

God ONLY Helps Those Who CANNOT Help Themselves.

A sermon on Judges 7:1-8 and Luke 13:22-30 by Pastor Jason Liebenow

It is a hard question. It is a question that has troubled many people throughout history. It is the question that started our gospel lesson for today. “Are only a few going to be saved?”

Satan has led many people away from the truth by spewing the seemingly pious thought, “I could never believe something so horrible as people going to hell.” But even for God’s faithful people, this is still a struggle. Are only a few people going to be saved? It is difficult to think that so many people could be going to hell.

Today, we get Jesus’ answer to this question, but he doesn’t give us the answer we would expect. Instead, Jesus answers this question with a haunting command. He commands us, “*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*”

Jesus changes the question from, “Will *they* be saved?” to “Will *I* be saved?” Have I made every effort? Will I be one of those who will try to enter but will not be able to? Will I be one of those who, despite everything in my life, will hear Jesus say that he never knew me?

In our first lesson for today, from Judges Chapter 7, we find an answer. Our sermon for today will focus on this key fact of God’s Word: God ONLY Helps Those Who CANNOT Help Themselves.

The book of Judges relates the history of Israel around the time between their entrance into the Promised Land and the beginnings of the monarchy. The book has a pretty clear cycle that appears again and again. The Israelites turn away from God and begin worshipping idols. God allows foreign nations to control and oppress the Israelites. The Israelites repent and call to God for help. God raises up a judge and saves the Israelites. This happens again and again throughout Judges.

Idolatry, oppression, distress, deliverance, idolatry, oppression, distress, deliverance...

In chapter 7, we are in the middle of one of these cycles. God has called Gideon to save the Israelites from an alliance of multiple foreign powers. Verse 12 tells us that the enemy army was so big that they could not be counted. Imagine standing on a hill, looking out as far as you can see, and all the way, there's not even a speck of ground because it is so covered with enemy soldiers. That is a massive army!

So in order to battle this enemy, Gideon gets an army together. Israel's finest gather and come up against this uncountable enemy with 32,000 Israelite troops. Not a bad number, but victory is still a long shot. They are still grossly outnumbered, but they are confident. They are God's people. They are led by God's chosen leader, Gideon. They can win.

And that is when we hear about one of the unique times when God could not save his people. It's not that God was not strong enough to give victory to 32,000 Israelites facing an uncountable horde. God could not save the Israelites at this time, because he knew that this would only give the Israelites pride.

If God gave that army of 32,000 victory, then Israel would forever boast that their own strength had saved them. They would create an idol out of their own works, their own efforts. Remember the cycle of Judges. Idolatry, oppression, distress, deliverance. God is consistently fighting idolatry in the book of Judges. For this reason, God could not save them here because it would be giving his people a new idol: their own works.

So instead of saving his people, God sought to make victory for Israel's army absolutely impossible. Twice God shrank Gideon's army down until the 32,000 soldiers were only 300; 300 against the uncountable horde! This is an impossible fight.

But then and only then, God could save Israel. Only when it was absolutely impossible for the Israelites to help themselves, only then was it possible for God to save.

This is the narrow way that Jesus spoke about: God ONLY Helps Those Who CANNOT Help Themselves.

Many people believe the opposite to be true. They look at life and say, “If you want more money, you have to earn it by understanding finances and working hard.” “If you want a healthy body, you have to earn it by working out and eating right.” “If you want good relationships, you have to earn it by putting the work into building those relationships.” They say, “What we have reflects the effort we have put into it. Largely, we get what we deserve.”

But we dare NOT bring that mentality before God. Our input, our efforts, our accomplishments, our decisions get us nothing from God. Just as God told Gideon that his army was too big for him to save Israel, when people come to God with what they have done, God says, “You have too much for me to save you.”

This is really a 1st commandment issue. “You shall have no other gods besides me,” our God commanded us. Luther explains that this means, “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

Luther continues to explain that really whatever we trust in the most becomes our god. If I trust that I will be ok if I have enough money, money has become my god. If I trust that I will be ok if I have a membership with the right church, that membership becomes my god. Even if it goes the opposite way! If I believe that things are not going to work out because I was born into the wrong family or I did not get the right background, those things can become my god. God wants us to trust in him above all else.

Luther points out 6 common idols for mankind, and the last one he talks about, the most extreme form of idolatry he mentions is our own works. If I trust that I have done enough to make me right with God, if I trust that God will love and bless me because of what I have done, God cannot help me. God cannot help me because, like Gideon, I have too big an army, I have too much invested in myself. If God were to save someone who trusts in their own works, they would not attribute their salvation to God, they would attribute it to their own works! They would be worshipping an idol, and they would only fall deeper into their sin!

This is the narrow way to salvation: only those who trust alone in God's grace shown through Jesus Christ will be saved. Only those who trust that they will be ok because God loves them in Christ, only those who believe they are right with God because of what Jesus has done, only those who believe that God will love and bless them because Jesus earned that for us, only they will be saved.

This is why Christianity is unique. Every other religion, every other human ideology trusts in an idol, and the most common idol of all is human effort, our own works. This is where the idea that every religion essentially says the same thing: that we are to love our neighbor. Religions that essentially only say, "Love your neighbor," are worshipping the idol of our own works. God cannot save people who trust in themselves. God cannot help those who help themselves.

Unfortunately, this idol is widely popular even among those who call themselves Christian. These are the people Jesus spoke about in our gospel lesson. The people who call themselves Christian, who talk about Jesus being their Lord but all the while they are trusting in their own decision for Christ, trusting in their own choice of church family, trusting in their own works. Such people on the last day will say, "Jesus, we served you faithfully all our lives." But Jesus will only respond to them, "I never knew you." They had too much human effort for God to

save them. Their army was too big. Their idol, their works, could not save them.

But we do have salvation. The way may be narrow, but it is open to all. As Jesus said, people will flood from every direction to enter the kingdom of God. The way is open to all because the way is full and free salvation through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Way!

God freely offers us salvation through Jesus Christ. When we are too weak, God is strong to save. When we do not have enough, God overflows with more than we could ask or imagine. When we are hopelessly lost, God is our sure hope. God ONLY Helps Those Who CANNOT Help Themselves.

Dear friends in Christ, you have found the narrow way in Christ. Therefore let us make every effort to stay on that way by fleeing the temptations to focus on ourselves. Do not buy in to Satan's lies that make you look to yourself for what you need, that make you look within for salvation! Are you struggling with a certain sin? Don't believe the lie that you can get out of it just by sheer willpower! Jesus is your salvation. He is strong enough to save. Look to him for victory. Look to him for all you need!

Your salvation comes full and free from Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was good enough to earn God's favor, and he gives you that favor freely. Jesus Christ suffered what your sins deserve. You do not need to suffer God's wrath for what you have done.

This is why we begin every church service by confessing our sins and hearing that we are forgiven for Christ's sake, because this is the narrow way. You are on the narrow way. Though you cannot save yourself, Jesus is your Savior. Amen.