

“Will Those Who Are Saved Be Few?” (Luke 13:22–35)

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Imagine you're trying to organize a family reunion. You have a large family with a history of not getting along. You want to make sure that everyone comes to this reunion, so you plan carefully. You're very worried about what kind of food and drink to serve. First, you think about what snacks to serve. You know that a lot of people in your family love peanuts. But then you think of that cousin with the severe peanut allergy, and you want him to come, so you decide there can be no peanuts. That's not such a big deal. People can go without peanuts for a day. So, you settle on some other snacks. You remember there are some people who have a gluten intolerance, but they don't mind if other people eat gluten, so you make sure to have some gluten-free options. But then you think about the meal you're going to serve. Traditionally, the family reunion has been a cookout, and you were thinking of barbecuing hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken. You start calculating how much meat to buy when you remember that there are two people in your family who are vegans. And they're not quiet, unassuming vegans. They are the zealous, nobody-should-kill-and-eat-animals kind of vegan. They refuse to be with people who eat meat. They won't go to any restaurant that serves meat. And if you're barbecuing anything but corn on the cob, they're not coming. Can you really have a family reunion without the barbecue? If everyone is eating no-pork-and-beans without hot dogs and veggie burgers, will everyone be happy?

You start to think that you can live with this vegan solution, and then you start to think about beverages. You'll have bottles of water and soda, and perhaps some iced tea. But traditionally, reunions in your family have had beer. You start to calculate how much beer you would need to buy when you remember there are some recovering alcoholics—and perhaps some not-so-recovering alcoholics—in your family. And, like the vegans, if they know that alcohol is being served, they won't come. You start to think about some other people in your family, the kind that expect to have a hamburger and a beer. How will they respond to an invitation promising them all the fun they can have with a black bean burger and a glass of iced tea? Will they come?

And, forget about food, the real issue is that some people in your family might not come to the reunion if they know that other people in your family will be there. They might not care if you're serving liver and onions; but they do care if your uncle Sal will be there.

The point of this story is to show not that it's impossible to please everyone. We already know that. It's to show that it's pretty much impossible to include everyone. In our time, the idea of inclusion has become very important. Exclusion is a dirty word. We don't want to exclude anyone. No child is to be left behind. Some people don't think anyone should be excluded from entering our country. In sports, people are afraid of excluding transgender women, biological men who identify as women. So, in some cases, biological men are beating biological women in track and field and in weightlifting, among other things. In that case, the desire to include transgender women ends up excluding biological women from winning these events.

The reality is that in nearly every case, there will be always be people excluded. And that is certainly the case in the kingdom of God. The reality is that not every human being will enter the kingdom. Not every person will be included among God's people. This is a very clear principle, from nearly the beginning of the Bible all the way to the end. And we see this in the passage that we're looking at today, Luke 13:22–35. But though there will be some people who are excluded from God's kingdom, it is not because God doesn't care or because he's cruel. No, we'll see Jesus lamenting over the fact that some people will not enter. God may be an exclusive God, but he longs to include everyone, even though he can't.

Let's begin by reading Luke 13:22–30:

²² He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³ And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ 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.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ And people will come from east and west, and from north

and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”¹

Luke begins by stating that Jesus was headed towards Jerusalem. This has been the case for about four chapters now. Luke’s main concern isn’t about geography. If Jesus wanted to get to Jerusalem from Galilee, it would only take three days of walking. He could have been there by now. But Luke is more concerned about what Jerusalem means to Jesus. Jerusalem is where Jesus is going to die. And Jesus knows that. That’s why, in Luke 9:51, we read: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Jesus knows what’s coming, and this is Luke’s way of reminding his readers what Jesus is going to face.

As Jesus is making his way through towns and villages, teaching people about the kingdom of God, someone asks an important question: “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” This question makes sense in light of Jesus’ teaching that unless you repent, you will perish (Luke 13:1–5) and that there are barren trees that will be cut down (Luke 13:6–9). Will many survive the judgment of God and enter his kingdom, or will it only be a few?

Jesus doesn’t answer the question directly. He turns it around to say, “Don’t worry about the numbers. Make sure that *you* enter the kingdom!” He says that the door to the kingdom is narrow. Many will attempt to enter it, but they won’t be able to get in. And there will be a time when it is too late for them to enter. The master of the house will shut the door, and at that time it will be impossible to get in. Still, people will say, “Let us in!” Then the master of the house, who is surely Jesus, will say, “I do not know where you come from.” Jesus doesn’t mean that literally. Jesus, as the Son of God, knows everything. But he means, “I don’t know you. I don’t have a personal relationship with you. You’re not on my team. You didn’t accept the invitation to the family reunion while you still had time to come. And once the party has begun, it’s too late to come in.”

The people who are shut out will say, “We ate and drank in your presence, you taught in our streets.” It’s their way of saying, “But we spent time with you. We hung out with you. We even had meals with you. We heard your words.” But for Jesus, it’s not enough that you spend some time with him. It’s not enough that you went to church for some time, or even took the Lord’s Supper and were baptized. Jesus wants faith. Faith is trusting in him, not just knowing facts about him. Real trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior leads to obedience. It leads to a changed life.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

It's not enough to say you believe in him. Anyone can do that. You have to mean it, and if you mean it, there will be things in your life that demonstrate that truth.

Jesus says that this master will say, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil." The line comes from Psalm 6:8, a Psalm in which David says that his enemies will be ashamed (Psalm 6:10). You may think it's strange that these people, who apparently want to get into the party, are called workers of evil. But to ignore Jesus' calls to repentance is evil. To reject Jesus is to reject God. Rejecting God is evil because he is the very reason why we exist.

There's a great illustration that by a pastor and author, Tim Keller, that I would like to read. This is what he says:

Imagine a widow has a son she raises and puts through good schools and a good university at great sacrifice to herself, for she is a woman of very slender means. And as she's raising him she says, "Son, I want you to live a good life. I want you to always tell the truth, always work hard, and care for the poor." And after the young man graduates from college he goes off into his career and life—and never speaks to his mother or spends time with her. Oh, he may send her a card on her birthday, but he never phones or visits. What if you asked him about his relationship with his mother, and he responded: "No, I don't have anything to do with her personally. But I always tell the truth, work hard, and care for the poor. I've lived a good life—that's all that matters, isn't it?"

I doubt you would be satisfied with that answer. It is not enough for the man to merely live a moral life as his mother desired without having any kind of relationship with her. His behavior is condemnable because in fact she gave him all he has. More than just a moral life, he owes her his love and loyalty.

And if there is a God, you owe him literally everything. If there is a God, you owe him far more than a morally decent life. He deserves to be at the center of your life. Even if you are a good person but you are not letting God be God to you, you are . . . guilty of sin. . . . You are being your own savior and lord.²

We often ignore God. Though he has given us life, and though we exist to know him, love him, worship him, and serve him, we take him for granted. That is wrong. And because we do this, the world is cracked. We fight, we argue, we're selfish, we're greedy. Things are not the way they ought to be.

And that puts us in a bind. If God is going to fix the world, he has to remove all evil. If we're evil, God would have to remove us. Is there a way for God to remove the evil from us without removing us?

² Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life's Biggest Questions* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 36–37.

That's where Jesus comes in. Jesus lived the perfect life that we don't. He always put his relationship with God the Father first. He was never selfish. Yet he died as a criminal. He was literally regarded as sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that when he died, God could destroy sin without destroying all sinners. And if you have a right relationship with Jesus, your evil has already been punished. And God has given you the Holy Spirit to start changing you from the inside out, to start replacing evil desires with good ones.

Jesus is telling these Jewish people that they should have known that he is the promised Messiah, the one that was prophesied to come. The Old Testament promised there would be a descendant of Eve, of Abraham, of Judah, and of David, who would be the anointed King, the one who would defeat the enemies of God's people. But the Old Testament also promised a suffering servant of God, someone who would come and take the punishment that God's people deserved for their sin, so that they could be healed and delivered from condemnation. They should have known that Jesus fulfilled these roles. But so many didn't. And Jesus warns them here that while their faithful forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, will be in the kingdom of God, along with all the prophets, not every Jewish person will be there. No one gets an automatic ticket to the kingdom of God. It's not based on your genes, or whether your parents had faith. It's not based on church attendance or how many good works you've done, because even your best acts are tainted with selfish motives, and we have all sinned in many ways. The one thing that gets us a ticket to the great family reunion, when we are reunited and reconciled to God the Father, is whether we know Jesus. Or, more accurately, whether Jesus knows us.

Last weekend, I was in Washington, D.C. I happened to walk by the White House, but I didn't get in. I admit I didn't try to get in, but if I had tried to get in, I wouldn't have been allowed in. I wouldn't have been allowed in even if I said, "I know the president. I've seen Donald Trump on TV! I've watched *The Apprentice*! I've stayed in a Trump Hotel! I even went to one of his rallies!" (Those last two things aren't true, by the way.) None of that would matter to the Secret Service agents. But if, while I was standing outside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Donald Trump came out of the White House and said, "I know him," then I would get in.

That's how it's like with Jesus. If he knows us because we trust him and have been following him, he will let us in to the kingdom. He has the keys to the kingdom of God. Or, as it says in Isaiah, he has "the key to the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (Isa. 22:22). Jesus says that many others will enter into the

kingdom and eat. They will come from east and west and north and south. He's probably referring to Jews who were scattered throughout the world, but also Gentiles—anyone who has faith in him.

Some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last. It's not how you start out in life; it's how you end up. We all know the story of the tortoise and the hare. They have a race, and the hare starts out fast. Quite naturally, he's faster than the tortoise. But he is arrogant and proud and perhaps lazy, so he takes a nap. And when he finally wakes up, he realizes the tortoise has won the race. Some people appear to start out life quite well. They may have been raised in the church and baptized at an early age. But then they grow up and don't go to church and don't really seem to be obey Jesus. They don't care that some people don't know Jesus. They don't obey Jesus in ways that only Christians do. Some people start out life poorly. They're the obvious sinners, the people who do terrible wrongs, the people whom you might consider to be the real "workers of evil." But if they turn to Jesus in faith, knowing that he alone can bring them forgiveness and reconciliation with God, then they enter into God's kingdom.

Jesus makes it clear that there will be some excluded from the great party that is eternity with God. For them, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, a terrible fate we don't want to know personally. Those excluded are those who didn't put their lives in Jesus' hands in this life, while there's still time to turn from sin and turn to the Savior.

This idea of exclusion is rejected by some people who claim to be Christians. They believe in what is called universalism: somehow, in some way, everyone will be saved. But this goes against the grain of the whole Bible. God is continually making a division between his people and those who are against him. On Wednesday nights, we're reading through Exodus, and we saw this in chapter 8, when God makes a distinction between his people, living in Goshen, and the Egyptians. The Egyptians suffer the fourth plague and the Israelites don't (Exod. 8:20–24). The tenth plague is the worst, the one that causes Pharaoh to let the Israelites out of slavery. That plague had the firstborn of all families die—unless they obeyed the word of God and sacrificed a lamb and placed the blood of the lamb on their door frames. This was a sign that they trusted in God's word. This trust led to obedience. And it was also a sign of atonement. The Israelites and anyone who joined with them were sinners, but a substitute could die in their place, taking the penalty they deserved for sin.

As the story of the Bible progresses, God makes divisions within Israel itself. It is clear that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,” to use the apostle Paul’s words (Rom. 9:6). Not everyone in Israel had faith in God and his promises. God knew that. We’re told in both the Old and New Testaments that God knows who are his (Num. 16:5; Nah. 1:7; John 10:14, 27; 1 Cor. 8:3; 2 Tim. 2:19). Jesus says that he is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). In John 10, he says that he is the shepherd who brings his sheep through the gate. The gate keeper opens to him, and he leads his sheep, who follow his voice, into safe pasture (John 10:2–3). There are others who try to sneak into the sheepfold by another way, but they are thieves and robbers (John 10:1). Jesus says, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (John 10:9). He says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14–15). He tells the Jewish people he has other sheep—Gentiles—and they will be become part of the one fold of God. He says that those who don’t pay heed to his voice are not his sheep (John 10:26), but, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

Jesus clearly includes some and excludes others. The irony is that if a pastor disagrees with Jesus and says that all will be saved, he is including a Jesus of his own making and excluding the real Jesus. And he will be including people into his church who don’t believe in the real Jesus, and he will exclude ones who do, for they will seek out a church where the truth of the Bible is taught. Even attempts to create a “radically inclusive Jesus” end up excluding people.

To some, the idea of an exclusive Jesus might seem cruel or cold. But even though Jesus does exclude some, we can never accuse him of not caring, of being indifferent or unloving. We see this in the next few verses, verses 31–35:

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’ ³³ Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’ ³⁴ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

Some Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, tell him that Herod Antipas wants to kill him. Herod was the ruler over Galilee, and he will eventually figure into Jesus' death. Jesus gives them a message: "Tell that fox Herod that I'm not afraid. I'll continue to do my work until it's done." Jesus will continue to perform miracles, to cast out demons and heal people. He will continue to teach. And his course will be finished on the third day. That could be just a figure of speech. But it's also an allusion to his resurrection. Jesus knew he wouldn't die in Galilee. He would die in Jerusalem, where prophets and apostles are killed. He would die on the cross, because some Jewish leaders wanted him dead, and because neither Pilate nor Herod stepped into rescue an innocent man. He died because Satan wanted him dead. But ultimately, he died because it was God's plan to rescue sinners. The Father sent the Son, his dear, loved, one-of-a-kind Son to die in the place of sinners. And Jesus came to lay down his life, since it was no less his plan than the Father's. Jesus knew what was coming, and he wasn't afraid of any man who might get in his way. He knew that his course included death on the cross and resurrection from the grave.

But even though he knew what was coming, and that many people would not enter the kingdom, he still laments. Jerusalem stands for the whole nation of Israel. Jesus laments that not all of Israel would come under his wings. He yearned to protect them the way a hen protects her brood. But they were not willing to come under his wings.

Now, the truth is that no one is willing to come under Jesus' wings unless they are first changed by God. Paul says that no one seeks for (Rom. 3:11), and the fact is that no one would seek after him were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit. And some may wonder why God doesn't change everyone's heart through the work of the Holy Spirit. Some might say that such a thing would violate free will. But the Bible never says that. In fact, the Bible says: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov. 21:1). God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 4:21; 9:12; 10:1; 14:8). And God has hardened and softened other hearts as he sees fit. So, it's not as though God is helpless. Yet, for some reason, God has chosen to bring some people to faith and not all. In a similar way, Jesus chose to let his friend Lazarus die. He did this so he could later bring Lazarus back to life. This was all for God's glory and to show what Jesus could do and what he would do by dying and being raised back to life himself (John 11:4, see also John 11:21, 37). But Jesus still wept (John 11:35). And then he raised Lazarus back to life.

We might say that God, in one sense, wants all people to be in his kingdom, but in another sense, he wants something else, something greater. Again, some people would say that this greater thing is to respect a person's free will. But the Bible doesn't say that clearly, and I don't think our will is as free as we sometimes think it is. But the Bible does say, in different ways, that God desires his own glory above all else. And this is a good thing. God is the most glorious being. If God glorified someone else more than he glorified himself, God would be an idolater, and therefore a worker of evil. But God doesn't just love and glorify himself. He loves sinners, and he has chosen to bring some sinners to glory through the door that is Jesus. We can accept that truth, and trust Jesus, or we can complain about God and show our true selves, that we don't love him and trust him. We may not understand all God's ways. In fact, if God is God and we are finite beings, we shouldn't expect to understand God completely. But we should trust that God is good and wise and that he always does what is right. And we should run under the protection of Jesus, because he is the only way to get into the kingdom. He is an exclusive God, but he's also a God who cares, who loves so deeply that he would die for sinners, and who even laments that other sinners will not be part of his kingdom. This is a God you can love, a God you can trust, a God who is worth following.

This message of exclusivity is one that challenges our society. And it challenges all of us. It's heavy. We should feel the weight of it. Some people will be shut out of the kingdom of God. And this is their own choosing. They didn't want to enter under God's terms. They thought that they God would allow them to do whatever they wanted and respect what they believe are their rights. This should cause us to lament. It should cause us to warn other people about this reality, to urge them to trust in Jesus.

And it should cause us to make sure that we are following Jesus. The truth is, we don't know how many will be reconciled to God. It may be very few. But Jesus doesn't want us to speculate about that. He wants us to consider if we're entering the narrow gate. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matt. 7:13–14). He gives salvation as a gift, but it's a gift that's hard to receive. Receiving it means acknowledging that we're sinners who can't rescue ourselves. It's a blow to our pride. And the way of Jesus isn't easy. When we follow Jesus, some people will hate us. We have to continue repenting, turning away from the allure of

the world and all the things it promises us will make us happy. It means putting our old selves to death so Jesus can make us into new people, the people we should be.

What we should do today is consider if we're entering the narrow gate. Are we truly following Jesus? Are there ways that we have been following the world, walking that broad path that leads to destruction? If so, it's not too late to turn around and get on the right path. As long as there is life and breath in a person, it is not too late to change paths, to walk toward heaven's gate, Jesus himself. He stands waiting. If we knock on his door in faith, he will let us in. Those who truly seek him will never be excluded. If we know this, we should tell others. In that great feast of heaven, there is room for more.