

Heaven's Surprising Guest List

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. I'd like to begin with a remarkable story. 22 years ago, my first year as an Anglican priest, I was in a beautiful church like this called St. John's, and similar, actually, in many ways.

And there was 15 leaders I invited to do a course called Christianity Explained, very similar to your Christianity Explored, which I'll be encouraging you to do. These 15, I was teaching how to teach the course so they could help others become Christians.

And at the end of seven weeks, a dear man, he was the rector's warden and had been for 30 years, and his wife came to me and said, we just want to say thank you so much.

We have both become Christians. The remarkable thing was that he said, you know, I've been in church all these years, I've heard all these different sermons, but it's as if God opened my eyes and I could see what I had never seen before.

It's remarkable. He became, as he described it, a real Christian. I want to talk about the idea of being a real Christian only briefly in this service because it can be misleading, but when I talk to non-Christians, one of their big moans is Christians, and that's the reason they don't want to become Christians.

[1 : 18] And I say, well, we're not on about Christians, we're on about Jesus, but just out of any interest, do you know any real Christians? Christians. And almost, without exception, a non-Christian will say, actually, I do know someone who I think is a real Christian.

Almost always. They describe someone that is relatively humble, who seems to have an obvious faith in Jesus, that they're keen to do what Jesus would have them do, and they love people and talk about Jesus.

Why am I talking about real Christians? In today's Bible reading, at the beginning and the end, are two people you would think are real believers, but they actually turn out not to be, much to their surprise, no doubt, as to others.

I'd like to talk about being a real Christian because in every church like this, there will be people like the Rector's Warden, perhaps, that have been in church for many years and are yet to have their eyes opened.

And I'll pray that today, as God's word is read, particularly with that in mind. But also, I think it's important to talk about being a real Christian because there are some here who have not yet become one and would really like to, but are not quite sure how to or can't imagine if they'd ever be able to.

[2 : 33] This passage helps us understand what a real Christian is and how to become one. So it would be very helpful, if you don't have your Bibles open, to turn to page 77 at the back in Luke 18.

Now, I always find it helpful to have a big picture and the passage that was read to us actually is three separate stories. In the first column, on page 77 at verse 9, it's a story that Jesus tells about a Pharisee and a tax collector that go to the temple to pray.

The next paragraph, at the top of the second column, verse 15, is about people bringing their children to Jesus. And then the third story, which is a longer one from verse 18, is about a rich ruler that comes to Jesus so he can be sure whether he's going to heaven or not.

Now, before we jump into the stories themselves, I'd like to point out to you that in these three stories are all these words that we use to describe real Christians.

There's lots of them and they all appear to be in these passages. So just briefly, look in verse 9 and you'll see a word, righteous. A real Christian is righteous.

[3 : 50] And you'll notice in verse 14 that the particular real Christian is justified. I'll explain what they mean, but these are real Christian kinds of words. In the second story, on the next column,

from verse 15 about the children, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, but he says something about the kingdom of God.

In verse 16, he says, a real Christian belongs to the kingdom of God. And in verse 17, a real Christian receives the kingdom of God and enters the kingdom of God.

There are things that happen. And in the last story, we're told, the man asked the question in verse 18, what must I do to inherit eternal life, life after death?

He's told in verse 22 that he can have treasures in heaven. And my favourite in verse 26, when they talk about being saved. We're Anglicans.

Are you saved, brother? We don't only say it in Anglican churches, but occasionally I do, just to stir you up a bit. Being saved. Born again.

[5 : 01] Now what's important about these expressions is they describe a real Christian. A real Christian is justified and righteous. A real Christian is in the kingdom of God. They've already received it, entered it, and belonged to it.

A real Christian is saved. A real Christian has already begun their eternal life. It just keeps going after the grave. And today is your chance to make sure you are a real Christian.

I just want to pray a brief prayer that God will open our eyes. Father in heaven, by your Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see and understand what your word teaches.

In Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen. Well, let's see our eyes open, God willing, and look at the first story.

I want you to notice before we read the first story, and each story has a mark of a true or real Christian. In the first story, we're told in the first verse why Jesus told it. Let me read from verse 9.

[6 : 07] Follow it with me. It helps. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I tell you, Jesus said, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now, did you notice in verse 9 why Jesus tells the story? He's speaking against people who trust in themselves that they are righteous. He is speaking against people who are confident they are good enough to go to heaven.

[7 : 28] In other words, they're self-righteous. He describes a character that's quite ugly, really. He could be an Anglican priest nowadays. He's arrogant, superior, offensive.

He's not just good enough for God. He despises others who he judges aren't good enough for God. I mean, even in our culture today, to be self-righteous is bad.

Well, he's bad. You know, I do like to say, I occasionally meet people who are self-righteous and think they're going to heaven because they're good enough. And I can't help but have a little laugh and say, are you telling me that you're perfect?

That you're actually so good that you deserve heaven? Is that what you're telling me? Oh, no, no, no. They always do. But that's what they're saying.

Of course I'll be in heaven. I mean, God will clear the deck so I can have front place. But it is so self-righteous. And the Pharisee in this story is rejected. God doesn't even hear his prayer.

[8 : 35] Yet how is it that the tax collector, who's the equivalent of the drug dealer in our day, how is it he can be accepted by God? Well, this is where we need to start to understand some of the real Christian words.

And the first word in verse 9 is righteous. Do you know what righteous means? Righteousness is a relationship word. You can only be righteous in relationships with people.

So you can't be righteous towards your house. To be righteous is to be right in your relationship with a person. To be righteous before God is to be right in your relationship with God.

To be justified is to be right. It's a bit like going to court. In fact, the word justified is a legal term. If you go to court and you're innocent, let the reader understand, you may be innocent, but it's not until the court declares you to be innocent that you are justified.

To be justified is when you are declared publicly by God, this person is righteous. Now, it's very important to understand that no one can be righteous by what they do.

[10:02] That's what makes us unrighteous. How then can anyone be justified? Well, look at verse 27, the answer is crystal clear. Jesus said, it's impossible.

But what is impossible with men is made possible with God. What's impossible? Friends, it's impossible for you or me to be good enough to go to heaven.

Come on, friends. Do not have yourself on. You will never be good enough to deserve heaven. You have to be perfect. It's impossible for you to be righteous by your own efforts.

So how is it then that the tax collector is declared by God to be justified, declared to be righteous? Look at what he says. It's the first mark of a real Christian.

In verse 19, he says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Listen very carefully, friends.

[11:07] The first mark of a real Christian is not saying you are good. The first mark of becoming a real Christian is to face openly and honestly, God, I am a sinner.

I need mercy. I try to do good, but I fail. I'm not righteous by my own deeds. In fact, I now realise it's impossible for me to be as good as Jesus.

The first step of becoming a real Christian is acknowledging our need to be saved. It's to turn to God to make what is impossible possible.

God, I am weak. I fail. I fall short. Have mercy on me. Please forgive me. That's the first mark. The second story tells us the next mark of a real Christian.

It begins in verse 15. Follow it with me and see if you can see what that mark is. Now, they were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them.

[12:16] And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him saying, Let the children come to me and do not hinder them for to such belong the kingdom of God.

Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not even enter it. Now, yes, Jesus liked kids and it's good to tell the kids that.

But more than that, Jesus is saying here that children have something we grown-ups tend not to have. We can learn from children something.

In fact, he says, we must learn from children this particular thing. It's helpful to know what it isn't. He's not saying become as innocent as a child.

Can you imagine that? I've lived for 50 years becoming innocent. To become pure like a child? Come on. That's not what he's talking about. What is he talking about? What is the quality?

[13:19] Verse 17. See in verse 17, it is how they receive the kingdom of God. Unless you receive the kingdom of God like a child.

The quality in view here, my friends, is faith. Children are extraordinary when it comes to having faith.

They just believe. They trust you without question. I know children that have absolutely unshakable faith that there is a man who lives on the North Pole with many elves.

He spends the entire year making presents. He then in one night hops on his sleigh with his flying reindeer, goes to every house on every planet, to every child, and he knows not only whether they've been good or bad, but what present they want.

And I have met children that believe that with joyful, all-encompassing, unquestioning faith. Children have amazing faith.

[14:23] Fortunately, I know children, and some of them are the ones I just described, that also have faith in something that's far more wonderful. They believe in Jesus.

I have met children, three, four, who know their friend, their invisible friend and here is Jesus.

He is their king. He is their saviour. He's always with them. He can always hear their prayers. They can trust him. He will never leave them alone, and when they die, they'll be with him in heaven.

Children as young as three, as four, know this, and they put us to shame when we doubt it. That's the kind of faith Jesus says we should have.

In fact, that's the kind of faith Jesus says we must have. If we want to enter and belong to the kingdom of God, we must receive it like a child.

[15:22] We must trust our king. Always. Absolutely. So, the first two marks. A real Christian is someone who admits their need.

God have mercy. I'm a sinner. But then they put their faith in someone that can rescue them and give them that mercy. The second mark of a Christian is they trust Jesus like a child.

What's the final mark of a true Christian? We see it in the third story. Now, the third story is a little longer, so I'll read it bit by bit and explain it as we go. Starting with verse 18.

A ruler asked Jesus, Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good?

No one's good but God alone. Jesus is actually challenging this man. He says, Hang on, we are all Jews. We know for a fact Jews do not believe we can be good.

[16:28] God alone is good. We have to make sacrifices because we sin. What Jesus is actually doing here is starting to challenge where the man is coming from because he actually believes that he is good enough.

His question, What do I need to do to get to heaven? And we'll see from his answer in a moment, he actually thinks he's done it.

Well, Jesus answers the question, What do I need to do to go to heaven? In verse 20. You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery. Do not kill. Do not steal.

Do not bear false witness. Honour your father and mother. And he said, Oh, all these I have observed from my youth. Now, just out of interest, do you recognise those five commands?

They're actually five of the ten commandments. It's helpful to notice the ten commandments basically have two parts. The first four commandments are how to be righteous in your relationship with God.

[17:36] And the last six commandments are how to be righteous in your relationship with people. These five commandments are from the second of those commandments, the six commandments.

He basically says you are to love people. Now, just out of those four, love God, love people.

Remember Jesus summarised the commandments? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, so I'm on and strength.

Love one another as I've loved you. And that's when we start to realise, oh God, have mercy, I'm a sinner. But when he does these five commands, do you know which command he omitted?

It's the last command and my friends, it's the command to do with money. You shall not covet. You shall not want what you do not have and that others have.

Now, the man doesn't notice that, so when Jesus tells him the commands, he says, oh, I've been doing that since I was a boy. And I actually believe that Jesus doesn't think, oh, come on.

[18:44] We're told that Peter, when he had Mark write Mark's gospel, the comment there is, Jesus loved him. That is, he thought, well done, mate. Just one thing, there's one thing you still lack.

What is the one thing he lacks? Look at verse 22. When Jesus heard it, he said to him, one thing you still lack, sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven and come, follow me.

But when he heard this, he became sad because he was very rich. And from this point, we realise the man has a change of heart. His face falls and he actually leaves Jesus.

Why? Because he's very wealthy. He covets and loves his wealth. His wealth is more valuable to him than following Jesus.

Now don't be confused by what it is he lacks. It's not, oh, one thing you lack, you have to give away all your money. That's not what he lacks. What's the one thing he lacks? Verse 22.

[19:53] Jesus says at the end of verse 22, follow me. The thing you lack, there's only one more thing you need, is me, the Messiah. Follow me, your Saviour.

But he turns away. And what does Jesus say in verse 24? Jesus looking at him said, how hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God.

In fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard it said, then who can be saved? But he said, well, what is impossible with men is possible with God?

Peter said, lo, we've left our homes and followed you. And he said to them, truly I say to you, there's no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents for the sake of the kingdom who will not receive manifold more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

I just want to focus though on his statement. How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. How hard it is for a rich person to follow Jesus.

[21:15] Can I say a few things just on that? I've reflected on this. I don't think I know personally anyone who is poor. And I suspect neither do you.

We live in the top 1% of the world's population when it comes to wealth. Sure you know someone who are a bit wealthier than you and sure you know some people a bit poorer than you but all of us are in the top 1%.

That is, we are all rich. And Jesus said, you know, when you're rich it's hard to enter the kingdom of God.

You know what the marks about a rich person is? And I bet you've got it. You haven't got enough. That's one of the marks of being rich. You know, you've got gazillions as far as 99% of the world is concerned but you say, no, no, no, I still haven't got.

And Jesus has said very clearly, you cannot serve both God and money. You have to choose. The second thing I want to say is that when the man goes away his disciples are gobsmacked and think, man, if he's not saved then who can be saved?

[22 : 37] Because what they're thinking is that was the prime believer. He was a guy who was godly, kept all the commandments from his youth, he was wealthy and blessed by God, he says he keeps all the commands and then you say some ridiculous thing like give away all your money and no wonder he goes away.

Man, if he can't be saved who can be? But the problem with that man was he was only prepared to do what he had to do to get to heaven and when Jesus said the thing you have to do is follow me and your money is the problem, he went away.

I'm encouraged to know that one thing I can do and one thing you can do is I can choose right now to follow Jesus.

It is important when you realise that Peter, when he says to Jesus we've left everything to follow you, Jesus makes the promise yes, I want to make it very clear to you that some of you have sacrificed a lot and you may lose your job, you may lose your family, you may lose your friends but I promise you in this life you will get manifold more in return and in the next life you will have eternal life.

To follow Jesus as a wealthy person in Vancouver will be difficult. I think the sacrifices we have to make are minimal compared to many Christians.

[24 : 16] But the last thing I want to ask is how is it possible that he can make you or me righteous? How is it possible that we can be justified?

You do recall that Jesus said I have come to seek and to save the lost. How does he make the tax collector justified?

because the tax collector turns to God for mercy. It's only when we follow Jesus and come to Jesus and say Jesus you lived the life I just will never be able to live and then you died the death that I deserve to die and now you say you'll give me your life in return for mine.

I gladly give my life to you and follow you. Listen carefully the third mark of a real believer is they follow Jesus no matter what the cost.

Why would a real Christian do this? Well a real Christian believes they are a sinner who needs God's mercy. They're not good enough for heaven. they are someone that realises they need to put their faith in God alone because he is the only one that can rescue them and they follow him wherever he leaves.

[25 : 46] If you want to become a real Christian you need to repent of your sins you need to believe in the son of God and you need to follow him obey. In these two stories two men choose not to follow Jesus.

the Pharisee doesn't follow him because he's too proud. The rich ruler doesn't follow him because he loves his money. What is stopping some of you from following Jesus?

What happens now is I want to encourage those who are not following Jesus to repent believe and follow him to become Christians.

Christians. There are two groups in this room. There are those who are Christians and there are those who not. Of those that are not Christians there are two groups. There are those who don't want to become Christians and there are those who do.

Those who don't want to become Christians I just have one word beware. God will judge you fairly but you will only get what you deserve and I guarantee there is not a person in this building let alone on this planet that deserves heaven.

[27 : 09] So if you do not follow Jesus you will not get heaven. You will get what you deserve but there are those who are not Christians who do want to follow Jesus and there's two of those.

Of those two there are some who have just had their eyes opened and say I now see it. There's nothing stopping me. I need to follow Jesus now.

And there are some who go I'm so close to seeing it but I don't think I'm ready to become a Christian right now. What I want you to do is this. I want to encourage those that have seen it to do it right now to become a Christian right now.

It's simple. It's being like a child. You simply say to your heavenly father I have sinned please forgive me. I put my faith in Jesus who died for me and I give my whole life to him and I now pledge to follow him as my Lord and saviour till I meet him face to face.

Are you ready? Some of you are. What I suggest we do is in a moment I will pray a prayer Christian.

[28 : 24] I thought I'd read it first so you know the kind of thing you would say and then if you'd like to make it your prayer you can pray it. Let me read you. This is not magic it's just a prayer that is saying to God I want to become a real Christian.

It says Dear Father in Heaven I am so sorry for not following you. Please forgive my sins. I trust to give me new life.

I ask for that new life now. Help me to follow you. Send your Holy Spirit to me so I can be enabled to serve you till I meet you face to face.

Thanks for your love. I pray this in the name of my Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. Now if that's the kind of prayer you would like to pray now is the time to do because we'll be going into our time of prayer in a moment.

I'll pray this prayer and pause if you'd like to make this your prayer repeat it to the Lord in your mind after me.

[29 : 40] So let's pray. If you want to make this your prayer just repeat it quietly. Dear Father in Heaven I am so sorry for not following you.

Please forgive my sins. I trust Jesus and what he did. He died for my sins and rose from the dead to give me new life.

I ask for that new life now. Help me to follow you. send your Holy Spirit to me so I can be enabled to serve you till I meet you face to face.

Thank you for your love. I pray this in the name of my Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have just one thing I'm going to say. I have a couple of million things I could say. But if you prayed that prayer you know what you know for a fact?

[31 : 01] You can trust Jesus like a child. That is he has heard your prayer and he has answered your prayer.

Welcome into the kingdom of God. You've just been saved dare I say to an Anglican. You've just received the kingdom of God like a child and you now belong to the king.

Praise the Lord. Hallelujah. Etc. While you're still kneeling can I just invite you to do one other thing. If you take out this brochure and look at this side this is the course I mentioned that that warden did that helped him understand and have his eyes open. This explains what the course involves when it starts etc.

I basically want to encourage people that it's a great course to do. If you just prayed the prayer or you just you'd really like to become a Christian or you really want to understand more then this is what you do.

[32 : 12] If you turn over on the back what I'm going to ask you to do during the announcements yes there'll be announcements but I'm sure you're very multitasking you can fill out this and what I'm asking I'd love everyone to put some comment on the top there should be pencils there but particularly if you want to do the Christianity explored tick the first square if today you prayed that prayer for the first time and understood what you were doing tick the second square and if you really want to become a Christian but you're not quite there yet then tick the third square so we know and can I say if you tick any of the squares please put your name and your contact number so we can call you that's pretty important well as I said in the moment we'll have our prayers and announcements just so you're not surprised during the last hymn we're going to pass the plate around again that's not to put more money in

I'm going to ask everyone if once you've written your comments or tick the square just put it in the offer tree plate as it goes around so we've got it and after the service if you'd like someone to pray with you we often pray in the two side chapels so if you'd like someone to pray with you just take a

seat in one of the side chapels and we'll pray with you well let's continue now to pray Julie's going to lead us in prayer and God bless you let's pray please your heads to pray Lord God we give you thanks for time and space to worship you this morning for music that draws our souls to you for your word that brings light for the forgiveness of our sins for being together in you we give thanks that in our time of worship together we get glimpses of that great paradox how messy we are and how much you love us may we never trust in ourselves that we are righteous enough in your sight and may we truly follow you

Lord in your mercy Lord Jesus on this day we honor our mothers we give you thanks for our own mother and for all the mothers in our midst thank you that even in our foibles they love us so passionately may they know that we love them and that they matter so much more than we acknowledge may you bestow your love upon each of them strengthen each mother as they seek to love their own children give them patience joy and wisdom and we thank you for your model of parenthood so tender so personal so abundant in truth and grace Lord in your mercy Jesus we pray for our world your world in pain and turmoil in so many places we pray for mercy on the people of Pakistan in such danger and so divided in factions protect them bring relief to that battered country we pray be with the leaders trying to resolve the tensions and the dangers we pray for the strife in Sri Lanka may the fighting end quickly and peacefully comfort the loved ones of those who died in the most recent attacks thank you for bringing relief to the fires in California support those who have lost their homes Lord in your mercy we pray for our province of British Columbia we ask your mercy on the upcoming election that there would be clear mandates and yet a new unity we pray we pray for leaders who are wise honest compassionate and courageous we pray for protection upon those leaders and their families Lord in your mercy we pray for our fragile

Anglican communion wounded struggling bring healing God save us we pray for the wisdom and humility to guide our efforts for truth and unity we pray for reconciliation that gives glory to you alone we pray for all the bishops involved Archbishop Williams and Venables Bishops Harvey Ferris Harding and Ingham may they seek your will and your heart in new and deeper ways and may your word inform them Lord in your mercy father our hearts are heavy as the trial over the ownership of our buildings loom near take care of us through this hold us tight teach us through this forgive our anger may all that we say and do reflect the work of Christ may we be your people as we walk through this be present with us as we meet tomorrow night together draw us closer to one another hold our unity firmly in your hands and give us humble hearts to hear your spirit

[37 : 55] Lord in your mercy dear God we pray for the pain and suffering in all our lives and we ask for your healing and redemption we desperately need your comfort wisdom and perspective every day we pray for those in pain and difficulty known to us at St.

John's for Paul Gil Maggie Ron Harold and Ben and in a moment of silence we pray for those known specifically to each of us be be with them bring them to our minds frequently that we would pray for them and love them well through the coming week Lord in your mercy and today it to us like to the Astaire for a pseud what d through oh much' i