

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius

A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 21, 2016

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A widespread belief at the time of Christ was that the Messianic Kingdom would be *for Jews only*. I remember how scandalized I was, on my first visit to Virginia in the mid-1950s, to see small little signs outside restaurants that said “*whites only*.” And restroom signs marked “*colored*.” If a ten-year-old boy living in an imperfect world could be offended that way, we can only imagine the consternation and grief of the Son of God. In point of fact the Blessed Lord told one of His parables as a complete reversal of “*Jews only*” policy. Saint Luke was a careful historian. And Luke records Our Lord did not say *all* Israel would be rejected. But the whole point of the parable is that at Judgment Day no privileges, whether national or racial, could replace *personal righteousness*.

First-century Jews had their own version of *The Hymnal 1940*. It was and is *The Book of Psalms*. Had they read it they would have found the Lord’s teaching even in the Psalms. “Away from me, all ye that work iniquity; for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping, the Lord hath heard my petition; the Lord will receive my prayer. All mine enemies shall be confounded and sore vexed; they shall be turned back and put to shame suddenly.” Ps 6:8ff) For those few Jews who were not Biblically literate but followed current events, there was the message of John the Baptist. We are told all Jerusalem had gone out to hear the Baptist. John said, “Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance; and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” (Luke 3:8) There never was a card-carrying exemption from personal righteousness. Not for First-century Jews. Not for 20th Century Catholics. Personal holiness has always been the only tune that is music to God’s ears.

Christ’s parable tells that some get into the Kingdom of Heaven and some do not. The Lord says to all: “Strive to enter at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” Christ does not tell us who the fortunate ones are. He does not give us percentages. He does not give the dimensions of the “strait gate.” Why? In dying for our sins the Lord came to earth to save us and our consciences, not satisfy our curiosity. His answer directs us to what use we may make of the truth He reveals. The Lord says not to ask how many

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will be saved but “*shall I be one of them?*” What must I do to be saved? That is the question He wants us to ask. That is the question He is interested in answering.

Let’s be fair to first-century Jews. They did not have a monopoly on complacency! Most people today think of God as a loving Father. And He is! Christ tells us that. But the Scriptures tell many more things about Our Father in Heaven. And none of it gives the impression Almighty God is some sort of divine sugar daddy! In every part of the Bible the people were very much aware that God’s holiness destroys sin and that they themselves were sinners. The relationship with God always has in it something of the predicament of being a lightning rod in an open field during a thunderstorm! Sin cannot exist in God’s presence anymore that darkness can remain when light fills the room. Light does not choose to destroy darkness. Both being what they are, no decision is necessary. God’s holiness destroys sin because that is what holiness does. And the only thing that prevents destruction is the love of God, which in the fullness of time is revealed fully in His Son.

So many people approach religion in an optimistic, easy-going, I-will-define-it-as-I-like way. The antidote is found in the Lord’s Parable of the Narrow Door Shut. In it Jesus instructed that Heaven may be gained by *striving*. So why ever, for Heaven’s sake, should we not strive for it?