

OPENING THE DOOR?  
LUKE 13:18-30

Imagine you are the pilot of the BA flight from London to Edinburgh; you're coming in to land; where do you land? You can't just bring the plane down anywhere, not on the grass, not in Princes St, not outside your front door; you have to bring the plane down on the runway and the runway is well-defined for you; there are white lines on the tarmac and you need to land the plane inside these white lines; at night, the runway lights show you these same limits.

Imagine that you are playing Masters golf this weekend; you're trying hard to win the green jacket for the first time and there is lots of effort going into getting yourself to the top of the leaderboard. But, like every sport, there are rules and limits. It only counts for you to score once your ball is in the hole; you can't hit it onto the green and say 'that's near enough; let's go to the next hole!' You actually have to put the ball in the hole for it to count towards your score.

Imagine, you are a financial adviser for one of the big banks or a building society; someone comes to you looking for a mortgage and says 'I'm looking for a really good interest rate; can you give me 2% over 50 years'; or on the other hand, someone else comes in and wants to deposit some money and open a new account with you and they say 'I'm looking for a really good rate of interest on my money; what about 20%'. Neither works, or if second one does, tell me and I'll come and invest, unless you're Northern Rock.

The point of all of these pictures is that there are limits to all kinds of things in life. Pilot of plane is limited in where he can land; it has to be on the runway, normally; the golfer is limited in way that he/she can win the tournament, it has to be by putting the ball into the hole (and every sport is has the same kinds of goals); financial advisers have limits to the deals they can offer clients, limited by the rates set by the banks etc. it is part and parcel of life that we have limits on the way we behave; some of these limits are imposed on us – we call them laws; others are cultural norms, ways in which people normally behave and there is a certain pressure not to walk outside these cultural norms; that can be peer pressure, or society's pressure and rebelling against that can be costly.

Jesus talks about limits in Luke 13; we are not always comfortable with limits when talking about the gospel and God and faith, because there is a feeling around now that limits are a bad thing! We should be able to do our own thing; we should be able to pic'n'mix our religion to suit ourselves; even if we are not really keen on the commitment that Jesus looks for, we still want the benefits of being attached, no matter how loosely. Well, if you are looking for Jesus to support that attitude, you are in for a surprise today; He doesn't! He is the One who talks about limits; He is the One who talks about a narrow door.

We begin with an open door: "*make every...*" (13:24) This saying comes in answer to a question about how many people will be saved – "*Lord are...*" (13:23) but Jesus turns a question about numbers into an answer about opportunities. 'The Door is open and you must go through it!' 'Make every effort' suggests that this is not something half-hearted; the same word was used for taking part in the Games, competing in the ancient world's equivalent of the Olympics; taking part and winning medals takes a great deal of effort and commitment. It is also the word from which our word 'agonise' comes. So, says, Jesus, 'be committed to going through the narrow door.' He does not mean that we merit a place in God's kingdom by the deeds we do, but He does mean that our attitude to faith should be whole-hearted in our commitment.

The key to the door is our attitude to Jesus Himself. 'What do you think of Jesus Christ?' I mentioned earlier the story of the woman being healed in the synagogues on the Sabbath: at the end of that story, we see 2 very different attitudes to Jesus. "When He..." (13:17) There were some, who were delighted at what He did and said and we have to think that they were taking it all to heart and doing the very things that Jesus was teaching them to do. But there was also another group, who thought what Jesus was doing and saying was all wrong and they were left with egg on faces because of His answers to their objections. There are other ways in which this attitude is seen and described in chapter 13:

- At very end of Chapter Jesus says: "O Jerusalem..." (13:34) The people were not willing to respond because they were not open to listen to Jesus; they refused to accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord and their refusal meant that they closed the door on themselves.

- We are left to feel that Herod has passed the point of no return.

- The Jews claimed that simply because of their blood relationship with heroes of faith like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob they would be in, that they had some kind of claim on God's kingdom as if by right, simply because of who and what they were.

- Others said "We ate..." (13:27) They had a 'nodding acquaintance' with Jesus. They were in a crowd once when He passed by; they heard Him preach once and thought it was mildly interesting; they were spectators of the Kingdom rather than believers.

All of these places show people who have not reacted with whole-hearted faith to Jesus, but have somehow thought, for different reasons, that they didn't need to react to Jesus at all and it wouldn't matter if they didn't; they had other claims on God! Jesus says, quite clearly, that door is open, but narrow; there are limits - the key to going through the door is their attitude to Jesus Himself.

Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed and while it is set alongside the parable of the yeast and they are the same in that they are both small things that have a big finish, the point of the two parables is different. 'The Kingdom of God is like' - means 'this is what happens when God is at work'. So when God is at work, "It is..." (13:19) Here is a small seed that is planted in the ground and grows and grows until it becomes a huge bush that birds can perch on quite safely. The point of the story is its end result - small beginnings, huge bush! The Kingdom of God began in a small way, with one man, Jesus; then He told others the gospel and they believed and so there were twelve disciples and then some others came; then Church was born and on day of Pentecost thousands believed, till 2000 years later the Church of Jesus extends across almost every nation and people-group on the planet and millions upon millions of people follow Jesus today, not to count those who have followed Him in the past and have died. This is a huge result; they have found the open door and have come in; they have found Jesus to be their life, hope, salvation and have come through the door of faith.

It still works: we read the story of the jailer in Philippi. He would be a rough, tough man; an ex-soldier probably; he had perhaps been given this job in his retirement, looking after prisoners for the Romans in the colony town of Philippi. Then one night, two prisoners are brought in who are Christians; they had been beaten and the jailer is told to guard them carefully. At midnight, these two men are singing hymns of all things; they don't seem too bothered to be in prison; then there is an earthquake and all the cell doors are blown open; the jailer naturally thinks that everyone will have escaped and comes down to see, but no - the prisoners are all still there. He said to Paul and Silas (the names of these Christian missionaries) "Sirs, what..." (Acts 16:30,31) The story ends "The jailer..." (16:34) Here is another person, another family, coming through the open door into the kingdom, coming through the door of faith in Jesus and they found that Jesus is their hope, help, salvation.

'As (Jesus) goes about His mission, He is holding open the gate of the kingdom and urging people to enter it.' (Wright) The Church's mission is exactly the same; we are still holding open the door of the kingdom and urging people to enter it. The key to going through the door is still the same – 'what do you think of Jesus Christ?' Our task, as Church, is to keep that door open for everyone; it is not our job to close that door on anyone; it is not for us to decide who is 'in' who is not; that God's job! Our job is to keep that door open and to persuade people that Jesus is good, that He is worthy of faith, that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. We are not in the business of selling ourselves; our mission is not to persuade more and more people to come to our Church, though that would be nice; our business is to show people what Jesus is like so that they believe Him. There is a statue in Boston of a man called Phillips Brooks, famous partly because he wrote 'O Little town of Bethlehem' but more significantly perhaps he was also bishop of Boston; the statue shows him standing on a plinth with the figure of Christ behind him, His hand on Brooks' shoulder; Brooks knew that his job was to represent Christ to the people he met, wherever he met them.

Let me give you an example: our Friday afternoon children's club is great fun; there are about 20 children there every time we run it, though over the year we have had 35/40 children pass through our doors. Very few of these children come to Church on Sundays and few, if any, have started to come to Church on Sunday as a result of Rock Solid. So it is a success or a failure? If our mission is to get people into Church, it has failed; but if our mission is to introduce children to Jesus and to God's kingship and tell them stories of Jesus and how to live by faith, then it has done that and will continue to do that. It will surprise us, at the last day, who is in, who has come through the open door; there will be more than we know. *"Indeed there..." (13:30)* The Jews thought they had a mortgage on the kingdom, their place was assured and that all the people they hated would be well-excluded, but Jesus has already said that His kingdom will extend to all nations, that people from every corner of the planet will be 'in' – the last people the Jews wanted!

The door is open. Jesus offers a place in the kingdom of God for us, a place of grace, blessing, hope, love, forgiveness; He offers us the great blessing of having Jesus as Lord, of God as King of our lives. The door is open. Unless life is just a game, it is possible to stroll past that door and miss it! It is possible to wait and wait and wait until it is too late and the door be closed for us! It is possible to think that the limits Jesus sets don't matter, that they don't apply to us and we'll get in through some other door. The door is open and the key to the door is 'what do you think of Jesus Christ?' There will come a time when that door will be closed and it will be too late for faith, the days of grace will be over, the day of salvation will be passed. But it is still open now; now is still the day of salvation; but it takes effort and commitment to go through, the effort and commitment of faith in Jesus Christ; we must go through that door ourselves and believe in Lord Jesus; we also have to hold that door open for others and show others Jesus and His grace. Jesus came to hold open the door to God's kingdom; we should go through and hold that door open for others.