

A Narrow but Open Door

Luke 13:22-35

Introduction

Here's the headline of a news article that appeared in the Straits Times on February 12, 2024. "Feud over ex-Sarawak governor's estate and health shines spotlight on family's wealth." Let me just read the first few sentences. "Uncertainty over the current whereabouts of Sarawak's ailing former leader Taib Mahmud represents the latest twist in a feud between his blood relatives and current wife. Internal conflict among the Taibs surfaced publicly in mid-2023. Children of the then state governor sued their Syrian-born stepmother over a disputed transfer of 50 million shares in a family-controlled firm that has long been the beneficiary of various government projects in the eastern Malaysian state, dating back to when Tun Taib was chief minister from 1981 to 2014. On Feb 3, news – backed by police reports from his children, doctor and lawyer – circulated that Mr Taib, 87, had been taken from a hospital in Sarawak's capital Kuching by his wife, Toh Puan Raghad Kurdi Taib, 44, against medical advice and without the knowledge of her stepchildren. A few lines later, "They appeared to be vindicated on Feb 10 when Inspector-General of Police Razarudin gave an update that Mr Taib was in fact admitted to a private hospital in Kuala Lumpur."

I'm not sure what the average response to this news article is like. Some of us may find it entertaining to see that such a family drama plagues even the most notable families. Others might think it as a fitting situation given how our former governor has chosen to handle his finances. What I find the most interesting though, is to observe the insecurity and desperation that creeps up within a wealthy person's family whenever they are near the end of their life. People begin to panic and scramble for assurance. What if they lived their lives thinking that they had access to

some inheritance, some right or some privilege only to realize that they did not? What if this future that they had dreamed of for themselves and for their children and grandchildren were in total jeopardy? In our passage today, Jesus addresses a similar kind of assumption but with far greater stakes. He lists the tragedy of being so close to the prize only to miss out. Please turn with me to Luke 13:22-35. Luke 13:22-35. Having introduced that the kingdom will start out small but grow into greatness, Jesus moves on to talk about how or more precisely, what kind of people will enter the kingdom. Using a parable that's unique to Luke, Jesus warns Israel to respond to him before it's too late.

I. A Narrow Door (13:22-30)

We begin in verse 22 where we are told that Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. On the journey there, someone asked him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Earlier in Luke 12, Jesus had said that the ones who deny him before men will be denied before the angels of God while the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (vv. 9-10). Then in Luke 13:3-5, Jesus warned that all would perish like the Galileans whom Pilate had murdered unless they repent. It's no surprise that people are beginning to sense that salvation is difficult. Therefore, like a "kiasu" student who wants to know how many people scored an A in the exam, we find someone asking Jesus whether there will be many or few people in the kingdom. Jesus, of course, does not answer the question directly. Instead, he shows that those who thought they were inside will find themselves outside.

Verse 24, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." First, Jesus describes the entrance to the kingdom as a narrow door. Not only is there one right way to enter God's kingdom only, many will not find it. What does Jesus mean when he tells people to *make every effort* to enter through the narrow door

and that many will *try* to enter? Is he suggesting that we can make ourselves good enough or worthy of entering the kingdom? At first glance, that's how we might understand this verse. After all, many of us, whether intentional or not, have come to see our walk with Christ with great emphasis on our devotion. When we first hear the gospel, we sense our lostness and our need for salvation so we give our lives to Jesus. Yet after that, the Christian life functions very much like a gym membership. We subscribe to a personal trainer, in this case, Jesus, who spurs us to pious worship and moral living, but we must lift our weights to keep up with the program.

However, v25-26 indicate that Jesus does not see human effort as keys to the kingdom. He makes it clear it is *not* our actions that grant us salvation. "Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'" Notice the appeal of those who were denied entry to the house. "We *ate* with you, we *lived* with you, we *know* you!" Much like the godfathers or great aunties who come out of the woodwork to congratulate a lottery winner, these people rush to claim a relationship with the master of the house. Here is an attempt to associate with a successful person based on *familiarity*. "I changed your diapers!" Here is an attempt to redeem benefits based on heritage and genetic origin, "Your parents and I go way back!"

The owner of the house, Jesus, denies ever knowing these people. Verse 27, "But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from.'" Simply sharing meals with Jesus, sitting under his teaching, or being acquainted with him is not enough to gain entry into God's kingdom. Outward contact with Jesus counters for nothing. I'm aware that there are plenty of cults in our city who use guilt to get people to attend their Bible studies. They turn to passages like John

10:27-28 where it says Jesus knows the sheep of his voice to say, “if you don’t join our meetings, Jesus won’t know you!” They quote Matt 7:21 where Christ taught, “only the one who *does* the will of my Father will be in heaven” to instill fear and a lack of assurance in people. Granted, Christians are not exempt from confusing our salvation with our identity too. Do you believe you are saved because you grew up in a Christian household reading picture Bibles and memorizing the Lord’s Prayer? Do you base your identity on being part of a denomination with a rich history like BEM or on attending a church with wonderful music and teaching like KEC? Jesus says that entry to the kingdom is exclusively through the narrow door He offers, or there is no entry at all.

Doubling down, Jesus calls those who try to associate with him through their actions as “evildoers” or literally, “the unrighteous.” Verse 27, “Away from me, all you evildoers! There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” The fitting ending for those excluded from God’s promise is to face the horrors of eternal punishment in a place with weeping and gnashing of teeth. These verses make it clear that Jesus is specifically speaking to Jews who believe that they have an automatic entry into the kingdom because of their heritage. Chapter 10 of the *Mishnah Sanhedrin*, a well-known Jewish document states, “All of the Jewish people, even sinners and those who are liable to be executed with a court-imposed death penalty, have a share in the World-to-Come.”

The *Mishnah Sanhedrin* is not totally wrong. By their birth, the children of Israel *were* ideal candidates for inclusion in the kingdom. Yet unlike the faithful patriarchs of Abrahaham who placed their faith in Yahweh, the people of Jerusalem had assumed that they would by default be

included in the kingdom. The irony is that the ones who were near would not be allowed to enter, while the ones who were far away would have a seat at God's banquet. The religious elites: Pharisees, scribes, lawyers, and priests will be left out while the outcasts: the tax collectors, sinners, the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind will be welcomed. Even Gentiles, people who were excluded from the kingdom perhaps even up to the point of Cornelius' conversion, are also described as being admitted to the house of the Lord. Jesus has come to reverse the order. Those who are last will be first, and first who will be last. In his order, one's admission into the kingdom of God is neither based on one's familiarity with the master nor on one's national identity but on his provision alone.

In these verses, Jesus masterfully changes the nature of the question from a theoretical to a practical one. Jesus says it is God who ultimately decides how many and who he wants to save. We should be more concerned about our own areas of accountability. As one commentator says, "The question "will the saved be few?" has turned to "will the saved be *you*?" Perhaps the one who asked the question at the beginning had also assumed that he has a place in the kingdom already. He might have also thought that by traveling with Jesus and by sitting under Christ's teaching, he has won a ticket to heaven. Friends, how about you? What makes you sure you will have a place in God's kingdom? One of the tragedies in life is that no matter how many friends you make, you will face death yourself. When that day comes, how do you know that your soul will be with Christ? Is it because you've lived up to the expectations that others have given you? That you've been a good son, a good husband, a good father? Or is it because you have followed your heart's desire and lived as you please? That you no longer have regret? What gives you peace and assurance? Whether you've lived a life of self-denial or self-fulfillment, Jesus says neither leads you to heaven. We either enter through Christ or we do not enter at all.

II. An Open Invitation (13:31-35)

Despite Jesus' warnings, the Jews still do not respond to his message. In this next section, Jesus targets his controversial message and ministry directly at the Jews. We read in verse 31, "At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." For the first time in all of Luke, the Pharisees directly confront Jesus in public. They tell Jesus that Herod of Antipas, the one who had killed John the Baptist, is now coming to arrest him. Make no mistake, the Pharisees were not expressing concern for Jesus' safety. On the contrary, they have long despised Jesus and his teachings on repentance and the kingdom. Thus, the threat of Herod presented an avenue for them to get rid of Jesus without assuming direct responsibility. They wanted to chase Jesus out of Jerusalem and neutralize his influence without dirtying their own hands. In fact, they probably expected this threat to work since up to now, Jesus had spent the majority of his time in ministry outside Jerusalem.

Jesus, however, was undeterred. He will complete his mission and nothing can stop him. Verse 32, "He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

Contrary to the expectations and speculation of the Pharisees, Jesus establishes Jerusalem as the key location of his ministry. He will go to the city, face the response that awaits him, and reach his goal on the third day. Of course, it's going to take more than three literal days before Jesus gets to the city. Many more exorcisms and healings still need to happen and he will keep doing so to complete his work, including the one in Luke 14:1-6 where Jesus heals a man suffering from abnormal swelling. When Jesus says he will complete his goal on "the third day", he is

signaling that he is going to save Jerusalem and its people by his death and his resurrection. He will not only bring physical healing but spiritual restoration.

Unfortunately, Jerusalem would respond not just with indifference but with hostility. Let's look at Jesus' lament in verse 34, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Jesus weeps over the city that represents the nation of Israel. Like David who mourned the death of his son, "O my son, Absalom, My son, my son, Absalom!" (2 Sam 18:33), Jesus too mentions the name of the city twice: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem!" Earlier in Luke 10:41, Jesus also did the same when he rebuked Martha's worries. Since the times of the OT, Jerusalem has long rejected its prophets and messengers. Despite God's desire to nurture and protect them, the people have chosen to persist in their sinful and idolatrous lifestyle over heeding God's word.

Jesus then speaks of His desire to gather the nation like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Addressing a primarily Jewish audience, Jesus uses a prevalent imagery of God in the OT: the bird. Deut 31:11 describes God "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft." while Psalm 91:4 writes, "God will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." Through this image, Jesus expresses God's deep desire to care for, nurture, and protect His people. Jesus' entire ministry has been focused on winning the Jews back to himself. Yet the people's stubbornness prevented this gathering and protection. Tragically, Israel has not learned from their past mistakes. They are about to reject and put to death yet another divine messenger.

As a result, the city and the nation are in peril. Alluding to Jeremiah, Israel is described like an empty, desolate house that has been left to its ruin. Since its inception, the greatest threat to Israel was neither hunger nor poverty, but exile. To the city that ignored God's call for justice, to the ones who have abandoned their covenant relationship with God, what awaits them is ruin, destruction, and isolation. Worse, this judgment on the house of Israel will last until they see Jesus again and acknowledge "he who comes in the name of the Lord." As the prophet, Jesus weeps for Israel and calls them back to their covenant relationship with Yahweh. As the Messiah, Jesus brings deliverance to any who would respond to his message and turn to him. Israel must accept Jesus as its deliverer. Until then, the nation stands alone and exposed to dangers. Despite signs of individual and communal Jewish conversions, the NT is clear that Israel has not been fully restored. Even today, the conflict in the Middle East and the sins of homosexuality and religious divide that run rampant in Jerusalem demonstrate how Israel has rejected the Lord.

What does this have to do with us? How does a passage that touches on the stubbornness of Jerusalem and its people speak to us here in Malaysia? In preparing for this sermon, I found it difficult to connect the message of verses 22-30 to that of verses 30-35. How does the former, which emphasizes the way into the kingdom relate to the latter, a lament over Israel? And then, yesterday evening, it finally made sense. In reality, the Jews who presumed that they would be in the kingdom because they are children of Abraham and the Jews in Jerusalem who kill prophets and stone messengers represent two ways of life. The first group believe they do not need Jesus because they've already made it. They already have what it takes to enter the kingdom, namely their identity and their familiarity with the Torah. Meanwhile, the second group believes they do not need Jesus too! They prefer to live in their sin and shut out any word from God. The sin of the first party is spiritual arrogance while the sin of the second group is spiritual lukewarmness.

Conclusion

Friends, the bad news is that the Jews are not the only ones guilty of spiritual arrogance and spiritual lukewarmness. Jesus' words in Luke 13 illustrate the greater human need to be reconciled to God. Just look at our country with its political turbulence, its financial instability and its spiritual corruption. Just look at the moral decline that's happening in our nation.

According to a 2021 survey, 39% of Malaysians were unable or unwilling to identify their sexual orientation, while 12% claimed that they were mostly or equally attracted to the same sex, good for the 2nd highest among Asian countries only below India. Even if we look past the sin of our country and society, all we have to do is look at our private lives. We look at our marriages and the way we repeatedly prioritize our needs over our spouses and hurt them, believing ourselves to be more righteous. We look at our work and the way we allow power struggles and greed to jeopardize our work and cloud our judgment on why we work and who we work for. We look at our life at home and the way we withhold a spirit of humility and service because we are too exhausted. Everywhere we go, spiritual arrogance and spiritual lukewarmness abounds.

What kind of solution does Jesus offer? How does Jesus relieve us of pride and apathy? The answer is in verse 24, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door." Where is this door? What can we do to find it? By the "narrow door", Jesus is of course referring to himself. Friends, perhaps you feel exhausted because you've lived all your life believing you have what it takes to make it. Perhaps you feel lost because you've tried everything and nothing has really worked out. No matter who you are and where you are, Jesus invites you to go to him. And the only reason you and I can find the way to heaven is because Jesus himself went through the narrowest way. There was only one way to bridge the gap between a holy God and sinful humanity, and this way demanded suffering, rejection, and death from the Son of God himself.

Yet Jesus willingly endured the path of the calvary. By his death and resurrection, Jesus opened the door to salvation, a door that was impossible for us to open on our own. The narrow way Christ speaks of isn't about our righteousness (nor is it about our lostness!) but about His unique and singular sacrifice.

And the only response Jesus demands from us is repentance. In Luke 13:22-35, Jesus challenges you and I to abandon our reliance on a merit-based system. In Jesus, the scars that you bear from your past, the mistakes you commit today, and the errors you will make are all paid for and forgiven. Jesus calls us to let go of both spiritual pride and of spiritual apathy. He invites us to trust in His sacrifice and his person completely. He exhorts us to turn away from our sins and embrace the grace He offers. Friends, will you strive to walk the narrow path Jesus has laid out for you? Will you cast your anxieties and burdens on Jesus, the one, true Way to heaven? Will you surrender your autonomy and bow at Jesus' feet? Let's pray.