

Luke 13:22-30

These words of Jesus, says Martin Luther, are able to frighten the greatest saints. If you and I were already in heaven, we would not have need of the instructions given here. But because we still struggle with sin and temptation, and because we have the tendency to imagine ourselves immune to the danger of falling away, we need God's Law to frighten us, and we need His Gospel to comfort us.

One thing is made clear in our text: on the Last Day there will be many people who will argue with Jesus. Not those who are heathens and pagans - out-and-out unbelievers; Christians will argue with Jesus. Or rather, those who considered themselves Christians. In shock they will cry, "*Lord, open to us!*" "*I do not know you,*" Jesus will answer. "No, Jesus, You're wrong!" they will argue, "Open the door!" But Jesus will not budge: "*I do not know where you come from. Depart from Me!*"

Many of those who will argue with Jesus on that Day are the same ones who argue with Him today. Only today the roles are completely reversed. Jesus is the one standing outside the door. "Open to Me," He cries. But from within comes the reply, "Go away...I'm too busy!" Jesus persists in calling, knocking, inviting: "Open your door! Be faithful in coming to My house to receive My gifts for you...Here is My Sacrament for you; take it often...Here is My Word of Life; read it, study it; it's for you." But those inside will not budge: "I'm too busy," they argue, "I don't need Your gifts. Leave me alone. Depart from me!"

If you are one who has argued with Jesus (and who of us hasn't?), now is not the time to ignore His call to repentance. "The door is open," says Jesus, "*Strive to enter.*" That word *strive* means to agonize. Like an athlete straining, with great pain and agony, to win the race. The athlete who says to himself: "I'll prepare for my race tomorrow; I'm too busy with life today," will fall short of winning an Olympic medal.

This is why Jesus says the door into heaven is so narrow. "*Many,*" He says, "*will seek to enter (the narrow door) and will not be able.*" Why not? Because so many think that the door which is open today will still be open tomorrow.

Jesus' words in our text are clear and definite. "*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...He will say, 'I do not know you...'*" The day is coming when the time of grace will be over. Those who do not avail themselves of that grace today will be the ones weeping and gnashing their teeth tomorrow.

This is what Jesus means when He says, "*Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.*" Those who are first are those who are close to the kingdom; those who have all the means of salvation available to them. There is a church where they are able to come, sit, listen, and receive. There is Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. There is a pastor who preaches Christ, who teaches the truths of Law and Gospel, who forgives the sins of those who are repentant. Those who are first have these means of salvation near to them. These means are readily available.

But some of these, says Jesus, who are first will be last. Some people have all the means of salvation, but fail to make full use of them, and they are lost. They will be last. They will be standing outside when the door is shut.

“Oh, I’m not worried,” some say, “I have faith.” Forget what you think you have, and use what God makes available to you today. You have a church. You have a pastor. You have the Word and the Sacraments. You are those, therefore, who are first. All these means are available to you. Now is the time of grace. Repent where you have failed to make full use of what God has put before you and begin, by His strength, to fully use His means of salvation.

There are some people who are last who will be first. They were destitute of these means in the beginning, but the moment they get them, they make full use of them. They were not raised in the church. Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, the word of the Gospel - were not near to them. They were last. But these precious souls - some of them - have now been given these means of salvation and they love them, they take advantage of them, they desire them and use them fully. It is such a joy to care for these dear souls; to give them the grace of God in full measure.

Perhaps you have seen before and after pictures of animals who were destitute and then were adopted as pets. The before pictures are heart-wrenching. These animals are malnourished. Their sides are caved in. Some have open sores. They are filthy. Their heads hang down, dejected, forlorn. But the after pictures are heart-warming. These same animals, usually dogs and cats, are well fed, clean, healthy. Their heads are raised up in confidence. They are full of energy, and love for their owners. These animals remind me of those who were last but are now first; who did not have the Gospel in the beginning, but now have it, make use of it, and are richly blessed through it.

When Jesus spoke the words of our text, it says He was going to Jerusalem. He was heading to the cross to be last for you. We see Him on the cross destitute, forlorn, His sides caved in, open sores cover His body. He is filthy, bearing all of our sinful stains. His head hangs down. He is despised, rejected. He is the classic “before” picture.

Jesus is last so that you are put first. God now, for Jesus’ sake, adopts you, through Baptism, into His family. He cleans your sinful stains with the blood of Christ. He heals your open wounds with the Gospel. He feeds you with Jesus’ own Sacrament. He lifts your head up high giving you confidence in His grace and joy in His love for you.

Whatever you have been, and wherever you have come from, it is not too late for you. The narrow door of repentance is here now. The means of salvation are put before you. Here is Christ who forgives you; all of you. No sin is too ugly. No heart is too wretched. It does not matter how awful your before picture was. Your after picture is beautiful, for you are clothed with Christ, completely forgiven.

Some of you who are hearing this sermon, or who will read it, were at one time last. But now with joy you grasp the Gospel of Christ. You love the means of salvation. Some of you had been first, but then you put yourself last by walking away from God’s Word and Sacraments. You neglected the means of salvation. You stopped striving to enter the narrow door. But through repentance, God has brought you back; and you know that you are not immune to the danger of falling away; and so it is your daily prayer that God keeps you steadfast in Christ; that He keeps, within you, a love and desire for His Word and Sacrament. And this He will do. Because of His great mercy poured out to you, His love and desire is to keep you always near to Him; always first, as His adopted ones in Christ Jesus. Amen.