

The Dinner Party

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[0 : 0 0] So in chapter 13 Jesus says that becoming a Christian is, that is being saved in biblical language or being saved to eternal life and fellowship with God. He said it's like entering through a narrow door. We saw that in chapter 13, and that verse I think comes up chapter 13 and verse 24. No, okay, it's fine, it's on your, there it is, yeah. Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many I tell you will seek to enter and not be able. And that section where Jesus is saying these things is the context for chapter 14 where Jesus goes to a feast, a dinner party with lots of different people. Now we've often taken that verse, I think a lot of people take that verse that Jesus says there in Luke chapter 13 as meaning that narrow there means narrow minded or negatively restrictive or mean spirited, narrow door, whole idea of the demands that Jesus makes in order to follow him. But actually it really simply means that there's only one focus, that's what he means by the narrowness.

There's only one focus that we need to consider when we think about being Christians or at least becoming Christians and then understanding what it means to be a Christian. And he's saying there's one relationship in other words that matters. And he says that and he explains that in verse 25 which we also read, when once the master of the house is risen and shut the door and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door saying Lord open to us and then he will answer I do not know you, I do not know you or where you came from. Knowing Jesus is the key to the focus of the narrowness of the door. And we need to understand what it means to be a Christian is to understand and to know and to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Now that will always mean looking deep into our own selves. It will mean looking into our own heart and what Jesus requires of us as we think about him. Do we acknowledge Jesus in our lives? Do we need him? Do we serve him?

And that's the challenging question that I hope that we can look at for a few moments. Jesus' audience in the chapter we've read from Luke, generally speaking anyway, were an audience who had rejected him, religious Jews, religious lawyers and religious leaders who had rejected Jesus and Jesus is speaking into their rejection and is speaking to them and reminding them that his way was very specific and knowing the way to heaven it was very specific. Basically they said they were good enough for God and he is challenging that and he does so by responding to them in different ways at this dinner party in chapter 14. And it's really significant because it's an ongoing, it's an ongoing challenge to us about our relationship with Jesus Christ, what we understand by it and what we understand he looks for and he gifts us by way of salvation and what it looks like in our ongoing lives.

So chapter 14 verses 1 to 24 is about a dinner party that wasn't heaven. It wasn't like a heavenly dinner party, it wasn't wonderfully fantastic and it wasn't the dinner party that Revelation speaks about, which I'll mention at the end. But it's the setting for his teaching on what it means to understand the narrow way of knowing Jesus. He has four conversations sparked by four different interactions during this meal that he has in this individual's house. It's really good because he's at a feast and three of the four responses he gives speak about feasting. So he's very culturally sensitive, he's very aware of what's happening around about him and he uses what's happening to teach spiritual truths that he knows, particularly the Pharisees of his day would find very difficult. But let's be honest, we will also in many ways find difficult. So think about some of the things he says and consider them for yourself as I must do for myself and then we'll draw one or two conclusions. What it means to enter the narrow way and to know Jesus, what is he saying when he says that in chapter 13?

Well in the first place he's saying you can't take your own self-righteousness with you into your relationship with Jesus. It's too narrow a way and he explains that in chapter 14 in the first six verses where this disabled character comes in and it's like there's a tension in the room as this guy's here, the Pharisees and the religious leaders know he's there and he's in front of Jesus and they're all saying is Jesus going to heal him but it's a Sabbath and he shouldn't heal on the Sabbath and then Jesus heals him and then explains why it's good and right for him to do what he does. And the trouble with the Pharisees, they were trying to trip him up, they were trying to say that they knew more about the Bible and the truth of the Bible as they had it than he did. And they were probably looking down on this disabled individual, this man who was unwell, maybe even have, they maybe even took him in in order to test Jesus. They were suspicious of

[6 : 18] Jesus and of his teaching, we've seen that before in these parables. They prided themselves in being law keepers, good enough for God, religious, upright, worshipers. But they were hugely judgmental of others and they misunderstood the biblical teaching and the laws of God about mercy and justice and truth and even as it revealed itself in Sabbath observance.

They didn't know or love God and they didn't know or love Jesus Christ. Jesus saw this man who was needing healed, Jesus loved him and healed him and they were silenced by the questions and the answers of Jesus. Again, we see the way Jesus acts, very often asking questions and challenging the thinking that they had before acting in mercy. As their hypocrisy is exposed, Jesus, they have nothing to say to Jesus. They were self-righteous, they were trusting in their own religious goodness and they thought that was what would make them accepted by God and would give them a place in heaven. They looked down on Jesus on others who were not like them. Jesus exposes their self-righteousness, their religious goodness as not being what was required to enter the narrow way of salvation.

So that's the first scenario in this dinner party. The second scenario is in verses 7 to 13 where he told a parable because he was watching the way the dinner party was unfolding.

And so he's saying here, you can't take your self-importance with you into your relationship with Jesus Christ because he was observing what was going on. Now the culture of the day was he's speaking into and we have an insight, a little insight here into the culture of the day at these quite public meals or quite public wedding feast. It was different sometimes from the way we do things. But they sat at what was called a triclinium which is a kind of U-shaped table and the most important guests sat at the U end, right at the bottom end of the table. And the table went out on either side and the least significant guests would be at the other end of the table. And he was observing people coming and sitting in the most important places because they were kind of maybe self-importance and they were proud of themselves and they were saying, I'm better than that other person and I have a right to sit at that place in the table. So there was a degree of self-importance that

Jesus speaks into in verses 7 to 11 and he summarizes it by saying, look, if you're going to exalt yourself, you need to be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

[9 : 35] And he's speaking into the narrow door question from the previous chapter and he's reminding them, he's reminding those who were listening and ourselves that we can't come to God with our own self-importance. We don't deserve a place at God's table. We have things back to front. To be in relationship with Jesus Christ and to be part of the everlasting life that He offers is to recognize that the invitation to be in relationship with Him and to sit at His table is in itself a gift and that we have no right to be there and we have no right to be sitting with Him and to be in relationship with Him. We have much to be forgiven and there's no place for us to come and to be in relationship with Jesus Christ with a deep degree of self-importance. So self-importance is challenged here by Jesus.

Now that might be something that keeps you from the kingdom, from Jesus. I'm too important for Jesus or my life is too important for Jesus or it may be for us as Christians that we struggle with the significance of our own lives in comparison with Jesus and we relegate Him. Let's say a little bit more about that later.

The third scenario that we come to is in verses 12 to 14, a shorter section where He speaks to the host who has invited him to the house and He says to him, look when you're inviting someone to a banquet, don't invite all your friends and the important people and everyone else because you'll know they'll invite you back but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Now what He's not saying there is that you can't have your friends round for a meal and He's not saying there that you can't have lots of different people round for food. He's not giving a general principle about who you invite to your house for food. He's speaking again into this narrow door scenario and He's really saying that we can't take the attitude that we have in inviting people to our home sometimes. We can't take that attitude into our relationship with Jesus Christ because what He's exposing here is kind of self-interest. What He's exposing to the host here is you're inviting people to your house for a meal because you know they're going to invite you back and it'll be a quid pro quo. You get an invite, they'll invite you and there's a degree of self-interest in what He's highlighting or exposing here. You know, furthering those who are of the same social, furthering your own relationships because you're inviting those of the same social standing, those who will return the favor or maybe those you want to influence positively in your life. Now He's saying don't take that into your attitude with God and as a means of entering through the narrow door or your relationship with Jesus. Now there's welcoming

God into your life for the wrong reasons, with the wrong motives, maybe to impress Him as some kind of influential friend. I want to say that I belong to Jesus because if I do that and I invite Him into my life then He'll give me what I want. It'll be a quid pro quo. Jesus, I've come to You, I call myself a Christian, so You need to be good to me.

You need to be nice to me. You need to give me a good life because I've given myself to You. Bless me so that I can have an easy life. Now you may say, well, I would never say that. I don't think that, but it wells up sometimes, doesn't it, when things are going badly and we say, what's the game, Jesus? I'm a believer and my life's just gone down the toilet. Things are really poor with me. Why aren't things better? Because I'm a Christian and I've given myself to You. So there is an element sometimes of self-interest in our relationship with God that we feel He is indebted to us as we give our lives to Him. I'll give my life to Him, then God is indebted to me. And that degree of self-interest destroys the recognition of why we need a Savior. So that's the third thing. The last thing here that He says is the last parable. Now I was originally just going to look at that parable, but it really fits into the whole picture of this chapter where it's the last element of why the way is narrow, why we can't go, we can't come to Jesus with our own agenda and with our own thinking. And this is really that we can't, He uses this parable to say we can't take our own self-centeredness into our relationship with Jesus because the way is too narrow to do so. And this is the parable that He speaks to in response to a fellow guest who very boldly says, hey, bless it, it's the one who comes and blesses it, he read in the kingdom of

[14 : 51] God and Jesus then replies to him with this parable. And he talks about a great feast and the invitations have gone out once. And then the second invitation goes to actually bring them to the feast. And all of a sudden the people who had initially been invited make really lame excuses for not coming to the feast. You know, I've bought a field, I need to go and see it. You know, do you think I'll look at a field? You know, in that culture if he bought a field he would have looked at it a long time before he bought it. He wouldn't have bought a field blind, I've bought a field, I better go and look at it. And then I bought a same with five Yoke of Oxen, I need to go and examine them.

Oh, could not wait for a day? And that's the picture that we're being given here. I've married a wife, that's the worst example of all. If you get invited to a feast you take your wife with you. And that's the general idea that Jesus is exposing the poverty of their reasons, because ultimately they didn't really want to be there. And the host wasn't important to them. They liked the idea of being invited, but they really didn't want to go with all these other people to sit at this feast and be there. And he's speaking into that whole idea of being self-centered in a relationship with Jesus and saying, you know, it's easy to kind of, the idea of Jesus being important and his lovely invitation to follow him. But actually when Prush comes to shove, he's not a priority. He's not really important to me in any way. I don't really like being with him and with his people. It's way down my list of pitiful excuses for not being in a relationship with him. In reality, being a follower of Jesus is just far too much work. And I would rather just do the things that I'm doing. Like I was saying to the, you know, what's the classic one today for us? Well, I can't go because I'm dry my hair. It's a really put excuse for me, because I just need to walk out the door and my hair's dry, because there's not much of it. But for some of you, that might be the excuse. And we all kind of use that as a joke. Dry my hair too busy. But it's that kind of thing. Now interestingly, Jesus is talking about good things, you know, material possessions, the means of wealth, five Yoke of Oxen or what a field, married a wife, love and relationships. He's not condemning these things. He's not saying these things are wrong. These are His gifts. These are from God, the good things of life. But what He is saying is saying, you can't make these good things of life the reason for living and ultimate things. You can't make them ultimate. God is the only ultimate person. You can't make them idols. You can't simply live for just the things of this life with no thought for the giver. And He's saying, you can't find ultimate peace and truth and happiness and joy and eternal life from these things. They're good things, they're gifts, but they're not to be worshiped and they're not to be prioritized before God, and they're not to be seen as replacements for God in Jesus Christ. And as He gives that parable, He goes on to really speak about how His original audience, the Pharisees and the Jews, had rejected Him like these invitees, and that they were to go out into all the different places to invite people to come in, and that really is pointing towards the gospel, the extravagant invitation to feast with Him, going out beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles and to the whole world to feast in Him and find true life in Him.

So Jesus answers the question about the narrow way in these four ways in this chapter. Can we just ask to apply that, to take that into our own lives more so? What is God saying to us from this picture, or this interaction between Jesus and the guests at the dinner feast? You know, as Christians, can we just push it aside and say, well, it's not really for us, this is for people who reject Jesus. But what is Jesus saying about the character and the nature of following Him and coming to accept Him as God and Lord? How do we approach our relationship? What are the dynamics in your relationship with Jesus Christ? Do these areas, do they impinge on our understanding of our relationship with Jesus Christ? And how do we present Him to other people? Because Jesus says there's a narrow way to follow

Him, and we have to share that, and the folks at the Herodotus Center need to learn and know and share the challenges of sharing Jesus Christ and what it really means to follow, because we can give people the wrong impression in our lives as well, can't we? But it's a narrow way. So there's two very important pillars that we'll look at very quickly, just the time that I've got left. First, from what He's saying, the narrow way, what does it mean? It means we come to Christ with nothing, okay? That's what He means when He talks about the narrow way of knowing Him. It means we have nothing to offer Him, that's what He's saying. You know, we can't take our self-centeredness, our self-interest, our self-righteousness, our self-importance. We can't take that into the game. We can't take that into the room with Jesus Christ. We need to recognize that there is nothing we can bring that pays for the failure in our lives to love Him perfectly and to love our neighbor perfectly, which is a summary of the law of God, that we are justly condemned, that we have broken these divine laws in our thought process, in our word and in our deed. And we have no hope whatsoever of eternal life or reconciliation with God in our own terms. That's what He's saying in this chapter about the narrow way. There's nothing, nil, zilch, nada, nothing.

There's nothing that we can bring before the living God. We are part of a broken world. We have broken hearts, and death and hell is all that we have and deserve as we look forward without Jesus Christ. Now, that takes us, that's a huge challenge for us. We might know it theologically, but in our own personal lives, because it's a huge blow to our self-centeredness and our pride. So we have, we come to Christ with nothing, we have nothing to offer Him, but at the same time, we come to see the gift that cost Him everything. Okay? So there's glorious King of kings who rightly condemns us, empties himself of his glory, becomes a man, and knows and experiences broken, sorrow, pain, rejection and death, everything that's completely alien to his being, and he dies on a cross in our place. He takes our guilt and he gifts us his innocence. And if we leave our sinful self at the door, that narrow door, with all its baggage and accept him and recognize his great love for us, then we offer him nothing and he gives us everything. He gives us life to the fool, and that's hugely significant.

[22 : 48] So there's a great urgency in our lives, not relegating Jesus to a has-been, and he demands preeminence in our lives. So we come to Christ with nothing. And then the second thing I want to say as a result of this is we live, and this is a challenging truth for us, we live as if we are last in the queue. Chapter 14 and verse 11, at the end of one of these sections he says, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. And then in chapter 13 where we read at the end, it says verse 30, behold, some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last. So we come to Christ with nothing, and then we live like we are last in the queue. Now we need to take that out of here into our daily lives, you know, so that salvation is much more than just a one-off decision. Tick box, amen, or through the narrow gate, amen. It's much more than that because it's a new way of living that turns our life upside down and inside out because it says that Jesus is now first and other people come before me and I'm last in the queue. That's radically overturning what we think. Christ, we say, and Jesus is a great example of this, you will be done at the moment of the deepest, darkest opposition, not my will but yours be done. Christ recognized that great act of obedience and as we come to Him, we put Christ first because not because we can, not because it makes us right with

God but because He's gifted us salvation and so in gratitude He comes first, and our daily battle is to say Christ first, not me first. Now that will come in your career, that will come in the decisions you make in your workplace, the way you respond to people when they're mean and nasty, it's Christ first and then it's me, or then it's others and then it's me. And that's a recalibration for us and it's a lifelong recalibration. So the narrow door is a one-off but it's also a way of living, it's a life. So take this example, an old broken-down water mill for example. It's all broken down, the roof's off it, there's the ivy up the sides, the wooden mill at the side isn't working, the water course has been blocked and it's used as a drinking den, it's used as a bothy or a drug den and there's no lights, there's no electricity, it's just not what it was intended to be. And then someone comes in and buys it, lovingly restores it and puts a huge amount of resources and time and money and heartache into making a working mill, the water flows, the mill is, you know, the wooden wheel is repaired, roof is put on, it's looked inside, they start employing people and this glorious old lady of a mill is fit for service again and it's been transformed.

And really that's what Christ is doing in each of our lives and that's what it means by following Christ in that He has paid the price to redeem us, to buy us back and He spends His time and His energy restoring us to what we were created originally to be, all your gifts, all your talents, all your beauty, all your smiles, all that you do, all that you are finds wholeness as He transforms us from the inside out and helps us to live as we were created to live and that means Him coming first, others coming next and ourselves being last. We are like last in the queue, Christ come first and other people come next.

That's really what I want to focus just in conclusion on. It's a double blow to our self-rule, Jesus first, others next. And so you take that and I take that and we apply it from when we leave church this morning into our lives. The other people, as Christians, other people we respect and we love other people more than we love and respect ourselves because of what Jesus has done for us. And there's an immediate context into that, into your marriage, your family, your colleagues, your flatmates. There's an immediate context within the church family that we live with Christ at the core of our lives so that it's a community of forgiveness and love. We treat other people with the grace and the patience Jesus has shown to us. How often is that not the case? That we don't treat others the way Christ has treated us. Those we struggle with, those who are in need, those who are isolated, those who are lonely, those who are wrong us, who hurt us, who let us down, who ignore us. We say, well, I'm giving up on this place because I'm ignored and nobody cares for my life. And yet when we sit down soberly and think about it, how often have we done that to Christ? Have we ignored Him? Have we kept silent? Have we rejected Him?

Have we accepted His gifts without any acknowledgement of Him as the giver? Within the church family, we put ourselves, we regard others with greater value and respect than ourselves. In our concern for the lost, that we have this great concern for them, how we perceive, how we deal with those who perceive us as enemies, maybe secular atheists, those from the LGBT community, that we need to learn how to love and to serve them and yet show them a different way with our radical, different worldviews and our understanding of the gospel, for them to recognize that we all need a Savior and that we all recognize that Jesus died for those who were His enemies and those who disagreed with Him. And therefore, we will die for others who disagree with us because we love them. And whether we agree with them or not, and that will take time and that will take convincing, just like those guests who were invited from the streets, who needed to be compelled to come in because they couldn't possibly believe they were invited to the great feast of the King. We need to serve others by telling them our story. And

[29 : 41] I think also we need to serve others and we need to recognize the grace of Christ working in us in our care for the disadvantaged. I think this section of the chapter is full of side bars, side boxes about caring for the disadvantaged, the outside, or the asylum seeker, the homeless, the addict. We could do that through Bethany or Edinburgh churches for sanctuary or through any different organization. We care for the vulnerable, we care for the weak, those who have no voice. We care for the unborn. We speak up for the unborn. But can I also say, we need to be better at speaking up for the unborn who are born into poverty and who are born into brokenness and who are born into emptiness and loneliness. And so we do, as churches I think, need to think about a role with, for example, safe families for children or home for good, fostering and adoption. So we don't just make a big commitment toward the unborn and say we're speaking on their behalf. We need to show the love of

Christ and the grace of Christ by fostering and adopting the children who are alive and who desperately need our help. I think the role of the church and our role is huge in our society today which is increasingly broken and individualistic and sometimes unconcerned for the other. Why do we do all this? Why do we do all these things? Well, it's the great paradox, isn't it? Because those who are last will be first. That's not our motive.

But what happens is the great paradox of the gospel is as we put Christ first and others first, we find that we receive what we can never experience if we put ourselves first.

Do you see the paradox of that? We try and live our lives by putting ourselves first, but we never receive the whole life and the forgiveness and the grace and the fullness that Jesus Christ our Creator can only offer us can never receive it unless we put Him first and others next. What is it we get? We get a place at His overflowing table and the honour of belonging to His royal family. That's the dinner party that is heaven, and that's what He offers life to us. It's not what we expect, that's for sure, because we enter a war zone in this life, but it's life to the full, and it's His yoke and His burden which is light and easy compared with trying to find happiness and contentment and peace and joy and forgiveness and meaning and identity away from Him.

So you see that beautiful truth, He offers by putting Him first, by coming to Him for salvation for our sins being dealt with, by putting Him first and others next, we receive and enjoy what we can never experience by putting ourselves first on the throne of our lives. We were not created to be on the throne of our own lives. Amen, let's pray. Lord, God help us to understand your great teaching. Forgive us when we maybe make it confusing or difficult or boring. Take that from us. And Lord, just make your spirit take your truth about the narrow way and help us to understand what it means. It means we ditch all the sinful, selfish pride and self-interest and self-righteousness that keeps us from you. And in so doing, we find our true selves in relationship with You, our Father and God.

[33 : 40] We thank You for that amazing truth of the gospel. May it be applied to our hearts, not only maybe for the first time, but it may be as Christians, as we've been Christians for many years. May we just be reminded how easily we slip into a self-centered way of living. Forgive us, we pray. Amen.