

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
August 25, 2019

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It was a popular and widespread belief in the time of Christ that the Messianic kingdom would be for Jews only. Our Lord Himself had declared “salvation is of the Jews.” But in today’s Gospel at Mass we have a parable of Our Lord which is a *complete reversal* of that belief. Saint Luke is careful in recording Our Lord did not say *all* Israel would be rejected. But the whole point of the passage is that at Judgement Day no privileges, whether national or racial, could ever replace *personal righteousness*.

If those 1st century Jews had bothered to look in the Scriptures they could have found this teaching even in the *Psalms* (6.8f) “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.” And for those who were not Bible readers but followers of 1st century current events, the message of St John the Baptist was similar. “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) Both the *Psalms* and the message of the Baptist were addressed to the Jews. No one ever issued a card-carrying exemption from personal righteousness. Personal holiness is the only tune that is music to God’s ears.

Although Christ’s parable tells us some get into the Kingdom of Heaven and some do not, He does *not* tell us who the fortunate ones are! Rather, the Lord says, “Strive to enter at the straight gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” And Christ’s use of the word “many” does not give us a percentage! Nor is the “strait gate” explicitly defined. Our Lord came to earth to guide our consciences, not satisfy our curiosity! His answer rather directs us to what use we may make of the truth He reveals. He says, in effect: “Ask not how many will be saved but *what must I do to be saved?*” That is the question Christ is interested in answering.

We cannot get comfortable by criticizing 1st century Jews. They did not have a monopoly on complacency! In the parable, the objections of those left outside were absurd. But those excuses are also contemporary. “We have known Christ socially

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and talked about Him at our cocktail parties; we have attended his sermons.” Those sorts of things are no good at all. Many people like to think of God as a loving Father. And He is. Christ Himself tells us that. But the Lord, and all the Scriptures tell us many more things about Our Father in Heaven, and in none of it do we get the impression Almighty God is a divine sugar daddy passing out lollipops to everybody! In every part of the Bible the people were very much aware that God’s holiness destroys sin and they themselves were sinners. The relationship was something of a *predicament*, like being a lightning rod in an open field during a thunderstorm! At Mt Sinai the people were told not to approach the mountain lest they die. Sin cannot exist in God’s presence any more than darkness can continue in a room when you flick on the light switch. Light does not *choose* to destroy darkness. Both being what they are, *no decision is necessary*. God’s holiness, just by what it is, destroys sin, and the only thing that prevents that happening is Christ and His Cross. Well did the ancient Hebrew leaders Moses and Joshua warn the people not to casually enter the covenant relationship with Almighty God, for God is *holy*, and He is a *jealous God*.

The antidote to the optimistic, easy-going, way in which so many people approach religion is found in the Lord’s teaching in what we might title “The Parable of the Narrow Door Shut.” And if Heaven may be gained by striving, as Christ says it may, then *why ever should we not strive for it!*