

Hard Sayings of Jesus Series:
“No One Comes to the Father Except through Me”
July 14, 2019

Listen to the words of the Westminster Confession, written by the Presbyterians in 1646: “The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ. Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: Much less can men, not confessing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they ever so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature (general revelation), and the laws of that religion they do profess. And, to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and is to be detested. (quoted from John Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*, p.231)

In other words, if you aren’t a Christian, no matter how good a person you are, no matter how much you love your neighbor, no matter how much you follow the virtues of your non-Christian faith, you will be eternally lost.

I am continuing my summer series on *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, with his statement to the disciples: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” This is one of those passages that seems to support the understanding that those who are outside of Christ are lost.

The way this passage is usually interpreted is, No one gets to heaven unless they believe in Jesus. No one dies and goes to heaven unless they are baptized, or say a certain prayer, or believe in certain doctrines about Jesus. Jesus is sort of a bouncer at a really classy establishment, and he is only going to let a few people in who say and do the right things. Jesus is the left tackle who is protecting the quarterback who is God. In other words, nobody gets to the God unless it’s through Jesus.

On our best days, we say, Well, this is the good news! We have access to the divine life. But if this good news is just about tickets to heaven, it means most people will not end up there, because most people who have lived and died in the history of humanity have not believed in Jesus.

And if we believe in the traditional view that heaven is a wonderful place beyond all imagining, and hell is a place of everlasting torment, then most people who have lived throughout human history will end up in a place of eternal, conscious torment, because they didn't believe in Jesus. And I must say, if that's as far as the good news goes, that just isn't good news enough for me, maybe for you, and for a lot of other people.

I am going to make an argument today that we have misunderstood this passage. We hear it so often at funerals, because we have always understood that this is about going to heaven. "In my Father's house are many rooms....I have gone ahead of you to prepare a place..." We've always understood that to mean heaven. But let's look at the context of this passage.

Jesus in John's Gospel has just celebrated his last meal with his disciples. In the first three gospels, it is the Passover meal. In John's gospel, it is the night before the Passover, and Jesus washes his disciples' feet. This is the reading we usually have for Maundy Thursday during Holy Week. He washes their feet, and then gives them a new commandment to "love each other as I have loved you."

This is the night before he goes to the cross. During the meal, Judas goes out to betray Jesus. And then Jesus says this: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." Glorification in John's Gospel is the cross. He is giving his life for the life of the world. The cross is his throne. So he says, Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews, I will say to you, Where I am going, you cannot come. Then he gives them the new commandment, love each other as I have loved you.

And then Peter says, "Lord, where are you going?" We don't get it. We don't know what's going on. Jesus says again. "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Jesus is not talking about heaven here. He is talking about the cross. He is going to the cross. Peter cannot follow him. Peter cannot do this work that Christ will do.

But Peter keeps pursuing this: "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. Jesus says, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."

The context is the night before he goes to the cross, and he's explaining to the disciples that this is his work, his glorification. They can't come with him.

That's where our reading starts today. Jesus said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'

Remember, this is about Jesus who says, I need to go somewhere that you cannot come, and he's telling this to followers who want to follow. They are troubled, because their job is to follow. But he says, I am preparing a place for you in my Father's house.

We have interpreted "my Father's house" to mean heaven. But we need to check that out: one of the ways to interpret scripture is to see how a phrase is used elsewhere, especially in the same book. This phrase is in chapter 2 of John's Gospel. Jesus is in the temple, and he becomes angry with the moneychangers and the people selling animals for sacrifice. He overturns the tables, and he says, "Stop making *my Father's house* a marketplace!

In that story, *my Father's house* means the temple, it doesn't mean heaven. The Jewish leaders are angry that Jesus has done this, and they ask, What sign can you show us for doing this? He says, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. They say, That's ridiculous. It has been under construction for 46 years. And the Gospel-writer John says, But Jesus was speaking of *the temple of his body*. In John's Gospel, everything has a spiritual meaning. Very little is to be taken literally.

So "my Father's house=the temple=Jesus' body. Let's take that back to John 14. In my Father's house are many dwelling places...I believe that means that after the resurrection, there will be a place for the disciples in the person of Christ, in the reality of the kingdom of God, in the reality that is Jesus. That reality that is Jesus has many rooms. Do you remember how Paul talks so often about being in Christ, in the Lord, in him? He says that phrase *164 times* in his letters. We live in Christ, in the Lord, in him.

What if Jesus is saying to his followers, You cannot follow me now. I need to go to the cross. But on the other side of the cross, when I am raised, when I am living in you through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will be in me in my Father's house, which is the house that is me, which is the reign of God.

I believe one of the mistakes we have made about the Bible is that it is a collection of books that tell us how to get to heaven. We especially think this about Jesus. We understand that he came mostly to die for our sins on the cross so that we can go to heaven if we believe that. He came to solve the problem of original sin.

But that ignores Jesus' life, his teachings, his works. What was he focused on? He was focused on how God's will could be done on earth as it is in heaven. He was not focused on the heaven-hell question. He was focused on helping angry, hostile human beings learn to love each other and love God. When someone asks him what the most important commandments are, he says, Love God and love your neighbor.

So when he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me, I believe he is talking to his disciples who need to hear that there will be a space and a place for them on the other side of the cross, in his mystical body, in Christ.

John 14:6 is often quoted as a passage defending "the exclusivity of Christ," as if Christ were exclusive. Brian McLaren has this very negative parody of John 14: "You should be very troubled, because if you believe in God but not me, you will be shut out of my Father's house in heaven, where there are a few small rooms for the select few who hold correct beliefs and doctrines... Then Thomas said to him, Lord, what about people who have never heard of you? What about people of other religions? Will they go to heaven after they die? Jesus answered, I am the only way to heaven, and the truth about me is the only truth that will get you to life after death. Not one person will go to heaven unless they personally understand and believe a clearly-defined message about me and personally and consciously ask me to come into their heart. (NOT John 14:1-6)

I don't believe this is about who gets in and who doesn't get in. This is not about a ticket to heaven. Again, the common thread here is disciples who are afraid because they can't follow Jesus. So he says, You will be able to

follow me on the other side of the cross. They are worried that he is going away and they will not have a plan, a roadmap, instructions. He says to his disciples, I am the way, the truth, and the life. It will be ok. Trust in me. You will not have all the answers ahead of time. You'll have to walk by faith. But there are many rooms in this reign of God that is on the other side of the cross. You can be a part of that.

Jesus is saying, I am the way. If you follow this way, of welcoming the stranger, and loving your enemy, and reaching out to the one in need, then you'll discover the reign of God. And there are people of many faiths and no faith who are walking the way of Jesus, without acknowledging him. And God will be the judge, not us.

So often this passage has been used by Christians to say to those who don't believe in Christ, Unless you believe in Jesus, you will be damned. I don't believe this passage has anything to do with that. It's addressing disciples who need to know that there will be a place for them on the other side of the cross. But what could mission look like for us in a pluralistic age? I think about Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4, when he repeats these words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

What if we spent more time following Jesus by loving and serving the world, rather than trying to figure out who's going to heaven? That's God's business! Jesus sends us into the world to love and serve our neighbors, which is good for our neighbors, and good for us followers. Brian McLaren says this: "Remember, in a pluralistic world, a religion is valued based on the benefits it brings to its non-adherents."

We can certainly be followers of Jesus without saying everybody else is wrong. We can tell our story, and then listen as they tell us theirs. I'll close with a quote about what mission might look like in this view: "Mission as a love affair of God with human beings and a love force to reconcile human beings with God and each other must be proclaimed and promoted. Mission as a love force also is open to the possibility that God may preserve the ways of love imbedded in other religious faiths. Mission is not an elimination of religious others; it is a sharing of what has been concretely and astoundingly gifted in love to Christians." (Sathianathan Clarke, Professor at Wesley

Seminary) Let's do that; let's share the love that we have been given. And trust God for the results.

There is a wideness in God's mercy that I believe we can't even comprehend. Amen.