

Open to all

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- [0 : 00] Jesus went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few?
- And he said to them, strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us, then he will answer you.
- I do not know where you come from. Then you will begin to say, we ate and drank in your presence and taught in our streets. But he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from.
- Depart from me, all you workers of evil. 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 you yourselves cast out.
- And people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.
- [1 : 14] Thanks so much indeed for reading. Please do keep Luke chapter 13 open. Let me add my welcome. Lovely to have you with us this morning. And why don't I pray before we hear more of Luke?
- Let me pray for us. Luke tells us at the beginning of his account that he is writing, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.
- Heavenly Father, thank you very much indeed for Luke's eyewitness account. Thank you for the confidence we can have in it. And we pray, please, would you grant us a growing certainty in Jesus and in his kingdom as we look at this passage this morning.
- And we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Well, today we're starting a new series of talks in Luke's gospel, a new section of Luke.
- We've seen, perhaps you'll remember how in the second half of Luke, Luke flags up a new section of his gospel by referring to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.
- [2 : 22] And it's there in chapter 13, verse 22. Jesus went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem. This section runs up to chapter 17, verse 10.
- And the question that dominates the whole section, really, is the question that's there in verse 23. And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few?
- Will those who are saved be few? Now, I guess there are all sorts of reasons why you and I might ask that question. Perhaps we look at family, friends, neighbours, colleagues.
- We count the number who are following Jesus. And it seems so small. We count the number who are simply uninterested in the claims of Jesus or who are apathetic towards Jesus or who have rejected Jesus.
- And there seem so many. Lord, will those who are saved be few? Or perhaps we look more widely at our nation, the sense of growing opposition and antagonism to the claims of Jesus, the decline of traditional church denominations.

[3 : 36] Lord, will those who are saved be few? It's not just a question of numbers, is it? It's a question of, God, what are you playing at?

Lord, are your plans really on track? Now, that would have been a question for Luke's original hearers as well. Because remember, Luke not only wrote Luke's gospel, which we have here, he also wrote a second volume, the book of Acts.

As Luke crisscrossed the Mediterranean with the Apostle Paul proclaiming Christ and establishing new churches, he experienced firsthand the rejection of the message of Jesus, rejection by the Jewish religious establishments, by the Roman political establishment, the Roman rulers.

He witnessed protests. He witnessed riots. Lord, will those who are saved be few? Well, what is the answer? Well, in summary, Jesus' answer comes in verse 29.

And people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God. A wonderful banquet is the way in which the Lord Jesus describes his heavenly kingdom throughout this section of Luke.

[4 : 56] There will be many. There will be a great multitude. And yet, not those who you might expect. Verse 30.

And behold, some who are last will be first and some who are first who will be last. It's the language, isn't it, of reversal.

You might hear it, I guess, at the Oscars. You know, the film that's tipped to kind of wipe the board and win all the Oscars actually wins nothing. And a film that no one's ever heard of picks them up instead.

Or the sports team that's expected to win the tournament, but they get knocked out in the first rounds while the outsiders win the cup. And Luke wants us to know it's just the same with Jesus' kingdom.

Why is that? Well, if you printed off an outline, you'll see the reason is because there's only one way and there are only two destinies. There's only one way and there are only two destinies.

[6 : 01] Firstly, there's only one way. I guess it's fair to say that most people have a sense of existence beyond the grave. And yet, when it comes to questions like who gets into Jesus' kingdom, well, most imagine that the road is broad, that everyone will be able to enter.

And as for the idea of hell, well, we simply don't believe in it. So notice then how the Lord Jesus rips up all of those assumptions.

Firstly, he says the door is narrow. Verse 24. Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able to.

Now, that word strive, it's the word from which we get our word to agonize. It speaks of determined, concerted efforts.

It speaks of a single-mindedness and an energy. Not in terms of earning our way into God's kingdom, because that is a gift. The forgiveness of sins, being at peace with God, all through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins.

[7 : 17] No, rather, it's striving in terms of the way which we respond to Jesus. It's just what we saw a few weeks ago, back in September, in chapter 13, verse 3.

The urgency of responding to Jesus. As Jesus says, No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you all will likewise perish. To repent is to do a U-turn from living my way without God to coming under the rule of Jesus.

Jesus is saying, you see, don't allow God's gift of the forgiveness of sins. Don't allow his compassion, don't allow his patience to work against your responsibility to respond decisively.

In other words, make sorting out your eternal destiny your top priority. Make every effort to ensure that you've got things settled with God.

Now, immediately we can see, can't we, that that cuts right across our culture, which assumes that there are many doors, not one, that all religions lead to God, that all you need is to be a person of faith, whatever being a person of faith means.

[8 : 34] Just as in the Roman Empire, there were many religious and belief systems scattered. But no, Jesus Christ alone is God's king.

It is by trusting in him alone that we enter his kingdom. A couple of weeks ago, we were at home one evening watching telly and the actor Tony Robinson taking us on a tour of India and Myanmar.

Now, as someone brought up with Blackadder in the 1980s, it's always slightly confusing to see him doing something serious rather than playing the figure of Baldrick. But nonetheless, as we watched him traveling around India and Myanmar, we saw him take part in a dance to exercise evil spirits.

He was later seen sort of soaring high in a wonderful hot air balloon, looking down on the whole landscape of pagodas and religious temples. And yet there was no attempt at all to ask the fundamental question, is there any reality behind those religious belief systems?

Notice this also cuts right across our culture, which assumes that the door is wide open, like an open goal in a game of football. If you miss it, it's because you've got something spectacularly wrong.

[10 : 01] Come as you are. There's no need to change. You're automatically in without having to respond. Isn't that what most people think? Indeed, that may well be your assumption today.

Sadly, it's even what some church leaders believe. But notice Jesus is not saying it's like a wide open goal.

No, he says many will try to enter, but will be unable to do so. The door is narrow. But secondly, the door will be shut.

Verses 25 to 27. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door saying, Lord, open to us.

Then he will answer you. I do not know where you come from. Then you'll begin to say, we ate and drank in your presence and you taught in our streets. But he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from.

[11 : 05] Depart from me, all you workers of evil. The door will close, at which point it will be too late.

Think for a moment. Arriving at an airport in normal times, you get distracted by the shops. You think to yourself, I've got loads of time. I'll just get whatever it is you want to get. You hear the final call for the gate.

You rush to the gate. I'm sorry, the flight has closed. But the outrage on our faces and the shock in our hearts at missing a flight is as nothing compared with missing out on heaven.

So here is another of our cultural assumptions that Jesus completely cuts across. That there's no rush. There's no hurry. I can take my time.

I'll wait until my career is less pressurized. My kids are older. Life is less busy. In the meantime, there are careers to be pursued, ambitions to be fulfilled, a social life to enjoy, families to look after, and pleasures and holidays to experience.

[12 : 15] And all along, the whole assumption is that mere acquaintance with Jesus Christ in some form or another is sufficient.

And if not, well, then at least somehow we'll be able to blag our way in at the end of the day. I attended church occasionally. I had a faith of sorts. The Ten Commandments were my moral compass, my moral framework.

I was a good parent. Far more feeble notice than the excuses which are given in verse 26, people who at least heard Jesus teaching and experienced his company.

And therefore, on that day, it will be with no pleasure at all that Jesus will say in verse 25, I do not know where you come from.

Because being a Christian is not about agreeing a set of beliefs. It is about knowing a person, knowing Jesus Christ.

[13 : 17] A mere acquaintance with a person is not the same thing as knowing that person. Notice that on that day, there's no place for negotiation in verses 26 and 27.

If we leave this life, if we move out into eternity without knowing Jesus, there are no amount of bullying or bargaining or bluffing or attempting to buy our way into Jesus' kingdom will work.

There are no second chances. Entry is on the basis of a decision I've made now, not on the basis of my ability to bargain my way in then.

No negotiation. And interestingly, no unbelievers, because actually everyone on that day will be trying to enter. As they wake up in the next world and realise that actually the truths that they ignored and dismissed or relegated simply to third importance in this world actually are true.

And yet it will be too late. The celebrity atheist. The socialite whose diary was packed with parties.

[14 : 38] The city worker whose life was dominated by work. Listen to one commentator on these verses. If people fail to enter Jesus' kingdom, it is not that God is unwilling to admit them, but they will not enter on the only terms on which entrance is possible.

It's no wonder, is it, that Jesus says in verse 27, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil.

Now, I don't know what your definition of evil is. We'll think more about it in a couple of weeks time. But I hope at least we can see that if our understanding of evil doesn't include an unwillingness to enter Jesus' kingdom to do so on his terms, then actually that is a very inadequate understanding of evil.

In other words, evil is not simply about my attitude towards other people and the way I treat other people. It is also about my attitude towards God and the way I treat him and regard him.

The door is narrow and it will be shut. Well, what are some of the implications? Well, I guess the big implication is don't be deceived.

[16 : 02] This could be you. Don't be deceived into thinking there are many ways to God, not one. Don't be deceived into thinking there's plenty of time.

How do you know? How can you be so sure? Don't be deceived into having a wrong view of Jesus as someone who only ever says yes to people and will never say no to people.

Don't be deceived into thinking that you know Jesus when actually you don't know Jesus. Or to put all of that positively, be certain that Jesus Christ is the only way to God.

Be sure that time is short. Be confident that if we do know Jesus, we will receive a great welcome on that day.

So that's our first point. There's only one way. And secondly, there are only two destinies. There are only two destinies. Verses 28 and 29. 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.

[17 : 11] But you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God. Now, the Lord Jesus wants us to picture here people streaming into his kingdom from all four corners of the globe.

Think back, if you're able to, perhaps, to London and the 2012 Olympics as people streamed into London from north, south, east and west, not just of this country, but the whole world.

Think back, if you're able to, perhaps, to the world, you're able to see the world of God's purposes, not just of this country, but the whole world of God's purposes have always been global. And we've been reminded of that, haven't we, in our growth groups, those of us who are in growth groups, as we've been looking at the material on mission over the last few weeks.

And yet, the great shock is, who will be excluded? Remember, Jesus is talking to Jewish people.

For many, their assumption would have been that they did belong to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They did so because of their heritage. And yet, Jesus is saying here that no amount of religious heritage, no amount of religious privilege counts for anything if we don't know Jesus.

[18 : 31] And again, it's with no sense of pleasure in verse 28 that Jesus describes hell as a place of terrible regret and grief and anger.

A place of consciousness. It's not that you die and then there's nothing. And a place that it's possible to be excluded from.

Like all warnings, of course, it is spoken in love, just as parents warn their children about the danger of running into the road. But I guess, perhaps, for some of us, our response, nonetheless, is still something like this.

How can a God of love send people to hell? That's often the way, isn't it, in which the objection is put. Isn't it unfair, unjust, unloving?

Well, not if he's told us about it beforehand. Not if God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.

[19 : 42] Not if people reject him. Now, before we go on, and perhaps especially if you're someone who is with us this morning and you're simply looking in on the claims of Jesus.

I just want us to think a little bit about, well, who can Jesus be if we're not convinced? Who can Jesus be that he makes such claims? In our age of no platforming people we disagree with, surely his teaching is outrageous.

Not only to speak with such knowledge and such certainty, but also in our culture, which so prizes exclusion, to speak so clearly of exclusion and division.

And perhaps above all, the fact that Jesus puts himself in the place of the master of the house, where we might rightfully expect God to be the master of the house.

Which means, of course, either Jesus is indeed God in the flesh. Or he's a man, and yet if he is simply a man, he's one whose claims are so outrageous that he makes Donald Trump look humble and reasonable.

[21 : 01] There really are no options in between. You see, to value Jesus, as so many people do for perhaps his teaching or his compassion or his wisdom towards others, and yet to deny that he is God, really is completely at odds with what we have in the historical evidence in the gospel accounts.

But then in verses 29 and 30, Jesus goes on to describe heaven. Verse 29. And people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God.

And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last. It's a place of reversal. Just think for a moment.

The fruits of Luke's journeys with the apostle Paul as they crossed the Mediterranean, rejected by many who might have been regarded as amongst the first.

The establishment, the establishment, the Jewish religious leaders, the Roman political establishment, the impressive people. Well, as we read through Acts, actually, many of the people who do put their trust in Jesus, well, they are, in many cases, those who might have been regarded as amongst the last.

[22 : 26] Slave girls, soldiers, prison jailers, manual laborers, fortune tellers. In many respects, the unimpressive, wrong sort of people.

Now, that may well have been surprising and perhaps rather unsettling to Luke's hearers. And yet, it's not a surprise to the Lord Jesus.

It is precisely what he intended. Now, we'll see why that is the case over the next two or three weeks or so. But it's the reversal that's echoed throughout this section of Luke's gospel.

Chapter 14, verse 11. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. Chapter 14, verse 24. For I tell you, none of those who were invited shall taste my banquet.

We started with the question of verse 23. Lord, will those who are saved be few? How does Jesus answer?

[23 : 29] Well, in the first place, surely he's saying, make sure you're one of them. Verse 24. Strive. Strive to enter through the narrow door. For some, I guess it's a warning. You might very much be amongst those who would be regarded as the first in the world's terms.

It's a warning against presumption. Don't make the mistake of assuming that the door is wide open, that it will stay open forever.

It won't. But perhaps others, and actually we'll think of ourselves much more as amongst the last. Perhaps you think to yourself, will Jesus have me?

I have nothing to offer. I'm all too aware that actually I'm far from God. Well, can we see you are precisely the kind of person that Jesus came for?

But what about those who do know Jesus? What are some of the implications for us? Well, I guess in part, he's giving us confidence and assurance that if we know him, we will be welcomed on the final day into his heavenly kingdom.

[24 : 40] And that is a wonderfully precious thing, isn't it? And perhaps especially a wonderfully precious thing against all the uncertainties and the roller coaster ride of being in lockdown and enduring COVID and so on over the last few months or so.

Jim Packer, in his excellent book, *Knowing God*, tells of an occasion when he went for a walk with a Christian scholar who had effectively forfeited any hope of academic advancement because he had clashed with church dignitaries on the nature of the gospel.

But it doesn't matter, he said at length, for I have known God and they haven't. It doesn't matter.

For I have known God and they haven't. If we know God, it puts all the disappointments and heartbreaks and upsets and frustrations of this life in their true and proper perspective.

And yet surely the primary application for us is simply the answer. No. No, those who are saved will not be few.

[25 : 59] There will be a huge multitude, a global multitude. Just as Jesus finished, remember the previous section in Luke 13, verses 18 to 21, with a couple of parables, one about a mustard seed, one about a grain of yeast, where growth has out of all proportion with the small and unimpressive beginnings.

Yes, a great multitude. And yet not those we might imagine. The rejection so often by those we might think of as amongst the first.

Political leaders, business people, those in the media, those perhaps who are first in terms of the education they've received or the opportunities they've had in their lives or what they've achieved.

Or the older church denomination, some of them as they've turned their backs on the teaching of Jesus. The gospel largely rejected by the so-called Christian West. While many who might regard themselves as last have come to know Jesus.

Indeed, you and I live in the great age, one of the great ages of kingdom flourishing, as people come from north and south and east and west to put their trust in Jesus.

[27 : 12] And who are they? Well, so often they are the unimpressive. They're the last. The urban poor in China. Migrant workers in the Middle East.

Descendants of African Americans who have experienced decades and decades of prejudice. Dalits in India. Gypsies in Eastern Europe. It may be a surprise to us.

But it's not a surprise to the Lord Jesus. It is precisely what he expects. So let's not be tempted to think that Jesus' kingdom is insignificant.

Perhaps the other things in our lives should have a higher priority. Don't be discouraged and think that Jesus' kingdom is small. There's not going to be any shortage of people at this great heavenly banquet.

It's just they're not the kind of people who we might expect. And let's not be discouraged either when some of those who are first reject Jesus or are uninterested in the gospel.

[28 : 19] And let's keep our eyes open to those who might be thought of as last. To think and pray perhaps much more widely in terms of those we might expect to follow Jesus and to respond to him.

Let me lead us in prayer. People will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much that the numbers at this great heavenly banquet will be enormous. Not few, but a great multitude.

And yet not those who we might expect, although precisely those whom the Lord Jesus intends. We pray, Heavenly Father, please would we not be deceived by the lies and misunderstandings of our culture.

And we pray, our Father, please would you keep us confident in Jesus' kingdom. Confidence that to believe in Jesus and to trust in Jesus is the right thing to do.

[29 : 34] And confidence in serving his kingdom. Knowing that it is indeed a great kingdom. And we ask it in his name. Amen.