

How do you get better at throwing baseballs? There's no substitute for getting out there and actually doing it. How do you get better at Math? Same thing. You have to do it. Without putting work in, it is unlikely that anything will change for the better.

This is also true with God's Word. God's Word doesn't work like so-called magic spells, where, with the saying of the magic words—poof!—things fall into place. The Scriptures themselves talk about God's Word requiring meditation and wrestling. Meditation means thinking about something over and over. Wrestling would be when we don't like something the Bible says. That's okay, so long as we don't proceed to ignore it. Instead, think about it. Struggle with it.

If we won't put the effort in, it is unlikely we will grow. Even if we were to read the whole Bible in a superficial way, it wouldn't do us much good. It would be like reading a math textbook cover to cover without ever doing any of the exercises. Would you be much better at Math?

Our Gospel reading today presents us with some thoughts that we might wish to skip over. It might be like a math problem, which we have no idea how to solve. With one glance we say, "I don't get it," and wish to put it out of mind. I can see why someone might do that with Jesus's words today, because he speaks in ways that we are not accustomed to.

First of all, he answers the question of whether few will be saved by essentially saying, **"Yes, few will enter the narrow door."** Many will eventually *want* to enter that door, but they won't be able to. The door is the door to heaven.

Another disturbing element is that Jesus is personal about the door. The door doesn't just happen to be shut as though it were an impersonal force of nature. The master of the house has arisen and shut the door. Those who are on the other side are in that predicament because God has put them there.

Then there is a conversation where Jesus uses the word "you" over and over. **"You will begin to stand outside and to knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'" "Depart from me, you workers of evil!" "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets will be there, but you yourselves will be cast out!"**

By using the word "you" Jesus wants us to take these words seriously and personally. Imagine, according to Jesus's words, you being locked out and saying: **"Jesus, open to us!"** But he says, **"I don't know you."** But we say, **"Yes you do! You know us. We ate and drank with you. We heard your teaching."** **"I don't know you. Go away you workers of evil."** That is horrible to imagine.

Did you come to church hoping to entertain horrible thoughts? Probably not. Should we just skip it like a math problem? There's a cost to doing that. You won't learn anything. To skip over stuff like this is to remain ignorant.

But that's not the worst of it. If you take your relationship with God seriously at all you will secretly harbor doubts and resentments having heard what he has said. Why does he bring up stuff like that? I don't like that stuff. I don't like hearing that "few" will go to heaven. I much prefer the pleasant picture of Christianity I have in my heart. The Christianity I love is attractive, accessible, and anybody can do it.

This is where we can probably learn something. Those sentiments are understandable and have a kind of attractiveness about them, but they are not the religion Jesus teaches. Being pleasant or easy isn't the main thing. Consider our primary symbol as Christians, the cross. What is the cross? It is an instrument of torture and death. How did the cross come about? It happened because evil doers wanted to have their way, and Jesus told them they were wrong, so they figured out a way to be done with him. "Nail him to the cross. Problem solved." That was evil, except from the perspective of the evil doers who did it. They thought they were just being practical and solving problems.

Evil can be that way. It can wear masks so that it looks different from what it really is. It can be minimized. Abusers often tell their victims that what they have done is no big deal. Evil can be regarded as inevitable, as a part of life: That's just how power works, or that's just how money works. We are taught in countless ways not to get upset about evil.

This is to the advantage of those who want to do evil. The last thing an evil doer wants is for anybody to call them out on it. This is essentially what Jesus did, and they hated him for it. Same thing with John the Baptist. He told those with power and authority that they were wrong. They didn't repent. They threw him in prison, chopped off his head, and put it on a platter.

The worldly wise, those who know how to coexist with evil, would never make mistakes like this. Why stick your neck out if all you're going to get in return is punishment? It seems much more sensible and advantageous to cooperate with those who do evil, or at least not call them to account. This is obviously not noble or courageous, but at least you won't get in trouble. You might even be rewarded according to that old saying: You scratch their back; they'll scratch yours.

This sleazy but comfortable way of living is exactly what is being critiqued by Jesus's words today. What Jesus teaches us is that evil will not be allowed to go on forever. Judgment is coming. The door will be shut. What seemed like it was advantageous—doing evil, cooperating with evil, keeping your head down—will prove to be disadvantageous because you will be on the wrong side of the door. On the other hand, that which seemed crazy—fighting evil, getting people with power and authority mad at you, suffering the inevitable consequences that come from that—will be proven to have been wise. They will be on the right side of the door with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets.

That door is narrow. It's hard to enter. Why is that? Again, it's because evil is real. Evil has power. Evil rewards you for doing what is wrong, and it punishes you for doing right. If you make your peace with evil, then it will leave you alone—at least somewhat. But if you resist, you will have a fight on your hands. When you see Jesus's words in this light, it is easy to see why there would be few who struggle to enter the narrow door. Most do not want to fight. They don't want to get hurt.

Jesus's message naturally brings the question to each one of us: Whose side are you on? Are you one of the few or are you one of the many? Do you want to be Jesus's disciple or do you want to operate by the rules that prop up and reward this evil world?

I urge you to be one of the few. As Peter said at Pentecost, "**Save yourselves from this crooked generation!**" How might you do that? First of all, repent. Change your ways; change your mind.

Secondly, believe in Jesus the Christ. He is God's Son who has been sent to destroy all the evil works of the devil. Thirdly, if you have not been baptized, get yourself baptized. If you have been baptized, then remember what that means.

As the apostle says, "You've died to this world, so that you may be raised with Christ as someone quite new and different." This old world with all its cruelty, sorrow, meanness, lies, abuse, corruption, oppression—what have you—is passing away. The rich and powerful of this world are sitting on a pile of stuff that's perishing. You are someone who has passed and is passing with Jesus through death into life.

Not only has God given you life, you can be an agent for good to give life to others. Let me explain a bit: You know what makes life really stink, what makes it sad and painful. It's when people lie about you, or reject you, or ignore you, or laugh at you, or sneer at you. There are countless more examples. Do you know what makes life much more tolerable? Being loved. Being accepted. Being forgiven. Being celebrated. You can quit doing the former things and start doing the latter things! You can be someone who heals instead of wounds.

Doesn't that make the choice clearer? To be sure, it is still going to be a struggle to enter that narrow door. Evil will always try to convince us that it is inevitable and invincible and so we might as well get on board, but it isn't more powerful than Jesus.

This is another side to that symbol of ours—the cross. It is not just a symbol of torture and death. It is also a symbol of resistance, fighting, and the overcoming of evil. It is a symbol of victory.

Just as you don't learn math by reading about it, or baseball by watching it on TV, so also we do not enter the kingdom by wishing it were easy. We enter by following Christ, who teaches us to repent and believe in him. You know what he is like. He is good, not evil. He is not an eagle-eyed inspector, ready to pounce the moment you mess up. Try! If you fumble and fail he will pick you up, dust you off, and say, "Keep going." Life with Jesus awaits. Grab hold with both hands.

