Sermon | Proper 16C

TEXT: Luke 13:22—30

21 August 2016

Entering By the Narrow Door

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints,

You can take all of the Scriptures, the entire Bible, and boil these down to these two doctrines: the Law, and the Gospel. So that every page, every verse in Scripture, can be classified as one of these two teachings: it’s either Law, or Gospel. It’s either a passage that tells us what to do, what God requires of us—that’s the Law. Or, it’s a passage that tells us what Christ has done for us—that’s the Gospel.

And so again, the Law is that doctrine which tells us what to do, how we should live. What does obedience look like? What does the holy, perfect life that is pleasing to God look like? How does God want me to live? The Law tells us. And we have these Ten Commandments, which give us God’s holy will for our lives in a simple, straightforward list of ten rules—this is what God requires of us. This is what God wants us to do, how he wants us to live. If you want to love God perfectly, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you want to love your neighbor perfectly as yourself—this is what you need to do—just keep these Commandments, and you will live that holy, perfect life that is pleasing to God.

But of course, what’s the problem? The problem is that, we are all the children of Adam and Eve, conceived and born sinful and unclean. And in sin, our thoughts, our mind, our will, our actions, and really our whole lives have been corrupted to the point that it is impossible to keep the Law on our own. It is impossible live the holy, perfect life that God commands, by our own strength.

For example, we look at the First Commandment which tells us, “*You shall have no other gods*.” What does this mean? “*We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things*.” Very simple. Just don’t have any other gods in your life. Just make God the only object of your fear, love, and trust. Don’t give your heart to any other gods besides him. Sounds simple enough. And yet, we don’t have to look very far into our lives to see all the ways, in this past month, in this past day, even in this very hour, that we haven’t kept that Commandment. We’ve feared, loved, and trusted in plenty of things besides God. How many times in this past week, were you worried? Anxious? Afraid? When the Lord himself said, “You have no reason to be afraid, I am your God. I will take care of you.” And yet, we turn to our bank account, to our job security, to our health, to our possessions, to our own strength, looking for assurance and peace for our souls and heart. We turn anywhere, we place our confidence anywhere or in anything, except on the God who alone can help and save. And so there’s no way we can honestly say we’ve come close to keeping this First Commandment. And that’s just the First out of Ten!

If it were up to us, to save ourselves by works of the Law, we’d be lost forever. Because it is as St. Paul says in Romans 3, “*By works of the Law, no one will be justified*” [Rom. 3:20]. The Law tells us what to do, but we have no power to do it. The Law shows us what God’s holy, perfect will is for our lives, but we have no power to carry that out, and obey that will perfectly. And so the real purpose of the Law is to show us our sin. Because above all else, God would teach the hard and sobering truth that we cannot save ourselves. God wants to strip us of self-reliance, so that we might abandon relying on ourselves, or any of the gods of this world, that our hope, confidence might be in him alone for life and salvation.

And here’s where we come to the other doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, the blessed Holy Gospel, which is the doctrine which tells us—not what we need to do, but what God has done for us in Christ. The Gospel tells how the Son of God looked down from heaven and saw our wretched, helpless condition. And he entered this world, to rescue us from sin and death. He took upon himself our flesh and our blood, became incarnate for us, became what you are, a human being, like you in every way, except without sin. And why did God become a human being? To stand under the Law for you, in your place, to live the life that you could never live, so that by his perfect, holy obedience, you might be declared righteous.

And that’s what Jesus did. Jesus really did love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and he really did love his neighbor as himself. And when we see Jesus in the Gospels, going around, healing people of their various diseases, and casting out demons, and performing miracles, and raising the dead, and preaching the Gospel to sinners, we see that great, selfless, compassionate love of God in action—his love ***for you***, and his love for his Father in heaven. Jesus kept the Law for us, and he kept it perfectly in every way, as our Substitute. And then, he goes to the cross. He dies, taking the punishment we deserved upon himself. So that, when Jesus goes to the cross, all your sin, all of your guilt, all of your iniquity is laid on him. St. Paul says it this way, that “*God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us*,” [2 Cor. 5:21] and in another place, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us*.” [Gal. 3:13] You see, Jesus is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world upon himself. And he lays down his life in one perfect sacrifice, to pay for your sins, and redeem you from the Law’s condemnation.

That’s what we mean when we say we’re saved by grace alone. It’s by God’s grace alone through the merits of Christ Jesus that we are declared righteous and saved. It’s not by works of the Law, it’s not by our own merit or striving; it’s by Christ’s work for us—his merit, his obedience, his perfect life and holy death—is the reason you are justified and saved. It’s the reason your Father in heaven looks at you, not with a frown but a smile, why he smiles at you, and loves you, and receives you as his own dear child, because of Christ, what Christ has done for you—that’s what it means to be saved by grace: to be offered a salvation that is totally unearned, undeserved in Christ alone. And we receive the grace of God by faith. Faith takes hold of the promises of the Gospel, and looks not to ourselves but to Christ, to his blood, to his death for salvation. So that those who believe in the promise of the Gospel are justified and saved.

So the Law shows us our sin. And the Gospel shows us our Savior. The Law teaches that we cannot save ourselves. And the Gospel teaches of the One who saved us by his suffering and death. And we need to hear the Law and we need to hear the Gospel, again and again throughout our lives. And why? Because the Christian life is a life of **repentance** and **faith**. What that means is that, the Christian life is about continually being brought to an awareness of our own sin so that we might acknowledge our sins and confess them. And the Christian life is about continually hearing the Gospel which gives and freely delivers the forgiveness of sins. Hearing the Law which works repentance, hearing the Gospel which works faith—repenting and believing—that’s what the Christian life is all about.

And so we come in here each week. We begin the Divine Service with the Confession of Sin, and the Lord responds with his sweet word of Absolution, *I forgive you all of your sins*. And then right away, we’re back to crying out to the Lord for mercy—*kyrie eleison*, and the Lord answers our cry with his body and his blood, in the Lord’s Supper, for our forgiveness and the strengthening of our faith. You see that constant cycle of repentance and faith—that’s what the Christian life is all about.

I say all of this as a prelude for our Gospel for today, where we hear the story of a man who comes to Jesus and asks, “*Will those who are saved be few*?” In other words, will there be many people in heaven, or will there only be a couple in heaven? And Jesus doesn’t really answer the man’s question, because Jesus is not interested in statistics. He’s interested in human beings. And so he responds to the man’s question by addressing *him* directly, “[You] *strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter, and will not be able*.”

Now that sounds pretty Law, right? “*Strive to enter the narrow door*.” And it might seem confusing. I thought we just said, that we’re not saved our own effort and *striving*; that, by works of the Law, no man will be justified. What does Jesus mean by ‘*strive’ to enter the narrow door*?’ Here, it’s helpful to understand, what is the door? What is this narrow door Jesus is talking about? The narrow door is Jesus himself. The only way into heaven is through Jesus. As Jesus says in John 10, “*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved*.” So Jesus is the narrow door. And the reason the door is narrow, is because Jesus is the only way. There is no other way to salvation than through Christ. Jesus says in John 14, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me*.”

Strive to enter the narrow door, is Jesus’ way of saying, seek the salvation that comes through him alone. That’s what Jesus means by *strive.* He’s talking about everything we just talked about: living a life of repentance and faith, hearing the Law, and hearing the Gospel, again and again, throughout our lives.

And so, how do we as Christians strive? We continue to attend the Divine Service. We continue to bend the knee in daily prayer. We continue to read our devotions. We continue to study the Scriptures together. And we do not ever give these things up. We never let the disciplines of the Christian life become just a phase, something we do for a season, but eventually fall away from. Because it’s by these disciplines that the Lord gives us his Word, and by his Word, we learn to repent and believe the Gospel.

And so, the Lord gives us a warning here in today’s Gospel. He says, *“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from.’* These are frightening words. You see, when Jesus talks about the many who will knock and say, “Lord, open to us. We ate and drank with you. We know you.” But he says, “I never knew you,” who is he talking about there? He’s talking about folks who knew Jesus, who we’re familiar with his teachings, but never really believed in him, or fell away from him later in life.

We might think of the Pharisees who rejected Jesus out of self-righteousness and pride. And, we might think of Christians today—many individuals who were baptized into his name as children, who were brought up and catechized in his word as teenagers, who ate and drank with him in the Holy Communion, but at some point along the way, stopped coming, gave up the striving, gave up the struggle. Sadly, we know so many of our friends and neighbors who have fallen away from the faith in the general apostasy from the Church which afflicts our country today. This is Jesus’ way of saying, “Don’t do that. Don’t fall away. Hold on to what you have. Stick with your Church, stick with the Word.” Because the Gospel is a treasure greater than any of the treasures of this earth. And those who die with faith in the Gospel promises have eternal life. Strive *to enter the narrow gate.*

That is, as the writer to the Hebrews says, *keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* [12:1-3] Keep your eyes on Jesus. Look to the One who already finished before you the race you are running now, submitting to your death, and is raised victorious over sin and the grave. Keep your eyes on Jesus. He stands at the finish line, calling out to you, encouraging you to press on toward the victory. And to the one who finishes the race, on the Last Day, he will receive his reward, the crown of Jesus’ glory, and the inheritance of heaven.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*