

January 23, 2005



One At A Time

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Luke 13:22-24

[Jesus] went on his way through towns and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. And some one said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And [Jesus] said to them, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

I remember the first time I went down to Buffalo to the new baseball field. It was back when it first opened, back when it was called Pilot Field. I drove over to U.B., parked my car for free, and took the subway down town. When I got off the subway car on Main Street and looked across the parking lot at the stadium, the front entrance was right in front of me. What a sight it was! It was large and inviting. It looked big enough for hundreds of people to walk right in all at once.

But when I got to the ball park, what a surprise. That wide and inviting entrance had narrowed down to a small two-foot wide turnstile. From a distance, I thought hundreds of people could walk right in; but when I got there, I found out that all those people had to squeeze down to single file so they could go through the gate... one at a time.

The opening was wide and inviting, but the gate was narrow. There was even a man there yelling at me, telling me to hold my own ticket.

It seems to me that's the way Jesus described the gate to the Kingdom of God.

From a distance, the gate appears wide and inviting.

From a distance, the gate looks open to everybody.

From a distance, the gate seems to be big enough to handle a great, big crowd.

But **up close**, the gate is narrow.

Up close, you have to enter one at a time.

Up close, you have to hold your own ticket in your hand.

Back in 1992 there was an important political event here. Ten candidates for president all came to Western New York for a debate at Shea's Buffalo Theater. You had to have a ticket to get in. I wanted to go.

I called up Doug Jayne. He said he'd be glad to help out. The next day, Doug handed me a ticket. He also warned me to get there early. "The ticket doesn't guarantee admission," he said. "Once the place is full, they'll close the doors on you," he said.

The day of the debate, I got there early. Unfortunately, so did a whole lot of other people. Franklin Street was packed full of ticket-holders. I found a place in the crowd and stood there waiting, ticket in hand. When the door finally opened, the crowd surged forward. With every step I took, I thought, "Will I get in? Will there be room for me? will I make it through the gate before the place is full?"

It's no fun being one in a crowd that's squeezing together, pushing forward, heading for one small opening. That can be scary. I imagine you've experienced it.

Back in the glory years of the Bills, back in the Super Bowl years, Janet and I went with Bob and Winifred Schasel to a championship game down in Orchard Park. We got there early, before the gates opened. We were all standing there outside the gates waiting. We were four out of thousands milling around, hopeful and happy, shivering in the cold and snowy January chill.

But when the gates opened, that friendly crowd became an anxious, pushing, surging mass. We got squeezed together, unable to move unless the crowd around moved. We almost couldn't breathe until we finally got to the turnstiles, showed the man our tickets and were allowed through the gate; and we had to do it... one at a time.

The worst time I've ever had was at the presidential inauguration a dozen years ago. Even back then, before the terrorist acts, before the heightened security measures, before our soldiers were sent to war; we still had to go through check points and ticket checks... one at a time - before we could get out onto the lawn of the Capital. Everything was fine until after the ceremonies. It was then when things got bad.

After the ceremonies were over, that crowd of happy politicians, that group of well-heeled donors, and the few common folk like me who were lucky to get in - it was then when the crowd became a mob.

Everybody was rushing to get home, or get to their parties, or get to the rest rooms. A quarter of a million people rushed out to get back through the gates and out onto the streets all at once. Janet, Ian, and I had to fight our way through the tightly packed crowd, scale a wall, and find a little bit of green space where we could wait in safety until that surging mob thinned out.

Do you think the rush to get into the Kingdom of God will be like that? Will there be hundreds, thousands, even millions of people lined up, waiting? Will they all surge forward at once, squeezing together, intent on getting through that gate one at a time? What do you think?

Jesus seems to be saying that's the way it will be. He also said that a lot of people who try to get in won't be allowed inside because there's something wrong with their ticket.

- Maybe the ticket they got is counterfeit,
- maybe it's out of date,
- maybe it belongs to somebody else.

Maybe they were so busy pushing their way to the front of the line that they forgot to purchase a ticket in the first place.

Most people have never even considered the fact that the door to the kingdom just might be closed to them. Most people count on heaven being open to everyone. They harbor the mistaken idea that God is just an old softy who will overlook their sins.

They're betting eternity on the hope that their behavior won't have a thing to do with the price of admission. They're wagering their futures

- that it's not necessary to live good lives,
- that they don't need to study the scriptures,
- that they don't have to pray regularly,
- that it's not vital to attend church,
- that they don't have to be generous with their time, talents, and treasures.

All the while, they suppose

- that an occasional good thought,
- that a once-in-a-while good deed,

- that a trip to church on Christmas or Easter,
- that a sporadic cozy feeling in their hearts about God -
- they think that's enough.

I think a lot of people are in for a surprise!

Jesus said if you want to get into heaven, if you want to enter the Kingdom of God, if you want to be saved - you have to "*strive to enter the narrow door.*"

Jesus said you have to *strive* to get in. That's a pretty strong word. "Strive" comes from the same root word from which we get the word "agony." Do you suppose Jesus meant that you just might have to go through agony before you can get into heaven?

It was true for him. Why shouldn't it be true for you, too?

You've lived long enough to know that sometimes life is agony. You know that the good things don't come easily or cheaply.

A fan came up to the great pianist Paderewski and gushed, "You're a genius!" Paderewski looked at her and said, "Before I was a genius, I was a drudge." He went on to say that if he missed practice one day, he would notice it. If he missed practice two days, the critics would notice it. If he missed practice three days, his family would notice. And if he missed practice four days, the audience would notice it.

You know it's true: the road to success is almost always paved with hours upon hours of drudgery - that day after day practicing, that agonizing repetition of doing the same old thing over and over again until you can do it right.

Jesus said, "*the door is narrow.*" He said you have to "*strive*" to get in.

I don't know about you, but I don't want my Christian life to be hard work. I want it to be comfortable. I want it just to come naturally. I want to glide into the Kingdom. So I don't like it when I hear Jesus saying that it's hard work, that it's drudgery, that it's agony.

There's an old Christian hymn that begins with the words, "The Son of God goes forth to war..." and it ends with the words, "O God, to us may grace be given to follow in their train."

If I was going to sing that hymn, I'd change the end. I'd prefer to sing, "O God, to me may grace be given to follow *on the* train."

Yep! That's how I want to get to heaven. I want to ride on the train. I want to go first class and ride in style. The problem is, there's no train stop for heaven.

The Christian life is a journey all right, but it's one you've got to make on foot! You've got to be on your way to heaven every day of your life, heading in that direction no matter what you're doing. You may get worn out. You may stumble and fall. You may get hurt along the way. You may think you'll never make it. But, it's something you've got to do for yourself.

You won't get into heaven because your mother was the greatest Christian you ever knew. You won't get to heaven because your grandfather was on the church's building committee. You won't get to heaven because your wife is a saint.

The only way to get there is on your own two feet.

Jesus said "*the gate is narrow*" that leads to the Kingdom of God, and you've got to walk there all by yourself.

And when you get there, St. Peter's going to want to see your ticket!

Two women were talking. Alice turned to Faye and said, "Faye, your husband is such a wonderful man." Faye answered, "But Alice, you don't have to live with him!"

It's all those years of intimate experience with a person - not the outward appearances - that determine the kind of man or woman a person really is. God knows you intimately. He knows your thought and your ambitions. He knows your motivations and your secret desires. He is the one to whom your heart is open, all your desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.

And it is out of His intimate knowledge of you, that God will decide whether or not your ticket is worth the price of admission into heaven!

When it comes to heaven, you don't need to worry about what your daddy thinks, or what your wife thinks, what the boss thinks, or even what the neighbors think. What should be on your mind is what God thinks about you. It's His judgment that counts. Don't count on Him being the old softy you always thought He was.

The day is coming when you'll make your way through the crowd. You'll finally make it to the head of the line, and you'll see that narrow

gate in front of you. There you'll be, standing at the gate, all by yourself, holding your shabby, worn, and torn ticket in your hand. Will you get in?

Did you strive hard enough?

Did you do what was right?

Were you the person you should have been?

The day is coming when Jesus will whisper in your ear, "*This night your soul is required...*" [Luke 12:20]

Are you ready? Based on the intimate knowledge God has about you, will you get in?

Jesus said, "*the gate is narrow.*" The road is hard. Are you ready?