

Who's In? Who's Out?

Luke 13:22-30

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 16, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²² Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' ²⁸ 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, and you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." (Luke 13:22-30, NRSV)



Who's in and who's out? We love that question, even if we don't always love the answer. Two baseball players were selected this week to be enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and a lot of controversy has been generated around one of them because many feel like he doesn't have the credentials to be included in such an elite club. He shouldn't be in, they say; he should stay out. Countless reality shows make their living on the weekly suspense of who will be "voted off the island" or survive to make the cut to the next round. There is already considerable Oscar buzz around which movies and which Hollywood personalities will be invited to the Academy Awards party and which ones will be shut out.

On a personal level, one of the most satisfying experiences in life is to be included, while one of the most heart-wrenching experiences is to be left out. Before social media, we often didn't know when we were being left out and so what we didn't know couldn't hurt us. Now, as even marginally-significant life events are posted somewhere for all to see, we more often discover when we have been excluded. I recently saw a Facebook post from some friends who hosted a celebration to which I was not invited. Honestly, I thought I would have been invited, that when these

friends made up their guest list my name would have made the cut. It didn't, and learning that fact was a little painful. To be fair, I know I've been on the other end of that experience more times than I realize, times when I have excluded some in favor of including others. Who's in and who's out? We love that question, even if we don't always love the answer.

One day somebody asked Jesus, "Who's in and who's out?" It was likely a disciple who asked the question, or at least somebody who had been following Jesus for a while listening to his teaching, because Jesus is addressed as Lord. "Lord, will only a few be saved?" It's a great question. It's the ultimate 'who's in and who's out' question, and I have a feeling that when it was asked everybody in the crowd got real quiet. "Shhh. Listen up! I want to hear how the rabbi answers this one."

I bet every single one of us, more than once, has debated this question with others. When all is said and done, who gets to be in heaven and who ends up in hell? Maybe we conclude that Mother Teresa is certainly in and that Adolf Hitler is probably out, but what about everybody in between? Sometimes the question is very personal. Is my husband saved? Is my wife saved? Are my kids going to heaven? My mom just died, is she now with God? This question was a subject of great debate in Jesus' day. Opinions ranged from the somewhat inclusive, that all Jews but the few most blatant sinners would share in the world to come, to the rather inclusive, that only the select few would be included. Of course, Gentiles, non-Jews, weren't even in the conversation. Everybody knew what side of eternity they would find themselves on.

As you have wondered about this question haven't you often wished you could just have Jesus show up and settle the matter once and for all? We can debate the question all day long but, really, what do *we* know? How helpful it would be to have Jesus himself give us a definitive answer to the question of who's in and who's out.

If he did, what would you expect Jesus to say? That everybody gets in? How could a loving God keep anybody out? Or maybe, Christians get in but everybody else is out. The Jews are in; how could the Jews not be in? Presbyterians are in for certain. Presbyterian pastors? Come on! People who live a good, moral life, they have got to be in! Can we even

imagine Jesus giving some categorical answer like that? Not if we know Jesus. The more you listen to Jesus' teaching the less you can imagine him answering that question in any way that encourages us to go out and start categorizing people ourselves, even whole groups of people based on their race, or religion, or standing in life, or external morality, and so on.

Instead of giving such an answer, Jesus gives a parable, and not just to the person who asked the question but to everybody within earshot, which includes us this morning. In the parable, the picture he paints, Jesus asks us to imagine a house, a beautiful house occupied by a generous Master who is preparing to host a marvelous feast, the feast of a lifetime. Everybody who comes to this feast finds that he or she has a seat of honor prepared for them at the table. Nobody ends up stuck over at the card table in the corner. The meal is lavish and abundant, fit for a king. In fact, nobody goes hungry in this house ever again. Scarcity is a thing of the past. The celebration is not rushed because time, around this table, is inconsequential. The conversation over the meal is seasoned with joy. Laughter is infectious. Silence is frequent, but never uncomfortable. Nobody hides anything from anybody else in this house. Every single thing about every single guest is completely exposed and yet there is no shame, no regret, no comparing your life to my life, no more measuring up.

The host, the Master of the house, prepares the feast, serves the feast, picks up the tab for the feast, joins in the feast, and in all of it could not be more delighted to do so. His hospitality is other-worldly, utterly unlike anything any of the guests have ever experienced before. None of them could have ever imagined that they would be saved a seat of honor around such a table, and yet such a seat has been saved for them. In the end...well, there is no end. The feast just goes on and on, and gets better as it goes. Nobody has to go home because for everybody present this house has become home. What's more, nobody around the table can even begin to imagine any other place that any of them would want to be ever again. There is never again any fear of missing out!

Now, if I seem to have liberally stretched the details of the parable, I've only done so with the rest of Jesus' teaching elsewhere in mind. You see, when you come asking Jesus about salvation, about who's in and who's out, this is the kind of picture he always wants to put into your heart and mind, a picture of what he saves people for and to, of that to which we are invited, this eternal, glorious and abundant life with God and one another. With this picture in mind, however, Jesus makes something exceedingly clear: **"Strive to enter [this house...this feast...this life] through the narrow**

door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." There is only one way into the house. Furthermore, when that one door is closed and locked by the Master of the house, which will eventually happen, then everybody still outside will have forever missed their opportunity to be included in the feast.

Here's the first thing Jesus teaches us with this parable. When it comes to the most ultimate question of who's in and who's out, the only person you ought to be concerned with is yourself. When it comes to the eternal destiny of other people, we are all on a need-to-know basis with God and Jesus is telling us here that we don't need to know. You see, in refusing here and elsewhere to give us categories and statistics that satisfy our human curiosity about these matters, Jesus makes clear that each of us ought to simply assess our own standing in relationship to God's Kingdom. Am I in or out? That's the only question we each ought to be asking ourselves.

Frequently in the church I hear people asking all sorts of interesting questions about the salvation of other people. What about people who lived before Jesus came? Are they in or out? What about infants or children who die? Do they go to heaven? How about people who live in parts of our world where they never even got the chance to hear about Jesus? What about them? How about really good people who just happen to have been given some really bad theology? We get so caught up in these impossible questions and we often do so, I think, to create a smokescreen around the one truly important question we ought to be asking. And I get it; it's much easier to wonder about the salvation of people in some remote part of the Amazon jungle than to face the question of our own salvation. And so Jesus essentially says here, "Stop it. Are *you* in or out? That's the only question I want you to be asking. The eternal status of other people is none of your business."

In that I think Jesus is implying that the door, though narrow, is open to everybody. Jesus would not urge us all to strive to enter the door if the door were not open to us all in the first place. That would be cruel. The scriptures, in fact, confirm this. I think of II Peter 3:9 which proclaims that the Lord is **"not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."** I Timothy 2:3 declares that God **"wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."** Everything in the scriptures points to the fact that Christ came so that everybody could be invited to the feast.

So why then is the door narrow? First off, I don't think it's narrow in the sense that it's too small for everybody to come through. Instead, I think it's narrow in the sense that there is only one door. Jesus, in other words,

does not agree with the popular, contemporary notion that there are lots of ways to into the house, many pathways to follow in life that lead to salvation. At another point he famously declared, **“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father [into the feast] except through me.”**¹ He is the door into the house where the feast is taking place and there is no other door.

It’s here that we find the heart of the Christian gospel. Why are we out of the house in the first place, separated from God and from the life that God has for us? The testimony of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is that it is our sin that has put us on the outside. We each have chosen to live life on our own terms rather than God’s terms and, in doing so, we have been evicted from God’s house. This shouldn’t be that hard to understand. If I’m living in your house and I begin to ignore your terms for living there and come up with my own set of terms that are absolutely contrary to your terms, you are going to ask me to leave your house and you would have right to do so. Why do we think it should be any different with God?

It isn’t. And so if it is our sin which has cut us off from God and the life God has for us, how do we get rid of our sin so that we can get back to God and to that life? The answer the world gives, the answer that most of the world’s great religions give, is that we have to work it off. We do enough good, practice enough religion, live up to some certain standard, so that the Master of the house will see that we’ve either worked off our debt or changed our ways to the point that he can trust us enough to let us back in. This is always our instinctual solution to the problem of sin. When I was a kid my parents always were rightly suspicious every time I suddenly became especially helpful around the house, compliant to their every request, full of flattery and gratitude about things I typically never even acknowledged. They knew that chances were I had done something wrong and was trying butter them up, to soften the blow when my transgression was eventually exposed. It’s just the way we think. Favor, even from God, must be earned. It’s up to us to somehow compensate for the shortcomings in our lives.

The scriptures, however, are as clear about our inability to make ourselves righteous before God as they are about our unrighteousness before God in the first place. I mean, why in the world would Christ, God’s only Son, need to come to earth and give his life on the cross if we could find our way home on our own? Because he did, because the Creator of humanity took on, himself, human flesh, becoming one of us, and then went in our place to the cross to take on the full consequences of our

sin, because of that a doorway *through him* has now been made for us through which we can come home to God and the life God has for us. This is pure grace. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8, **“By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”**²

I have met so many people who insist that there must be other ways into the house, that only one door leaves us too few options. My question to them is always the same: How else do we deal with the crushing reality of human sin if not by the grace that comes through the sacrifice of Christ? Furthermore, do we dare to suggest to God that he really should have been more generous by making more doors into his house? “It’s nice, Lord, that you sent your Son from heaven to earth to give his life in utter despair on the cross, and that sacrifice is certainly fine for some people. But you really ought to have made some alternative ways in for those who would prefer a pathway to you other than Jesus.” No! We dare not perpetuate this utterly offensive idea that the world ought to be entitled to doors into the house other than the one in Christ which God has already given us.

That door is enough, because it’s open to everybody. Romans 10:13 declares, **“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** Jesus himself made clear, **“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.”**³ All are invited to the feast. But we must have faith to come. We must call on the name of the Lord. We must ask, seek and find. Jesus is emphatic here in this text, telling us that we need to *strive* to enter the narrow door. The Greek word we translate here as ‘strive’ is the word ‘*agónizomai*’, and was typically used in that time to describe the intense struggle involved in athletics or warfare. It’s where we get our word ‘agony.’ Picture a runner on mile 21 of an elite marathon putting one foot in front of the other even though everything in her body is begging her to stop. Imagine a soldier engaged in battle fighting for his life against a powerful enemy.

Let me make this simple. In answer to our question about who’s in and who’s out, Jesus is telling us that we must be concerned only with *our* status and, as we do so, we must give the pursuit of salvation our vigorous and total attention. No serious marathon runner is distracted by other pursuits during the crucial part of the race. A soldier in battle is absolutely single-minded in his focus. This is what Jesus wants us to consider when it comes to our own lives. This is not about earning God’s favor by being good enough or by trying

¹ John 14:6 (NRSV)

² NRSV

³ Matthew 7:7 (NRSV)

hard enough; let's not make that mistake. It is about making everything else in life secondary. It's about refusing to allow anything else to obscure the centrality of Christ in all things. It's about holding loosely to everything else in life which ultimately will not matter. I mean, if you find your way, by God's grace, into his house, seated at his table, savoring his feast, experiencing a life of eternity where every wrong thing has been made right again, will you really at that point worry that perhaps, by striving to be there, you have missed out on something else somewhere else?

Here's why this is especially important, why Jesus clearly speaks with urgency here. The time is limited. The present offer of salvation is not indefinite and, therefore, we should not presume on the grace of God too long.⁴ A day is coming when Christ will return, or when your life will come to an end, and on that day if you have not entered into the narrow door you will have missed your chance. Is that not what Jesus says here? **"...you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us', then in reply he will say to you, 'I don't know where you come from.'"** Is that not a terrifying prospect? Is that not a terrifying prospect that *Jesus* gives us?

It's been noted that Jesus speaks about eternal hell, judgment and punishment more than all the other speakers of the Bible put together. It makes no sense that he would do this if everybody is saved in the end. Not everybody is saved in the end. Some will be in and some will be out. Again, our concern is not with others. That's none of our business. We're on a need to know basis with that, and we don't need to know. Your concern is with yourself. My concern is with myself. And we ought to be concerned. Jesus isn't messing around here. As Anglican bishop N.T. Wright puts it, "Unless all human life is just a game; unless we are mistaken in our strong sense that our moral and spiritual choices matter; unless, after all, the New Testament as a whole has badly misled us – then it really is possible to stroll past the open gate to the kingdom of God, only to discover later the depth of our mistake."⁵

And you know what's truly sobering about Jesus' warning here? It's given to religious people, to so-called, or at least self-proclaimed, 'insiders'. These are people who shared meals with Jesus, who sat often and listened to his teachings. These are church folks who get left outside, Presbyterians even, Presbyterian pastors perhaps, people who ate at the Lord's Table in worship, people who were members of churches and sat

through more sermons than they can remember, people who have been comfortably affiliated with Jesus for a long time and who presume that they will do so indefinitely.⁶ It's this sort of person that Jesus is warning here. You assume you're an insider, but if something doesn't change you will some day find yourself on the outside looking in.

I'm not here to make even a hint of judgment as to whether you are in or out when it comes to God's house. You have to ask that question of yourself just as I have to ask that question of myself. And I really don't think God wants us to agonize over this question day in and day out, to live in anxious uncertainty about our ultimate standing before him. But we do need to ask the question. Your church membership will not save you, nor will your church attendance. Your baptism will not save you. Your good deeds, though they may actually be more numerous and impressive than others you could point to, will certainly not save you. No favorable comparison to any other person is worth anything before a God whose standards of holiness infinitely surpass even the best of us. It is only the gift of the grace in Christ that will save you, this gift your faith in this gift. The absolute surrender of your life to the one who gave you this gift, that is the solitary doorway into the feast of abundant and eternal life which God has prepared for all who will come.

I know we like the idea that everybody is seated at the table in the end, that all a person really has to do to get to heaven is die. We like the idea even though it's not an idea we ever get from Jesus. But if we would just think it through, it doesn't even make sense because, frankly, *not everybody wants to be seated at that table!* You see, people are not saved to some custom-made, self-centered paradise, some never-ending life where we get to finally be the center of all things. No, we are saved to life with Christ, to a life in *God's* Kingdom where Christ is the glorious and unavoidable center of all things for all time and where we are in relationship to him as his brothers and sisters, beloved sons and daughters of our shared Heavenly Father whom we worship forever. If that's what heaven is, why then would somebody who spent their entire life on earth keeping Jesus at a distance, or at best devoting to him marginal attention, suddenly at the end of his or her earthly life want to enter into a reality where there is no choice other than wholehearted devotion to Christ and to Christ alone. They would not.

Jesus was clear that all who seek him, who truly seek him, will find him and the life he has will be added to

⁴ See Luke 14:15-24

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 170.

⁶ Stealing language here from James R. Edwards in his brilliant commentary: *The Gospel According to Luke* (Apollos, 2015), 402.

them. There are some, however, maybe many, who simply do not want Christ, now or ever. As C.S. Lewis famously put it in *The Great Divorce*, “Everyone who wishes [heaven] finds it. Never fear. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss [heaven]. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.”⁷

Here’s the surprise at the end. It’s a wonderful surprise for some - extraordinary good news! – but for others the source of perpetual weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the end, Jesus makes clear, **“People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”** Yes, some who have chosen to remain outside will be left in ultimate disappointment and frustration, crying out, “How in the hell did those people get in when we got left here outside!”

But imagine the joy of those others, the absolute delight of those who never in a million years would have believed that they would ever be given a seat of honor at such a feast. Those on the outside will look at them seated there and say they don’t deserve it, and they will be right. They *don’t* deserve it. Nobody does. But Christ nonetheless has made a way. It’s a narrow way, yes, in the sense that it is the only way. But in another sense it is a very broad way that welcomes the most unlikely of seekers.

You know, if we did ever try and answer the ‘Who’s in and who’s out?’ question for other people, we would have a very difficult time achieving any sort of accuracy in our answers. That’s Jesus’ point. One day there will be all sorts of people, the unlikely people, people we never would imagine will be included, but there they will be marching into the kingdom ahead of others we thought for certain would have been there. Jesus is simply urging us here to make sure that we, by his grace, are counted among that number.

One last insight, one I picked up from James Edwards in his marvelous commentary on Luke.⁸ The word for ‘eat’ in verse 29 is a translation of a Greek word that literally means ‘recline’. It was common in the ancient Middle East, and in many parts of the Middle East today, to recline at meals around the table. This isn’t a word that Luke uses a lot in his Gospel. Just three

times actually. The first is in the Christmas story of all places, when we read in Luke 2:7 that Mary **“gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid [i.e. reclined] him in a manger...”** The Son of God, born a helpless baby boy, reclined in the dirty place where animals came to feast. The other instance, besides here in Luke 13, is in Luke 12 in Jesus’ parable about the master who comes home delayed but then invites those faithful servants who never gave up waiting for him to recline at his table so that he, their master, can serve them a feast.⁹

Can you imagine it? The God of the universe reclines in a feeding trough in absolute squalor so that one day he might make a place for us to recline at his table in absolute glory. Both banquets are orchestrated by God and radically reverse all human preconceptions. Salvation is entirely God’s doing. All can be in who want to be in. The way may be narrow, but praise God there is a way. All glory to our God, through whom we have found favor through his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Remember a time in your life when, against your will, you were kept out or shut out from a place or group? What was that like for you? What did you do?
2. Read Luke 13:22-30. What stands out to you from Jesus’ teaching here? What do you notice first?
3. How does Jesus answer the question of who will be saved? According to Jesus, who will make it through the narrow door and who will not?
4. Why is the door narrow? What does Jesus mean by this?
5. How does a person ultimately know if he or she is ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the Kingdom of Heaven? How can a person be certain?
6. Jesus tells us we must ‘strive’ to enter the narrow door if we want to do so. Does this striving characterize your life right now? Why or why not?

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Collier Books, 1946), 72-73.

⁸ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 403.

⁹ See Luke 12:35-40

7. Where is the good news in this passage?
8. Jesus is clearing giving a warning here to religious people. How do you sense you are being led to respond to his warning today?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What sorts of people does God want with him in heaven?