

# Will Hindus be In Heaven?

Luke 13:22-30

Preached October 4, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. 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.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' 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. Then 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."

**Introduction.** The great idea of canoeing with a friend on the Watauga River did not seem so wonderful when we saw the 45° waters running wild, high and fast on that spring day. Not long after we launched, we faced our first challenging rapids. As we rounded a bend, the angry waters flipped the canoe and thrust both of us into the chilly waters. After swallowing his share of the river, my friend swam to shore. I feverishly attempted to maneuver the upside down craft to dry land but had no success as the water carried me downstream. Finally as the bone chilling waters began to cause my core temperature to drop, I battled the current and made it to shore. It was on the heels of that experience, I had a chilling realization of my own mortality – I could have easily been drowned in those churning waters.

Nearly every human being at some point comes face-to-face with the reality that one day she/he will die. Whether the person believes death is imminent or many years away, there is a real concern for what happens after death.

Within Christian belief, there is the understanding that there is life after death. God provides the hope of our living in His presence (2 Cor.5:8). While there is a variety of thoughts within the Christian community of what this looks like and when and how it happens, nearly all believers share in the hope of an afterlife with God. Most refer to the place of afterlife as "heaven."

The notion of heaven is important in the discussion of salvation. As we have heard over the past several weeks, while being saved is more than about getting to heaven, it is nonetheless part of the

consideration. Through salvation, we are given the promise of heaven.

Regardless of one's understanding of heaven, most ask two key questions: "Who is going to heaven?" "Am I going to heaven?" As you heard in our scripture lesson, these questions are not new to our age. A man came to Jesus with a similar question – "Will only a few be saved?" He was wondering who would be part of God's ultimate kingdom.

## Response to religions.

We are living in a global community that is very different than that of our forebears who lived more than 75 years ago. They lived in a world where their community was largely homogeneous – people like them lived around them. The greatest difference among neighbors was either whether they attended church or not or whether they attended the Baptist or Methodist church. (It was much like the little Methodist boy and Catholic girl who were playing together. A playful dog grabbed the pants of the boy and down they came. The little girl looked and said, "My, you Methodists are different from us Catholics.)

Today we live in a global community where we are instantly and constantly exposed (probably a bad use of a word) to people of different races, ethnic backgrounds and belief systems. It is common to have neighbors and/or associates who are atheists, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, good-ol'-boys or part of some religious ideology that you have no idea what it is. More often than not, we like our neighbors and associates and see many fine qualities in them. Most of us want them to go to heaven.

This globalization of our community and the development of a culture of

tolerance have led to a belief that all religions are equal and at their core they are the same and that religious people are all seeking the same destination. While this is a very attractive idea, I contend that not all religions are equal and their core is not the same. Some may have some shared beliefs, practices and moral positions, yet each is unique.

Let me provide a brief example. Hinduism is a diverse religion that has a high level of religious tolerance and advocates personal tranquility – most of us value both of these. For the Hindu, the goal of life is the escape of suffering. One's soul goes through life in a series of reincarnations or births until that soul finally gets it right and enters Nirvana – a state where the personal consciousness is blended into the grand consciousness of the universe or divine. The person or soul loses personal identity. That is so different than the Christian view where suffering is a pathway to righteousness and salvation– *take up your cross* (Matthew 16:24), *count it a blessing when you experience trials* (James 1:2). In the afterlife, there is not loss of personal identity but completion through resurrection. We are fully human.

What are we as Christians to think of other religions, particularly what their adherents will experience after death? Does the Bible give us any understanding in our contemporary situation?

In his book *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, James Edwards offers helpful insight about how the Bible and the early Christian community viewed other religions (209-216). He asserts that the Bible views some religions negatively and some positively. Of the three categories of religion he identifies outside

the Christian faith, Edwards says the first is "negative." Many of the fertility cults in which the biblical community was nurtured were brutal expressions that focused on cult prostitution and human sacrifice. Today, we see destructive cults such as those of Jim Jones or more recently the Texas Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints, which nearly enslaved their children and practiced bigamy with them. The second category Edwards labels as "worthless," basing the label on a comment from Paul's comments in Acts about those who worship "worthless idols" (14:15). Throughout history there have been groups whose practices were not destructive but had little value to redeem people. The third group he labels as "foreshadowing," based on an understanding of Galatians 4 that points to the role of preparing for the mature faith in Christ to come. These faiths often play an important role in ordering society, building community, and promoting healthy morality, and most of their adherents earnestly seek God. These religions serve as a tutor which can lead to the ultimate revelation of truth in Jesus Christ.

So what about those who practice these faiths, particularly the latter category? Is it possible they will go to heaven?

### **The Narrow Gate.**

Let's turn back to our scripture lesson to see if we can discern any insight. Jesus' response to the man who asked whether only a few would be saved should stir lots of stuff within us. It is not an answer many would expect to hear because of the paradox it contains – the gateway for entry is narrow but people from all over the earth get in.

Jesus told the inquirer that the gate for entry to God's eternal kingdom was narrow and many who sought to enter it were not able. They lacked the strength and power to get through the gate.

When I hear of the narrow gate, my mind pictures an old livestock gate. It consisted of a narrow fenced entryway that led into a sharp angle, typically less than 45° that led to the point of exit. A cow or horse could not pass through that gate because its body could not turn

around the steep angle since it walked on four feet or hooves. Jesus was saying, "Some who want to go through the gate just are not able pass through."

Jesus follows up the analogy of the gate with a parabolic story of a man who has locked up his home for the night and then has visitors. They want to come in but the homeowner claims he does not know them even though they claim they had associated with him and heard him teach. Think for a moment – if someone came and rang your doorbell at 3:00 am would you eagerly let them in, especially if you did not know them? There are probably some you might recognize that you would still be hesitant to admit.

These two analogies seem to say that some do not make it in the ultimate Kingdom and enjoy ongoing fellowship with God. Clearly there is an exclusive tone to these thoughts. In light of our subject, we can say, "Not everyone is going to be in heaven."

### **People from east, west, north and south.**

Jesus did not end his conversation with those two analogies. He then said something that probably was quite shocking – "people from east and west, north and south will have a place at the table in the kingdom of God. Some who are first will be last and some who are last will be first." Here is the great surprise. People from all over the globe will be part of the kingdom celebration.

This is a message of inclusion. While theologians may debate exactly what Jesus intended (were these Jews who were dispersed throughout the world or the Christian community that exists in nearly every land or people beyond these) the clear message is there will be surprises and reversals. People who really wanted in will not be present because they could not get through the narrow gate and many who were unexpected will be welcomed. (Probably these thoughts make none of us feel extremely comfortable. I believe it is impossible to read this text and be comfortable.)

### **The nature and role of God.**

In light of this, what are we to make of the question of who will get into heaven

and who will not? We must remember some fundamentals related to the nature and role of God.

- Ultimately, God is the Judge who determines who enters heaven. He is the homeowner who decides who will be permitted to sit at his table. Permission to sit at the table is always a gift from God. A few years ago, Billy Graham was interviewed by Jon Meacham of Newsweek. This was reported: *When asked whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, Graham says: "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't ... I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have"* (August 4, 2006). (We can trust God to the right thing.)
- God has made the means of salvation available to humanity through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the ultimate expression of God's infinite love toward humanity. Jesus is the means to the Father and the Father's table. Jesus is the key that unlocks the door to the Father's house.
- God desires all to be at his table and I believe reaches out to all, not necessarily in ways common to our experience. You see, God loves the Indian raised in a Hindu community in Mumbai as much as a person raised by deeply committed Christians in Chattanooga. God offers the invitation to both to sit at his table.

### **The human response.**

Is human response necessary for people to enter into God's heaven? I believe human response is essential. Paul expressed this in this fashion - *For by grace you have been saved through faith* (Ephesians 2:8). Grace is God's part and faith is the human part. Faith leads to salvation and brings us to the door Jesus opens to the table.

The central expression of faith is receiving Jesus Christ – confession of him as Master and Savior of one's life.

This is at the heart of the evangelical gospel. If you have never received and confessed Jesus Christ, I urge you to do so today.

But are there other expressions of faith in responding to God? I believe it is safe to say there are. In Jesus' words here, he refers to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the OT prophets being in the kingdom of God. These lived before the time of Jesus yet responded to the revelation God had given them. They believed in God, sought to please him and attempted to do what they believed God wanted.

I believe that many in our world have responded positively to the revelation

God has given them during their lives through nature, their conscience and their religion. Had they known and understood the full truth of Christ, more than likely they would have said "yes" to him. In their lives, they sought to know God, expressed their love for him and attempted to live as they perceived God desired. Could these be among those in the kingdom from the east and west, north and south?

There is one last thing I want to draw out from our text that is important to hear. Jesus urged his questioner and those listening, "*Strive to enter the narrow*

*gate.*" Striving is fighting for or struggling to accomplish something. It is the disciplined practice of an athlete in training who seeks to win the race (2 Cor. 9.26). It is the ongoing discipline of faith. It is a lifelong journey. We are called to a life long discipline to enter the narrow gate.

#### **Invitation.**

Today, we are preparing to gather around a table that foreshadows the great table of God in the ultimate kingdom. This table is open to all who come in faith. You are invited to come and enjoy a foretaste of heaven.