

**Luke 13:22-30**  
**An Inconvenient Truth**

Most teachers get a lot of questions. Some questions are based on genuine interest, others are vain attempts to try to trick the teacher. Some questions are serious, others are silly. Jesus was a rabbi, and rabbis are teachers, so naturally Jesus was asked His share of questions as well.

“And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘why do You speak to them in parables?’” (Matthew 13:10).

“And His disciples asked Him, ‘why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’” (Matthew 17:10).

“As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, ‘tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?’” (Matthew 24:3).

“One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘what commandment is the foremost of all?’” (Mark 12:28).

“Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?’” (Luke 7:19).

“Nicodemus said to Him, ‘how can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’” (John 3:4).

“The crowd then answered Him, ‘we have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, “the Son of Man must be lifted up”? Who is this Son of Man?’” (John 12:34).

“Thomas said to Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?’” (John 14:5).

“Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?’” (John 14:22).

In the passage today, Jesus was asked a very good question. And it is important to carefully consider the answer He gave. We have here, the very Son of God answering a most compelling question about the nature of salvation.

**Context**

As Luke narrates the story, Jesus “was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem” (v. 22). We must stop here to mark the commitment of Jesus to His mission. Undaunted by what lay ahead, Jesus steadfastly set Himself toward Jerusalem. He was only months away from being crucified. Still He pressed on. And not with His head down dejectedly and passively resigning Himself to a fate He could not control. He continued to fulfill His mission by teaching.

While Luke is not specific about what Jesus taught, it seems probable that He continued to teach about the kingdom of God. There was no reason to change His message now. The miracles He had performed were to testify that what He said was true. He had claimed to be the Messiah, and so He taught about the salvation for those who believed. Though there is no direct link between this passage and the one that

precedes it in Luke's narrative, surely it fits contextually with Jesus just having taught the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, which He used as illustrations of the kingdom of God..

As Jesus was teaching "someone said to Him, 'Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?'" (v. 23). Since Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God, it was natural to wonder about the difficulty of being included. Jesus had taught some difficult things, and it was not unusual to expect that people wanted reassurance that the kingdom of God was welcoming to all.

The question was, I think, sincere, though we know nothing about the person who asked it. He could have been someone on the verge of committing to Jesus, or simply a casual onlooker who was curious. Nevertheless, Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, and the Messiah was supposed to bring salvation to the nation of Israel,

"Israel has been saved by the Lord  
With an everlasting salvation;  
You will not be put to shame or humiliated  
To all eternity" (Isaiah 45:17).

It was understood that even the Gentile nations of the world would be welcomed into the kingdom if they obeyed,

<sup>6</sup>"Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
To minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord,  
To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath  
And holds fast My covenant;  
<sup>7</sup>Even those I will bring to My holy mountain  
And make them joyful in My house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar;  
For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples" (Isaiah 56:6-7).

Yet the response Jesus gave to the question was disturbing. Rather than speaking effusively about the open-door policy of the kingdom of God, Jesus answered and said "strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (v. 24). What Jesus was teaching ran counter to the prevailing Jewish understanding that salvation was a national, and not a personal, act. As it said in the Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.1, "all Jews have a share in the world to come." The Jews had come to believe that not only would they would all be saved but also that salvation was impossible for a Gentile. Counter to this, Jesus had taught that salvation was a personal experience, as in the parable of the sower and the seeds.

One glance around Jesus would have borne out the truth of the assertion that salvation was not for everyone. After nearly three years of active ministry, with miracles beyond imagination to support His claim to be the Messiah, Jesus had gathered only a handful of genuine followers. He had run afoul of the religious leaders who accused Him of being Satanic. He had frustrated the masses and crippled His popularity by refusing to be the kind of Messiah they expected, "<sup>14</sup>therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'this is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.' <sup>15</sup>So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to

the mountain by Himself alone“ (John 6:14-15). One glance around our modern world would teach us the same thing. We need not look too far to find examples of wickedness and depravity. Even a cursory glance at the news informs us the rampant sin of humanity. It is impossible to ignore the manifestations of sin. Yet, we are compelled to want to be saved.

Our modern understanding about salvation reflects not just our modern inclusive culture of tolerance, but an idea that is more deeply embedded in our history and culture. As a nation, we are the freest in the world. We have great political rights and freedom of choice. We elect everyone from our President to the people who serve on the local water board. The rise of popular democracy in the United States stemmed from the early 19th century, and it was directly linked to changes in evangelical teaching on salvation.

The Second Great Awakening of the 1820s-1840s was epitomized by its greatest preacher, Charles Grandison Finney. The revival Finney preached was centered on emotional appeals and devices such as the “anxious bench” where prospective converts could be prayed for and impressed upon to place their faith in Jesus Christ. The emphasis was on the choice of the believer to accept or reject Jesus as the Son of God. As with the burgeoning democracy then occurring in the United States, the individual had the right of choice. It was up to them. They had to make the decision. In such a case, everyone was able to be saved.

We must get this right. We must not be misunderstood - there is enough of that with regard to Christianity already in the world. To begin with, there is nothing wrong with preaching about the individual sinner’s obligation to repent. John the Baptist called for people to repent, “<sup>1</sup>John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 3:1-2). Jesus called people to repent, “from that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 4:17). The issue is not about the invitation to repent, but the theological context in which that invitation is given.

Salvation has always been limited. God only chose eight people to survive the flood. God only saved Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. God only saved a small remnant from the destruction of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The percentage of those saved was never very great, and there is no reason to think that that biblical truth has changed today. Yet, the most important thing to consider is not really the numbers of people saved, but whether or not we are among them. We ought not to be concerned about the spiritual welfare of others until we are certain of our own.

In responding to the question, Jesus laid out three principles which guide us in our understanding of the inconvenient truth that only a few are saved.

### **Salvation Takes Effort**

Notice that Jesus did not directly answer the question. He gave no percentages, and He offered no raw data to analyze. Instead, He talked not about how many, but how to enter the kingdom of God, “strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (v. 24). Recognize that Jesus did not speak of God's unconditional love for all mankind. Consider also that He

did not try to manipulate or use emotion to persuade people to profess faith in Him. Instead, He talked about the work that goes into being saved.

Again, we must not be mistaken. Scripture is emphatic in its declaration that salvation is the work of God. No one can come to faith in Christ unless God has given that person the gift of faith, “no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). We cannot save ourselves because of our sin nature, “you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We are saved by the free gift of grace, “for by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

Still, Scripture also teaches that salvation involves the will of the sinner. Sinners must repent, and repentance is an act of the will. It is not mere intellectual acknowledgment that one is in the wrong, it is a conscious choice to make a sincere effort to do what is right in the future. This is seen from Luke’s choice of the word ‘strive’ which means to agonize or to struggle. Other examples from Scripture emphasize the nature of this struggle.

“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm’” (John 18:36).

“Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12).

“Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Corinthians 9:25).

“For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (Colossians 1:29).

Jesus said “<sup>23</sup>if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. <sup>24</sup>For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it” (Luke 9:23-24). Salvation can cost a person his family, “if anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). The story of the rich, young ruler reminds us that we must be willing to sacrifice all our possessions to the kingdom if necessary. Surely bearing one’s cross to the place of execution is an act of will. Surely being prepared to renounce one’s family is an act of will. Surely being prepared to give all your possessions to the Lord is an act of will. The Christian faith is not about self-fulfillment but self-denial. The Christian faith requires effort.

Another point on which to reflect, is the nature of this struggle. Believers must struggle against Satan, the world, and our own flesh. In such a struggle, it is impossible to always win. We are not condemned for struggling. Along the way we may lose many battles. If a believer is struggling, if they are fighting the fight and running the race, they are doing their best to participate with the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification. That is all we are asked to do. The ultimate result is in the hands of God. We are to struggle, but He provides the victory, “<sup>12</sup>so then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

The image of the narrow door further illustrates the physical effort required. One can picture trying to squeeze into a space too small. It was something Jesus had emphasized before, “<sup>13</sup>enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). The broad way to destruction also reminds us that the majority of people will not find their way to heaven. The road will be too difficult. The sacrifice will be too much. Again think of the rich, young ruler. As Virgil said in the *Aeneid*, “easy is the descent to hell.”

### **There is a Time Limit**

Not only is the opening to heaven narrow, but it will also be closed. There will come a time when the Lord of heaven “gets up and shuts the door” (v. 25). When that awful moment occurs, there will be those who “stand outside and knock on the door” (v. 25). Jesus clearly taught that not all will be saved. In their desperation they will cry out “Lord, open up to us!” (v. 25). Tragically, their pleas will be ignored. All they will hear is the master of the house answering “I do not know where you are from” (v. 25). Time had run out.

This, too, was a truth taught throughout Scripture. Frustrated with man before the flood, God said “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years” (Genesis 6:3). Jesus had emphasized this greatly in His recent teaching. He told the story of a fortunate farmer who planned to use his bountiful harvest to guarantee his future years but instead learned that “this very night your soul is required of you” (Luke 12:20). He implored people to settle their issues before coming before the local judge, “<sup>58</sup>while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, so that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. <sup>59</sup>I say to you, you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent” (Luke 12:58-59). He told of a fig tree that was given one more year to produce fruit or be consigned to the flames, “if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down” (Luke 13:9). Clearly Scripture teaches that “Behold, now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Consequences of delay are poignantly related in the parable of the ten virgins found in Matthew’s gospel. Those who were prepared of the bridegroom were admitted to His presence, but those who were not were shut out. Once the door was closed, hope was lost. The point Jesus made was clear. Not knowing when the bridegroom might return (or when we might be summoned to meet the bridegroom) all ought to “be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour (Matthew 25:13).

There will come a time when the world will transition from a time of grace to a time of judgment. Mercy will be exchanged for justice. There is such a thing as the wrath of the Lamb (Revelation 6:16). It is possible to repent too late.

### **Salvation Involves Relationship**

Jesus explains why some people are shut out of the kingdom of God. Simply stated, they do not have a relationship with their Savior. “I do not know where you are from” (v.25) is all they will hear from

beyond the door. Those shut out will argue that “we ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets” (v. 26), but in response God will answer “I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers” (v. 27). Despite their own feelings, God does not know them. They do not have a relationship with their God.

The kingdom of God about which Jesus spoke so often was never about religion. Religion involves rituals and ceremonies. Jesus spoke of a personal faith. He spoke of a commitment that involved the entire life of the believer. It was not a matter of performing certain acts at certain times in certain ways. It was a matter of becoming one with Christ. The Christian faith has ever taught this same message.

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).

“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“<sup>4</sup>Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

That a person is outwardly religious is not sufficient. That a person calls themselves a believer is not a sure guarantee of salvation. That a person performs religious duties and acts of faith does not mean they have a relationship with Jesus Christ. There is a numbing finality in the following passage.

“<sup>21</sup>Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ <sup>23</sup>And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Hell will be populated not only by the wicked and irreligious, but also by well-meaning and outwardly religious people as well. In eternity, everything is made clear. Everyone eventually believes. Only on earth is there uncertainty.

Jesus went on to describe what awaited those who were shut out of the kingdom of God, “in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out” (v. 28). Being Jewish was not enough. Being a child of Abraham was not sufficient if a person rejected the Messiah. Salvation was not a matter of genetics. Furthermore, those in hell are aware of what they have lost. Figuratively, they see what they have missed. That is no small part of their suffering. Hell is not only physical pain, but it also involves the heart-breaking recognition or opportunity wasted.

While those cast out will suffer, others “will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God” (v. 29). That they will come from every direction is a reference to all the nations of the earth. What the Jewish people rejected was given to others. As in the parable of the marriage feast.

<sup>2</sup>The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.  
<sup>3</sup>And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. . . .” <sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, ‘the wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast” (Matthew 22:2-3, 8-9).

Finally, Jesus concluded, “some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last” (v. 30). The first and last is, among other things, a reference to Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had a great opportunity which many of them squandered. Instead, many Gentiles were blessed to receive what the Jews turned their backs on. Shocked as Jews were to hear such things, Jesus taught were the truth about the kingdom of God. Paul later expounded on this same truth, “<sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).

That not all will be saved runs counter to our prevailing cultural notions of inclusion and tolerance. Yet, it is a truth that pervades Scripture and was taught clearly by Jesus, Himself. It is ridiculous to argue about it. Two plus two is four whether we like it or not. It is not five, or thirty, or orange. And that the way of salvation is narrow and requires effort is true as well. We had best understand that.

### **Takeaways**

May God grant us grace to use our privileged position as His children to further His kingdom for His eternal glory.