‘just prayer this simple prayer,’ but rather uses a Greek term which means wrestling earnestly in prayer. He speaks to those who had no thought to agonize over their salvation, no thought to work it out with fear and trembling. And he refers blithely to those who foolishly believed that simply because they showed up they would be allowed in. There were some who believed they would simply knock on the door of heaven and be admitted. There were those who thought because they had eaten and drank with Christ they would be admitted; this may refer to those who literally supped with the incarnate Lord, or to those for the last two thousand years who took communion with the Lord, but without sincerity.

Now *few* is a relative term, and it seems the Lord is being purposely evasive of giving a precise answer, and as the passage proceeds we will see that indeed others, perhaps many, will come from the four corners of the earth and gain entrance. So, the message for anyone who is concerned with who, and how many are saved, receives from the Lord, the conviction to

search your own heart and be concerned if indeed you are willing to strive with Him, to drink the cup that He drank, to pick up your cross and follow Him.

So, what is being said here? Is salvation truly the result of our striving after God in our own strength? Is eternal life a thing to be earned by our own efforts or our own good works? We know that it is not. We know that Christ has done the only acceptable work that may contribute to our salvation. Only He could have provided the necessary sacrifice, and truly He did provide it. He went willingly to the cross that should have been our cross. He deserved no cross, no crucifixion. Our crosses were well deserved.

So, salvation is free after all. It is discipleship that is costly. It may in fact cost you everything. Jesus said to the Rich Young Ruler, after he said that he had followed the ten commandments his whole life long: *“You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me (Luke 18.22).”* This prescription did not cause the ruler to rejoice knowing that the treasures of heaven were indeed great, even greater than the temporal treasures he now has in abundance. He went away sorrowful, we read.

Is this then the call for the disciples to take vows of poverty and sell all their worldly goods and take on a life of austerity and self-denial? Well, it was for the rich young ruler. For every disciple our striving must become to willingly give up anything that keeps us from diligently seeking the Lord, anything that keeps us from striving after Him, anything that keeps us from coming together on time - before the door is shut - before the Bridegroom has gone inside. Anything that keeps us from hearing the word preached, from being present when the church meets.

How many times have we heard the gospel preached as though Christ is ready to fill the void in your life? Have you tried everything else? Try Jesus. Are you feeling unaccepted? Christ will accept you. Friends, these may all be nice sentiments, but these are not the gospel. Paul gives us the gospel application of his life when he writes to the Galatians, saying, *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of*

*God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain. (Gal.2.20,21).”*

The apostle here speaks of a radical transformation. He speaks of his life as being forfeit for Christ. He says he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him. He has not departed from his flesh, but in the flesh he lives by faith. The grace of God did not cancel out the need for the apostle to strive in faith, it increased it. His life was a life of striving, of setting aside those things that offend the Savior, those sinful desires that he treasured more than Christ. He writes: *“For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members (Rom. 7.22,23).”* The spirit of the apostle is at war, he is warring, or striving, or agonizing over those very things that keep him from closeness with Christ.

**v.25. “When 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....”** If there is anything that we may relate to this metaphor of shutting the door it is none other than the ceasing of the preaching of the gospel. How many times have you wished for the preacher to be silent, to be quick, to be done with his incessant ramblings? Maybe you have some place to go after service. Maybe you are hungry, or have a gathering to attend, or to host. If you are a child maybe you are bored with long sermons and can’t wait to get out and run free. Little did you know that when the preachers of the word are all silent the end is come and the door is shut. For the gospel is the door to Christ, and Christ is the Door into the presence of God. Will you strive to enter? Or will you just saunter along through life and hope the door is left open late for you? Will you wait on God or will you make Him wait for you?

We may also rightly suggest that the narrow gate is the church itself, that the closed door is the closed door to the church. Remember Christ died for the church, laying down His life for her, we read in Ephesians. Have you ever heard the gospel preached with an invitation that says, “I am not asking you to join the church, but simply to invite Jesus into your heart”?

It has been noted that all those people who were saved in the book of Acts, all those who were converted to Christ, all those who were crucified with Him, and who Christ now lives in, are never depicted as merely those who were added to the conversion statistics of a movement. But rather the explicit language of the Bible is that those who were being saved were *added to the church*.

Luke writes of it saying: *“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2.46,47).”*

So Luke writes again of striving, or, continuing, persevering. We must strive not only to continue daily with one another, but to be in accord with one another. To be close, to break bread, to sanctify our own houses by hospitality to the saints. And we must strive to known by Him as members of His body, the church. We may say, “But I am a member of the invisible church. I have no need to be part of the visible body.” Friends, the Augustinian reference to the invisible church that so many of us are so fond of claiming part in has no notion of free agency about it. The church is a visible thing. It is visible in heaven to those who are in heaven, and it is visible in the earth to those who are in the earth. The reference to invisibility points to those who are visibly in the company of other believers, those who have outwardly made profession of faith, and publically taken part in the sacraments, who are inwardly insincere, and privately uncommitted. They are in essence self-serving, and false disciples.

We know from the context that they have visibly dined with Christ, they have visibly heard His teaching, they visibly walked with Him in the streets. Yet, somehow, they did not know Him. Somehow, He still claims not to know them. How is it that they may claim to know Christ, they have heard the gospel and know it well, they profess to have surrendered to their lives to God, they attend the company of saints, contribute to the church, and yet, He says He knows not where they are from?

The answer may lie in the risen Christ’s message to the churches. Jesus says

to the church of Ephesus what He could say to many churches in our day. We read: *“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent (Rev.2.2-5).”*

The Lord is not blind to the good works done by His people. He sees that these are zealous to stand against error and heresy, against falsehood and liars. They are patient, a great virtue. They have labored for His name. They have been tireless in their efforts. But yet they are fallen. They strive for certain things, but they do not strive for the most important thing. They have lost their first love. They have abandoned the first works.

What are the first works? There are almost as many interpretations of this as there are commentators. Now, most will, of course, say that Jesus is our first love. And that is indeed the case. But how do we love Jesus? What is the work we do to show our love? Some will say it is zealous evangelism. If we evangelize persistently we show the love of Christ in its most fundamental form. Some will say that it is to feed the hungry and minister to the poor. And that to do that well is to put Christ first in our affections. Some would say that if we neglect our tithes to the church we have waxed cold in our affection for Christ.

I am quite certain that to fall short in any of these areas is an indication of a waning affection for Christ, and a lagging zeal to contribute to the cause of Christ. Yet I have always believed that what the risen Savior is telling the church of Ephesus in this exchange is that they have lost the sense of love for Him personally that they had when they were first introduced to Him. Remember when you were first saved, when you first responded inwardly to the gospel. Friends, if your response was in the fervor of the moment, or the result of a temporary emotional state, it may be that fervor, that sentiment, or that excitement that you were truly in love with. And you may find that you cannot love Christ well apart from all the trappings of that moment.

So, what does it mean to return to your first love? And what does it mean to strive enter the kingdom, the place where your first love resides? Well, my friends, I cannot tell you in any doctrinal way. There is no teaching I can teach you that can bring you there. However, I may be able to illustrate this thing for you. I believe we have access to the Lord's meaning in these verses. I might refer you to Jacob who wrestled with the Angel all night, who strove with God, who would not let Him go until He blessed Him. And how did He get blessed. He got wounded. Wounded for life. His hip was thrown out of joint. He did not come away stronger. He did not come away healed. He came away impugned and afflicted. Yet he came away from his encounter with God as a covenant partner for life, and his life was a tumultuous life.

I can teach this principle with marriage because the Scriptures use marriage to illustrate covenant love. So let me bring you closer to home, let me refer you to a friend of mine. His name is Frank. He is in his elder years now, and has been married to his wife for many years. She is quite sick. She is bound to a wheel chair, and otherwise immobile. She has become a burden. It is certainly his joy to strive to care for her, but you must know that it is not all joy. Yet she knows that she is his first love because he continues to strive for her, to care for her, to be with her.

I could tell you that apart from Christ Himself that my wife Karen is my first love. We have striven together for twenty three years through some very hard times and some very good times. I carry a little phone on my hip. It beeps from time to time. When it does a name appears in the window on that phone to tell me who is calling. There are certain people that I like to hear from more than others. But when Karen's name comes up I am always glad to see it there. She is my first love and though she might be calling with bad news or even to report some tragedy or some serious setback of some type I never tire of seeing her name on my phone. When I come home and pull into the garage I am always happy to be home. But if her car is not in the garage, though I am happy, I am not fulfilled. There is something missing, something essential. She may have good news to report or trying news, but it is always my joy to strive together with her, and where she is I will be there also.

And so it must be like that with Christ. He has many hard sayings to bring us. He has teachings that convict us of our sin and expose us as the sinners that we are. Yet since He came into our lives He is always first place there. His word is where He is known. When it is preached we come. We strive to come. We prepare ourselves to come. He is our first love and we are always pleased to be in His presence, even when we are naked and exposed, even when we become known for who we really are. Though our last encounter with Him may have been trying we are always glad with great joy to be back before our First Love, to hear His voice once more, to know His mind more deeply. So, we strive to be present when He is the subject of discussion. We linger long around Him and His people, and we sit at His feet untroubled. Our relationship to Him is personal. His sacrifice for us is personal. He strove for us. We must strive for Him. It is through this striving that we really come to know Him. It is remaining with the church even when we are greatly disappointed, even when we are personally offended, even when we are greatly abused. We remain, because He remains. He is often offended with us, yet He will never leave us.

And for those of us who preach, and teach, though we are not always well supplied, or well appreciated, or honored, or even noticed for our effort, we keep coming because it is our joy to preach, it is our love to exalt Him through His own Word. And when the word of God is faithfully preached we may be sure that: **“They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God.”**  
**Amen!**                                  strive