

Strive like Marty McFly Luke 13:22-30

When we think about salvation, when we think about someone getting saved- what are some of the thoughts that play through your mind? Perhaps you think of someone coming down the aisle to pray a prayer to receive Christ. Or you think of a Pastor reciting a prayer that is to be repeated, and when “amen” is said- voila- that person is saved. You think about revivals, and evangelical events where many are given the opportunity to raise their hands because they have decided to follow Jesus. And I’m not downplaying any of this, many of us started our journey with the Lord through coming down the aisle, raising our hand, or reciting a prayer.

But my point is that we do our best to simplify the gospel. There’s the simple “ABCs” of the gospel- A.) Admit you are a sinner. (For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. [Romans 3:23](#)) B.) Believe in Jesus. (Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved [Acts 16:31](#)) C.) Confess Jesus to be Lord of your life. (that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. [Romans 10:9](#))

All of this is true, the gospel is simple, but perhaps sometimes we oversimplify it. And the danger is that perhaps many just walk down the aisle, recite a prayer, or raise their hand- and yet their heart and their mind remain unchanged. The transforming, salvation work doesn’t really take place in their life, there was little effort to really understand and grasp Jesus’ truth, and one day they will pass from this world and go on to the next, and will have the sobering realization that they are outside the kingdom gates. We would never want that to happen to us, or to anyone we know. And Jesus doesn’t want that either.

Throughout the gospel books, Jesus over and over teaches about the Kingdom of Heaven and what it takes to enter it. He says to repent: [Matt. 4:17](#)- *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* [Luke 5:32](#)- *“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”* [Luke 13:3](#)- *“I tell you... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”* He says to believe in Him: [John 6:29](#)- *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”* [John 11:40](#)- *“Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”* [John 14:1](#)- *“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.”* He says to follow Him: [Matt. 16:24](#)- *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”* [Mark 10:21](#)- *“One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”* [John 8:12](#)- *“I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”* But

in today's passage, He says something very different- something a bit surprising- concerning salvation.

We had last seen Jesus leaving the religious leaders in Jerusalem, to go across the Jordan river, where many believed in Him there. He ministered in that place approximately 3-4 months before He began His final return back towards Jerusalem. If we were to continue in John we would very quickly get to the events that took place during that last week of Jesus' life, so instead we're going to turn back to Luke in order to look at the events and teaching during His ministry in this 3-4 month time period on the other side of the Jordan river. [Luke 13:22-30](#)

Ok, so Jesus is making His way back to Jerusalem, teaching along the way, and someone asks *"Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?"* ([verse 23](#)) We don't know the exact motivation of the person asking, maybe they were a true follower of His and were genuinely concerned, or maybe they weren't and were just attempting to test Him. Either way, the question would seem to be deserving of an answer, especially in light of Jesus' rejection by the religious leaders. You see, everyone imagined the long-awaited Messiah to come and proclaim salvation for the whole nation of Israel. Everyone from the lowest of low, all the way up to the chief priests and other leading officials. It had to have been alarming that the religious leaders rejected Jesus, and that He would say things to them like *"But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep."* ([John 10:26](#))

This question probably stemmed from an understanding that the Messiah was to proclaim that many, if not all, were to be saved, yet Jesus' message seemed to indicate otherwise. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus had proclaimed *"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it."* ([Matt. 7:13-14](#)) This type of talk was shocking, unnerving to its listeners. It was completely unexpected. And perhaps those who had been tracking His ministry, were beginning to see that out of all the masses of people that were healed, out of all the tens of thousands who listened to His teaching, in comparison, there were only a few who followed Him and adhered to His teaching. [1 Corinthians 15:6](#) tells us that after His resurrection, *"He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once."* This verse tells us there were at least 500, maybe the total number of believers at this time was somewhere in between 500 and 1,000. Now 1,000

sounds like a lot of people, but in comparison to the nation at large, which was just over 500,000- considering what the Messiah was expected to do- 1,000 people was a tiny amount out of 500,000. 1,000 is .2% of 500,000. To put in into perspective, that's less than the percentage of Christians in Iran. .2% is pretty close to the percentage of believers in a country like North Korea, Yemen, Tunisia, or Turkey. It makes sense for someone during Jesus' day to look at His ministry and ask, "are there really not that many who are going to be saved?" And how does Jesus answer? [Verse 24...](#)

Jesus doesn't answer how many will be saved, but He says that many will try to be saved. They will try to be saved, but it will be too late. He just recently encouraged His disciples to ask, seek, and to knock ([Luke 11:9](#)), but there obviously is a time frame in which one can do that. There's a window of opportunity for us each to ask, seek, and knock on the door to the kingdom. Jesus is urging the listeners to not worry about the number of those who will be saved, but rather to make sure that everyone who is listening then and now, will be part of that number. He is warning that there will be surprises for many who wake up to eternity who had assumed that familiarity with Jesus earned them a ticket into His kingdom. They will say things like: "Jesus I know your teaching. I went to church and heard about you. I raised my hand one time. I prayed a prayer!" And yet He will say: "I don't know you. I don't know where you're from. You do evil." On a side note, Jesus would have every right to say to *each* one of us, "you do evil"- because the fact of the matter is that we all do evil. Sure, we like to call it mistakes, mess ups, stumbling- but the truth is that none of us is without sin, we all do things that are considered evil in God's eyes. And it's only through Jesus' sacrifice and forgiveness that we can be confident that our evil is erased, and that we can arrive at Heaven's gates clean and pure, without the stain of sin showing up on us.

One of my favorite celebrities is Jimmy Fallon from the Tonight Show. I really enjoy his wit, his humor, his impersonations, his musical talent, the way he interacts with his guests. You can get tickets to his show, to be part of the audience, and it doesn't cost you any money (it's a free gift), but you have to request them in advance. There's a certain process that takes place before you can arrive at the studio and expect them to let you in. If I don't do any of that process, and just show up at the door, I can't say- "Jimmy- you in there? Let me in man- I watch your show online, and I think you're great. I loved it when you sang

that song while impersonating Kermit the Frog, and man it cracked me up when you and Will Smith did that evolution of hip-hop dance together.” What are they going to say at the door? “If you don’t have a ticket, get out of here! He doesn’t know you!”

In [verse 28](#) Jesus wants us to imagine the regret others will have, and that we would have if we were to see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others entering in, but ourselves locked out. There will be so much regret that it will cause weeping and gnashing of teeth. In [verse 29](#) Jesus comes a little closer to answering the original question of “how few will be saved?” He says that there will be many more coming than could be seen right there in that particular moment of history- people from the east, the west, the north, the south- people from all over the world will enter the door and recline at the table in His kingdom. Can you imagine this taking place, and yet you yourself missing out on that experience? If you were to put yourself into that situation, what would you look back on and think to do differently? That’s really the purpose behind Jesus’ words here- to get every listener and reader of this passage into the mindset of seeing our future selves, and consider what we will be thinking on that one most important day of all time.

Jesus is telling the Charles Dickens’ Christmas Carol here. The audience is intended to imagine themselves as Ebenezer Scrooge and examine their past, present, and future selves with the end goal being that they change their present after the realization of a possible future. Jesus is telling the story of “It’s a Wonderful Life” where James Stewart as George Bailey changes His present outlook on life because of a glimpse into a possible future. Jesus is telling the story of Back to the Future II where Marty McFly gains knowledge of future ruin, and thus is called into action to prevent that future ruin from happening. This is an amazing moment, where He is peeling back the veil of time and giving the listener a glimpse into the future. And unlike the Christmas Carol, and It’s a Wonderful Life, and Back to the Future, Jesus is actually talking about fact, real life, a true event that is coming, that will affect every single person who has ever lived on this earth.

In [verse 30](#), Jesus says *“some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.”* If [verse 29](#) came closer to answering the question of “how few will be saved?” verse 30 comes closer to perhaps answering the inner question that motivated that first question. The one who asked the question could see that not

many from Israel were choosing to believe and receive salvation under Jesus' terms. It was obvious then. The people who "followed Jesus" actually physically followed Him, and it wasn't many. Again, most assumed that when the Messiah came, that *all* of Israel would be united under accepting His leadership- but this obviously wasn't happening with Jesus. And Jesus has an answer for this. Israel was considered as first among the nations- they were the chosen people. But as it ends up playing out- many from Israel would arrive last at the door of the Kingdom, last as in late- missing the opportunity of entrance into the Kingdom. But other nations, even those considered as heathen- following false gods- who were last in the list of those who were closest to God, as it plays out they become among the first who abandon their false beliefs, who choose to repent, believe, and follow Jesus and thus enter into His kingdom first, on time, taking their seats at the table, before the doors are shut.

In all of this passage, there is one action word that Jesus gives the listener in order to avoid the possible future scenario of being locked out of His kingdom. The "doing" word He gives them is in [verse 24](#): *Strive*. *Strive* to enter through the narrow door. He doesn't say it's easy, He doesn't list out simple steps, He doesn't give them a formula. This word "strive" is the Greek word "agnizomai," from where we get our word *agonize*. Paul uses this word in [1 Cor. 9:25](#) when he says "Everyone who *competes in the games* exercises self-control." In [1 Timothy 6:12](#) he says "*Fight* the good fight." The word fight that Paul used is the same Greek word that Jesus uses here in verse 24. This is also how Jesus used the word when He said "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be *fighting* so that I would not be handed over to the Jews..." ([John 18:36](#)) Strive, agonize, compete as you would in sports, fight to enter through the narrow door. This concept of fighting to enter into Jesus' kingdom probably sounds really foreign to most of our ears. How do we reconcile this with "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" ([Eph. 2:8-9](#)) Somehow both concepts are true. The Kingdom is a gift of grace, you can't work to earn it, yet there is somehow personal striving involved in order to make sure we receive the gift of grace while it is being offered.

A bible teacher from over a 100 years ago, a man by the name of A.W. Pink said "It is... true that salvation is a free gift, but an empty hand must receive it and not a hand which still tightly grasps the world." Perhaps the striving that Jesus

mentions is not the striving through an attempt to grab onto the Kingdom and earn a right of entrance, but rather it's striving to let go of the things of this temporary world. John MacArthur in His book *The Gospel According to Jesus* (pp 182-183) says "The message of Jesus cannot be made to accommodate any kind of cheap grace or easy-believism. The kingdom is not for people who want Jesus without any change in their living. It is only for those who seek it with all their hearts, those who agonize to enter. Many who approach the gate turn away upon finding out the cost."

Perhaps the striving is to realize how much we need His gift of grace, striving to remind ourselves of how dependent we are on Him, striving to see the world for the temporary place that it is. Striving to maintain our focus on His Kingdom, striving to not lose hope, striving to trust Him. Striving to let go of our sin, striving to not forget Him, striving to not let our minds become corrupted by this world. And as much as we should strive for these things, surely our salvation is not dependent on our striving for them?

I believe Jesus' words here would be best interpreted as being directed towards those who have yet to believe. The struggle, the fight, the striving is commanded for those who have yet to find the right gate to enter. Those who don't yet know the way to eternal life should do everything in their power and strength to find the truth. They should strive to "*Seek the LORD while He may be found; [and] Call upon Him while He is near*" as Isaiah the prophet says. ([Isaiah 55:6](#))

Perhaps you've gone to church your whole life, and yet you're still unsure about what you really believe concerning Jesus. This verse is for you- strive to figure it out. Do the research, do the homework, ask the hard questions, cry out to the Lord. Labor over the scriptures seeking answers, fight to get to the truth- because one day it will be too late to still be looking for the answers.

For those of us who do walk with the Lord, this verse is for our friends and family we know who don't walk with Him. Sure they may know of Him, about Him, have probably attended church at some point in their life- but down deep in your heart, you can see them as being among the people Jesus mentions who are shut out from the Kingdom. To you I say don't strive for your salvation, but strive to get them to strive. Encourage your friends, family, people you meet to seek out answers and fight to determine what they really believe. Plead with them, labor

as Jesus did to hopefully get them to consider where they will be on this day of judgment. Use this passage to start up conversations. *“Hey, this past Sunday we read this verse where Jesus says to fight to enter into His Kingdom, and I really thought my Pastor was about to say that we need to earn our way into Heaven which I know isn’t true, but then I realized Jesus was talking to those who were unsure about following Him, and I thought about you and wanted to encourage you to really research and figure out if what Jesus says is true or not. Or, “Oh, what do I believe? Well, I believe we’re all kind of like Marty McFly in Back to the Future II. Seriously, in Luke chapter 13 Jesus unveils a possible future reality and I’ve made sure that that future for me has been changed- if I were you I’d do the same. Let me show you what I’m talking about...”* Or over the holidays, have some friends over to watch a Christmas classic like *A Christmas Carol* or *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and make a goal afterwards to say to at least one person, *“you know, this movie reminds me of something Jesus said...”* Realize the urgency of Jesus’ message as it relates to you and to the people you know.