

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

Opening Hymn: #101 — I Am The Door

Those with a knowledge of scripture probably like to do a bit of second-guessing when they hear a speaker's title. What's will this be about? Perhaps we'll hear about Paul and Silas and the time they were in prison. In Acts 16 there's an earthquake at midnight and the gates fly open. The jailer is horrified. When he hears no-one has escaped, he throws himself down at the feet of these two faithful missionaries and asks this very question. But that's not what we're going to talk about.

Instead we want to explore this subject as it was handled by Jesus. The account begins in:

Luke 13:22 And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them . . .

As was often the case in his ministry, this lesson was stimulated by a question: "Lord, are there few that be saved?" But Jesus ignored both the man and his question. The account says that he spoke to THEM (not him). Why did he do this? That requires some speculation:

- Bro. Russell suggested that if Jesus had really answered the question, it would have led to many other questions the answers to which the audience was not prepared to receive (*R1951:3*). He also said it was not the due time to explain the particulars of the two salvations (*R5407:1*).
- If Jesus had answered the question (e.g., "Few are saved" -or- "In fact many are saved") the man might have said "Thank you" and gone his way none the better.
- On the other hand, if the man disagreed with Jesus' answer, a debate might follow which would have focused everyone's attention on what was really of no great consequence.
- So Jesus ignored the question because it was the wrong question. The answer would not do anyone any good.

If an outside observer were to study us, I think he would likely make one observation: "Bible Students love questions! Everywhere you go they seem to be debating one thing or another." We do this even though the answer might not be very important. Example: "Is the number 144,000 of Rev. 7 literal or figurative?" How are we the better if we were absolutely sure we had the definitive answer to that question? The answer satisfies our curiosity, but little more.

The last few verses of the gospel of John recounts an incident when Peter asks a wrong question:

John 21:21,22 (Phillips) [after being told the kind of death he would suffer Peter asks about someone else] "Yes, Lord, but what about him [meaning John]?" "If it is my wish," returned Jesus, "for him to stay until I come, is that your business, Peter? You must follow me."

Rather than being concerned about whether the 144,000 is literal or symbolic, a better question is "What must I do to become a part of the 144,000 mentioned in Rev. 7?" That's the kind of question the man in Luke 13 should have asked: "What must **I** do to be saved?" And that's the question Jesus actually answered. Let's go back to the parable and pick up both the question and the answer:

Luke 13:23–30 Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, **Strive** to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

In the very first word of his response, Jesus answered the question the man should have asked. How can he or anyone be saved? **Strive**—Greek word #75 which has as its root the Greek word *agon* (we get the words *agony* and *agonize*). It means to struggle, literally to compete for a prize, or figuratively to contend with an adversary. It appears six times in the scriptures and has been translated fight, labor fervently, strive.

Where today does one find those who labor fervently, striving and bending every energy to compete for a prize? Athletes come to mind, particularly those who compete in the Olympic games. Such games were held in Jesus' day and this Greek word describes what athletes do to win. Paul used this word and gave us a wonderful word picture about this kind of “striving”:

1 Cor. 9:25–27 (NIV) Everyone who **competes** [#75] in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown of laurel that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man shadow boxing. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

(He also used the word in 2 Tim. 4:7 when he said that he had **fought** a good **fight**.)

And what is it that we should try so hard to do? Enter in at the strait gate. “Strait” is a word we rarely hear today, except in the plural (e.g., “he’s in dire straits,” or “the ship is in the straits of Gibraltar”). It means narrow or constricted. Most modern English translations render the Greek as “narrow door.” In New Testament Greek the word only appears here and twice in a similar passage in Matthew:

Matt. 7:13,14 Enter ye in at the **strait** gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and **MANY** there be which go in thereat: because **strait** is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and **FEW** there be that find it.

Do you want to be “saved” [the question the man should have asked Jesus]? Then you must put forth all your energies and focus all your attention on that objective. Otherwise you will not be victorious. In the ancient world victory in the Greek games was one of the highest honors a man could achieve. Paul uses those games as an example for our struggle against everything that might keep us from the prize.

Winning must be our chief business, and the winners will be accorded the highest honor among all the people in the kingdom.

In the Luke account, the man asked whether there would be only a few saved. In fact Jesus did answer that question in the words we just quoted from Matthew:

Matt. 7:13,14 Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and **MANY** there be which go in thereat: strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and **FEW** there be that find it.

This must seem a bit strange to many Christians. Does one really enter the way to life through a narrow, constricting gate? But isn't entry as simple as confessing that Jesus is one's personal savior? Only a few find it? Yet 1.6 billion people—roughly a third of the world's population—are Christian. That sounds like a lot, not a few!

Yet both this scripture and our own eyes tell us that if one must “strive” to win the prize, there are few competitors. In this parable and in the world around us, we see that many want to be within the master's house as long as it is no great trouble. They think they can enter whenever they wish. But that's not true. Here and also in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins there does come a time when the master of the house shuts the door and those on the outside are not allowed to come in.

Why do they think they should be allowed in? They say, “we have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.” In other words, we know who you are and we like what you have to say. They don't say that they never did anything about those teachings, that they never left what they had like those who were always with him. But they knew Jesus was doing a good work and, if asked who they supported, they would certainly say Jesus.

Might any of us be like that? We enjoy our associations with the brethren, we like the message of the truth, we're reasonably regular in our attendance. But to spend hours in personal study, to deprive ourselves and our loved ones of money or time to devote to the gospel, to think of nothing else except the scriptures and our responsibility for what we know ...well that's a description of a fanatic. It is too extreme. There's too much **agony**.

Yet that's the word Jesus used when he said what appears in our Bible as the word “strive.” Knowing the truth will not save anyone. “Thou believest there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble” [and remain devils!]. (James 2:19) Some think the number 144,000 is figurative because it appears to be much too small. I would be more inclined to think that if it is figurative, the literal number will be much smaller, if membership in that class requires “striving” in the Olympic Games sense of the word.

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

Luke 13:28 There shall be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.

The expression “weeping [sometimes wailing] and gnashing of teeth” occurs only here and six times in Matthew.

Matt. 13:42 And shall cast them [the tares] into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Matt. 13:50 And shall cast them [the bad fish, the wicked] into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Matt. 22:13 Then said the king to the servants, Bind him [the man without a wedding garment] hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matt. 24:51 And shall cut him [the evil servant] asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matt. 25:30 And cast ye the unprofitable [one-talented] servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So we see that “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is associated with tares, bad fish, the one without a wedding garment, an evil servant and a one-talented servant. This is a figure of speech and indicates the keen disappointment associated with loss. One commentator suggested that “gnashing” might be considered as “chattering” teeth since they were in outer darkness where it was always cold. It does not mean second death even though in the case of the tares and bad fish the destruction is in a “furnace of fire.”

We quoted five of the six texts in Matthew. Here’s the last one:

Matt. 8:11,12 “Many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, but the **children of the kingdom** shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The “children of the kingdom” are cast into outer darkness? How can this be? In the parable of the wheat and the tares, our Lord tells us the wheat represents “the children of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:38), are gathered into the barn, while the tares are the ones associated with weeping and gnashing of teeth. We don’t have to guess as to what Jesus means in Matthew 8 because the Luke account says, “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when YE shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.” The “ye” means the leaders of the people, the scribes and Pharisees, who considered themselves God’s favorites. If one were to ask for a show of hands from all those who thought they were “children of the kingdom,” they would be the first to raise their hands. **They** thought of themselves as the children of the kingdom.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the patriarchs of the nation, the ones everyone knew would be associated in the kingdom. But it would not be the religious leaders of that day who would be with them in the chief positions. It would be those who would “come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south.” And who were those? Everyone from the four corners of the earth, from all nations, kindreds, peoples, and tongues. Although this included Jews, these were mostly Gentiles.

The Last and the First

“There are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.”

Here is another expression which needs interpretation. In the 19th chapter of Matthew, Jesus is visited by a rich young man who wanted to know what he had to do to gain eternal life. After he goes away disappointed, Jesus answers Peter’s question about what they, the disciples, will receive since they did what Jesus told the young man to do. After telling them about their specific reward, Jesus goes on to say that those who have forsaken anything for his name’s sake shall receive an hundredfold. The last verse in chapter 19 says, “Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” (Matt. 19:30)

Who were the “last” in Jesus’ time. According to man’s judgment it was Peter, James, John, and all who like them had forsaken everything to follow Jesus. And who was “first”? It would be someone like the rich young man who went away without obtaining anything of real importance. Those who wanted the rewards of victory without “striving” for it in the Greek sense of the word would essentially find themselves last, outside in the darkness where there was keen disappointment over the lost opportunity.

How Does This Affect Us?

When we study the parables of our Lord, it is important that we seek to understand them from the viewpoint of those who heard them. Jesus did not talk over their heads. He did not expect they would get nothing out of them, nor that they would not be understood until after many centuries went by. The people did, in a general way, understand what his parables were saying. That’s why we read statements like Luke 16:14, “And the Pharisees . . . heard all these things and they derided him.” If they and the people could not understand these parables, they’d shake their heads, walk away, and would consider Jesus no threat at all because he talked only in riddles.

So let’s summarize what Jesus probably expected his audience to get out of the parable of the strait gate:

- Salvation comes only through “striving” like an athlete who wants to win a crown at the Olympic Games. Salvation does not come cheap.
- The time will come when the opportunity to obtain salvation will end. Then it will not matter how much you want it. You can’t have it.
- Having a casual association with the Master does not count. Hearing his teachings is no better than not hearing them if you don’t do anything about it.
- Those who are in the most prominent leadership positions will be keenly disappointed to find that they are not leaders in the kingdom, but are, instead, in “last” place.

That’s a considerable number of lessons in one short parable. But the parable would hardly have been preserved for us if there were not lessons for us. In fact, every one of these lessons has just as much significance for us today as it had for those who heard it from the Master’s lips. That’s what makes all the parables so powerful:

- Obtaining a heavenly reward comes only through “striving” for it, putting aside everything else, concentrating all our energies on obtaining the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus.

- The opportunity to gain a heavenly reward will end some day. When we hear the call, we are expected to respond to it. Delaying a commitment until one finishes school, gets married, has started a career, retires, or whatever means the opportunity will be given to others.
- A casual association with the Lord, the truth, and the brethren may be pleasant but it does not count. Hearing the truth has no particular benefit unless we do something about what we hear.
- Those who are in prominent leadership positions among us will not necessarily have prominent positions in the kingdom. It all depends upon how hard they “strive” to gain the mastery over the world, the flesh, and the adversary.

So this parable has much to say to us nearly 2000 years after Jesus gave it. May we do more than just hear its words. Let us take its lessons to heart so that the Holy Spirit will be able to transform us into a useful instrument for dispensing blessings to the entire world of mankind in the coming kingdom.

Closing Hymn: #291 — The Gate Ajar

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