

Parables of Jesus

Message 4

Do All Roads Lead to Heaven?

Luke 13:22-30

Introduction

Four years ago I ushered at the memorial service of a dear family friend. Funerals are always sobering occasions. We are hit with the reality that we will never see our friend again. All the laughter, comfort, and wisdom that he brought us are gone forever except in our memories. We grieve for ourselves, but also for his wife. They were married 60 years. That is four times as long as most of you can remember. Sixty four years ago was the last time that Mrs. Ternigan had ever lived alone, and now she is faced with a life full of memories which will remind her that the most significant part of her life is gone. We do grieve for the loss of this wonderful man – but we also are glad for those memories. He was a warm, inspiring individual, and his influence will live on. But in Mr. Ternigan’s case there is greater cause for rejoicing, because he is now with Jesus in heaven. He died of cancer. Now the pain is gone forever. He loved Jesus, and now he is with him forever. Furthermore, we also may have the hope of seeing Mr. Ternigan again in heaven. This is a great comfort to his friends, those of us who ritually said goodbye to him four years ago.

The prospect of going to heaven – a place of eternal joy and fulfillment – is a great comfort to many, but not to all. Some people do not believe there is an afterlife, or if there is, we cannot know what it consists of. And some people are not qualified to go to heaven. This is a hard teaching. It is not a popular subject. I must admit that I doubt I would have thought to teach on this topic had not this parable come up in Luke’s gospel. But here it is, and it would be wrong of me and foolish of you to ignore this passage.

The Path to Heaven is Difficult

Getting to heaven is hard, and many people will not make it. Jesus makes this point from several angles. First He tells us to strive. Heaven is no one’s birthright. It is not available for those who are merely rich or beautiful or popular, or even good. It is only for those who work hard to get there. The Greek word for “strive” is used several other times in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 9:25 we read, “And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.” Here Paul is speaking of athletic games, such as our Olympics this summer in Greece. Olympic athletes work extremely hard, and harshly discipline themselves to qualify to compete in those international sports. Paul mentions this in 1 Corinthians 9 as a model of the Christian life, which must also be disciplined and strenuous.

Paul follows up this conviction of the necessity of laboring in the Christian life with his own example. In Colossians 1:29 he says of his own life and ministry, “To this end I also labor, *striving* according to His working which works in me mightily.” Anyone who is acquainted with Paul’s life knows that this was not a false claim. But Paul was not unique. Later in Colossians [4:12] he says of one of his colleagues, “Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always *laboring* fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” Near the end of his life, Paul wrote to his beloved disciple Timothy that he should “*Fight* the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called...” [1 Timothy 6:12] In these verses the word which Jesus used is translated as “strive”, “labor” and “fight”. It is a mighty striving and a fervent labor. It is impossible to make this passage say anything other than that getting to heaven is very hard work.

How hard do you work at being a Christian? There is a current of teaching going around these days that believing in Christ will solve all your problems. A couple of decades ago this strain of thought was called the Health and Wealth Gospel. Some preachers told their people that all they had to do was pray for a pretty wife, a bigger house, a new car – and they would have it. “Name it and claim it” was their slogan. It was very appealing, but not very Biblical. Much better was the approach of Martin Luther. Luther is

famous for his teaching that salvation is through Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. Some people take this to mean that as long as we agree with the teachings of the Bible, particularly that Jesus died for our sins, we are guaranteed a ticket to heaven. But that is a terrible distortion of what the reformers actually taught. It is true that nothing we can do will make us acceptable with God. You cannot live a life good enough to buy your way into heaven. Only Jesus can get you a ticket to heaven. His death paid the penalty for our sins, and when we believe in Him we get the credit for His righteousness. Jesus' goodness gives us the pass to stand before God. But having been accepted by God, there is still the question of how to live for Him. To answer this question Luther, in particular, taught something he called a "theology of the cross". This was in opposition to a theology of success or of victory. Of course Luther knew that we *are* victorious in Christ, but he was focusing on the way our daily lives unfold – and they contain suffering. Luther saw that we are called to struggle in life, as Christ did while on earth. It is after this life is over that we have full victory and rest.

How would you characterize your attitude toward the Kingdom of God? Are you striving to enter, or are you coasting along? Do you work hard to follow Jesus, or are you looking for easy discipleship? Let's read on to see what else is involved in successfully getting to heaven.

The Entrance to Heaven is Narrow

Jesus next says that the entrance to heaven is a narrow gate. Many people will crowd around this narrow passage way, many will get close to the entrance, but many will never actually pass through. Matthew's gospel elaborates a bit on this idea. In chapter 7, verses 13 to 14 we read, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." All through the Bible – from the Old Testament to the letters of Paul – man's life is pictured as a path or road. Here we see two paths being offered to man – a broad, smooth, easy road; and a narrow, difficult road. The narrow difficult road – i.e. the life of obedience to Christ – leads to life; but the broad, easy road – i.e. the life of self-indulgence – leads to destruction.

Coming back to Luke, we find that many seek the narrow gate, but many fail to get in. Why is this so? Is it because God hides the key? Does He cover the gate with bushes so that few can locate it? No! The reason many fail to enter is that they find the broad path instead. After much searching and considerable frustration they find a nice wide, smooth road which is easy to travel. This road makes few demands upon them, so they find it very pleasant traveling. They settle in on their journey and quite enjoy the scenery and the sunshine. If anyone questions them about their travels they declare that they are traveling to the Kingdom of God, for that is what they set out to seek. They are so pleased with their travels that they pay little attention to the end of that road. Little do they know that it leads them gaily to a horrible place. suddenly, without warning they fall off the end of the path into unspeakable torment. And all the time they thought they were on the way to heaven.

This parable comes in the midst of the teachings that Jesus gave on the way to Jerusalem. In fact, much of Luke records this journey, which extends from chapter 9 to chapter 19. All along, Jesus was teaching how to live in a way that is pleasing to God. It is sort of a traveling sermon. Maybe we should say it is the "sermon on the road", for it serves a similar function to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Both spell out how we must live if we are going to be a part of God's Kingdom. Last week we discussed a good portion of chapter 12. There Jesus taught us to live for Him, not for wealth or any other human pursuit. We must trust God to care for us, as He cares for the sparrows. Our job is to seek the Kingdom of God, not the city of man. All these things make up the narrow path. We do not get to decide what will please God. We do not get to decide how to live in order to go to heaven. God made the gate, and He made it to admit only people who follow His commands. What have you done about last week's lesson? Have you been trying to obey it? If you ignore and forget what God says to you, how can you ever hope to enter the narrow gate? Are you

someone who thinks you are on your way to heaven, but in reality are happily on your way to hell?

Many are Unable to Enter

Jesus says further that this great throng is *unable* to enter the narrow gate. It is not a problem with the gate – it is a problem with them. They crowd around it, but do not have what it takes to get in. What is that necessary ingredient? It is preparedness. The focus of last week’s parable was on the necessity of being ready for Christ’s return. Jesus came first as a teacher, but He will return as judge and we must be ready for him. The great crowd could not enter the gate because it was locked. They could have entered earlier, but they were busy with other things. They knew about Christ. They ate and drank with Him. They knew he was a preacher. But look closely at how this is worded. Does it say “We heard you preach”? No! It says, “You taught in our streets.” There is no evidence here that they listened to Him – much less that they obeyed Him.

Their relationship with Christ was that of spectators. They saw and knew what Christ was doing, but they were not followers. They are like church members who attend services – even eat and drink at the Lord’s Supper – but pay no attention to the Word of Christ. James says such people are deceived. They are foolish, like a man who looks at his face in a mirror, but then immediately forgets what he looks like! All their lives these people thought they were on the right track because they were moral, or religious – but the one thing they never did was to hear and obey Christ. So when it comes time to enter eternal life, they find that the door has already been locked. Their chance is over.

Jesus tells us what God will say in that day. First He will say, “I do not know you.” This does not mean that they were conceived and born without God’s awareness. In both Old and New Testaments, the word “know”, especially when applied to God, refers to much more than mere awareness of existence. “Know” means an intimate relationship. This is clear in Genesis 4:1 when it says, “Now Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain...” Everyone can see we are talking about the closest form of intimacy here. When God was planning to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, He decided to share this secret with Abraham. God said He would do this because, “I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord...” [Gen. 18:19] Here God’s knowing is a powerful force that creates obedience in Abraham. In Isaiah, God’s people are condemned because they did not reciprocate that intimacy with God. Isaiah began his prophecy saying, “The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.” [1:3] The central reason the spectators cannot enter heaven is that they do not have a personal relationship with God.

Let’s think about this from another angle. Even if we consider knowing simply as awareness, how could God not know someone? What would it mean for God not to know you? It would mean that God has put you out of His mind – that He does not think about you. And why would God not think about you? Last week we read in Luke 12 that God thinks about the birds and the flowers. That passage pointed out that we could count on God to care for us because we are more valuable than birds and flowers – unless we have become hateful to Him. It is a terrible thing when God does not know you.

God will also say, “Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.” Here we have the crux of the problem. God will lock the door to heaven and have nothing to do with these people because they are iniquitous – wicked. How could this be? Is this crowd populated by murderers and thieves? Who would we expect to be seeking entrance to God’s Kingdom, anyway? I doubt it would be axe-murderers and extortioners. As we noted earlier, the crowd is made up of good townsfolk – people who go to church and are decent citizens. Then how could God call them wicked? What terrible thing have they done? Just one. They have refused to listen to the words of Christ! They did not take the narrow path. They found an easier path. They decided that it was not necessary to do what Christ taught. They decided for themselves what is good. The problem with this is it implicitly condemns Jesus. They implied that Jesus had it wrong – that there was

another way to live. Ultimately, they considered Jesus either a fool or a fraud.

The Misery of Those Who Do Not Enter

The climax to this passage is too horrible to dwell on for very long. Those who refuse to hear Christ will in eternity be able to see the wonderful festivities in the Kingdom of God, but they will be locked out. Their lot will be an eternity of torment. Their tears will never cease, and they will grind their teeth in pain. They will see the patriarchs and prophets, the apostles and evangelists, the young and old, rich and poor, black and white, American and Asian and European and African – a huge crowd no one can count coming from all over time and the globe to celebrate the victory of Christ over sin and over His enemies – they will see all this and know they had their chance and blew it. They had their chance when Jesus was preaching in their town, but they had other things to do.

The Choice Before You

Which road are you following today? Are you struggling against sin in your life? Do you work hard to serve God and others? Do you hear the words of Christ and obey them? Let's consider that one for a moment. Do you hear the words of Christ? What about yesterday? Did you read the Bible at all? Do you read the scripture every day? That is where you will find the words of Christ. If you do not read your Bible, how ever will you know how to live? Now having read it, do you obey what it says? Are you actively trying to align your life with the commands of Christ? What about the week past. Have you been trying to obey the command to seek God's Kingdom? Are you trying to place God's concerns above your own? Remember the good Samaritan? Are you trying to serve the needy around you? Do you even know who they are? I know some at Lehigh. If you cannot think of any needy people here, perhaps you are focused on yourself.

At the end of this parable we have two powerfully contrasting images – the blessedness of heaven, and the torment of hell. I am very comforted to know that Mr. Ternigan is with Christ in heaven today, and I hope to join him there myself one day. But until then life will be a struggle. Sin is a powerful force in my life and in the world. I am pulled constantly to the life of ease. I want to give in. I want a pleasant life. I do not want long hours and late nights. I want the warm fellowship of close friends and the happiness of a cheerful home. I want enough money to buy all I need and desire. But God gives me long hours and late nights. He brings difficult people and situations into my life. Sometimes I cannot spend as much time at home as I would like because duties call me elsewhere. And it seems that we always could use more money. But the good news of this passage is that this is the path to heaven.

Why should you choose a life of hardship? Isn't that crazy? Can you really be sure that heaven is worth it? Isn't this the sort of "pie in the sky" religion that everyone knows is ridiculous? What if we get to the end of life and there is no heaven? Why not live it up now? At least we can have a few years of happiness before we hit the grave. Beware! That is the voice of Satan. He loves to deceive you and he only tells lies. Do not listen to him! Listen to Christ instead!

Hardship With Christ vs Misery With Sin

But the life of hardship is not a life of misery. Never confuse the two. Misery comes from sin. True, sin can be pleasurable for a while, but sin destroys. It destroys friendships, it destroys marriages, it destroys lives – it will destroy your future if you let it. No, hardship is not misery. Hardship is just enduring difficulties. But we have a great hope in life, a blessing we do not even have to wait for – Jesus goes with us in all our hardships. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? Remember we said Jesus is our Good Samaritan? Jesus is the one who finds us when we get beat up in life. He cleans our wounds and bandages our injuries. He carries us along on his own donkey. He gives us rest and healing. And best of all – He paid for everything! Your salvation is so costly you never could have saved yourself – but Christ died to save you, and He goes with you in all your struggles. At the very end of His time on earth He said, "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Which is better, a life of ease, empty of Christ – or a life of difficulty with Jesus as your companion? Do not turn Jesus away. Perhaps you have been pretending to follow Jesus, but your heart has never been in it. Maybe you look like a Christian on the outside, but you don't really care to follow Jesus. Or perhaps you have never tried to follow Jesus. Maybe you are hoping that your good intentions and charitable deeds will buy your way into God's favor. Maybe you are ignoring Jesus' saying that He is the only way to God. Maybe you are offended at the thought of Jesus' death securing your salvation. Be warned! Do not look for the easy path. Do not be deceived by the false promises of other roads. Look instead for the path where Jesus is, the hard path, the only one that leads to heaven.

If you choose the hard path, Jesus will comfort you in your trials. The Holy Spirit will empower you to serve God. And the Father will one day say, "Well done, my faithful servant." Can you think of anything better than life with Jesus as your companion and eternity with God as your Father? I can't. So banish all foolish thoughts of comfort. Choose life, life with Jesus. Take the hard road that leads to real life.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
September 14, 2004