

Missing the obvious

Christians can be inexcusably stupid, too

I've been asked many times, "Are you saying everybody's going to be saved?" And I've answered each time, "No, I'm not saying everybody's going to be saved, I'm saying everybody already is." Which usually creates a cacophony of "Yeahbuts," and a flurry of swishing pages as Bibles are grabbed and fingers search for all those terribly familiar scriptures that talk of many people being lost and only the few being saved, like:

- 1) **Matthew 7:13-14** - "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only few find it."
- 2) **Matthew 7:21-23** - "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"
- 3) **Luke 13:22-27** - "Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, you evildoers!'"
- 4) **Matthew 25:10-12** (the parable of the 10 virgins) - "But while they (the 5 foolish virgins who didn't bring any extra oil for their lamps) were on their way to buy oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came, 'Sir, Sir,' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'"

From scriptures like these, it really does seem like only a select few are going to be saved. And in the last few centuries the influence of Calvinism has sealed that view in many Christian minds too, which is ironic because it recalls the question Jesus was asked in Luke 13:22 – "Are only a few people going to be saved?" Somehow the idea just keeps on rolling through people's heads that "Christ's redemption is only for an elect few," or that God's grace is only for those who put out the necessary effort on their part.

There are three ways I've sorted this out in my own mind:

- 1) First of all, what is the **context** in each of those verses mentioned above – like, for instance, who is Jesus talking to, and why?
- 2) Secondly, what about all those **other scriptures** that talk of God wanting to save everybody, and sending his Son to make it possible? And -
- 3) Thirdly, **a question**: “How can I ask people to put their trust in God when I can't tell them for certain that he loves them?”

Take the **context** of those verses in Luke 13, for instance, and the people who were asking if only a few are going to be saved. Who is Jesus dealing with here? It's his fellow Jews who thought THEY were the only ones being saved because they were Abraham's children - *and* because they'd shared a few meals with Jesus and listened to his teachings. It's to THESE people Jesus then says in **Luke 13:28** - “**There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but YOU YOURSELVES thrown out.**”

He's talking to people who think they can just ride into God's kingdom on the coattails of knowing Jesus and being Jews - who weren't the least bit interested in his message, however. If they were, they wouldn't have asked the question about the few being saved in the first place, because it was obvious that Jesus was healing EVERYONE who came to him in faith. He wasn't being selective at all in who he helped. He even helped Gentiles. It was obvious, then, that God's grace wasn't limited to the few. It was open to everyone, and in context, it's the people who DON'T believe that, who believe God's only saving a select few, that God gets angry at.

The context makes that clear again in the scriptures about the narrow gate and Jesus rejecting people doing miracles in his name in Matthew 7. Jesus is talking to his fellow Jews again about “the road that leads to life” (Matthew 7:14), because that's what the Jews were missing. They thought it was based on their obedience to the law, but Jesus points out it's not based on anything we “perform” (verse 22). Even if a person uses his name and a miracle follows, that's no ticket to eternity either. The only thing God wants from anyone, Jew or Gentile, is faith in his Son, wonderfully demonstrated in the next chapter about the Gentile centurion with a sick servant who says to Jesus in **Matthew 8:8** - “**Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.**”

Jesus' reaction? **Verses 10-13** - “**he was astonished and said to those following him, ‘I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.’ And his servant was healed at that very hour.**”

At last! Someone who believed God's grace was open to everyone, without trying to prove himself deserving of grace, or provide evidence that he was a good person with a list of good deeds to his name, or feel he had to act all pious in Jesus' presence, either. And Jesus loved it! Here was a Gentile of all people, and a high-ranking soldier at that, who'd simply watched Jesus in action and believed what he saw, that Jesus wasn't picky about who he helped. ANYONE going to Jesus for help received it.

It was a clear demonstration of the "road to life" – a road wide open to anyone BUT extremely narrow too, because the ONLY road to life was faith in Jesus. Salvation was open to everyone, yes, but only through Jesus. And Jesus used this incident of the soldier's faith in him to warn his fellow Jews how serious it was to miss that point. Because in comparison to this Gentile soldier, "the subjects of the kingdom (THE JEWS) will be thrown outside, into the darkness." Why? Because they didn't trust him. This was their problem. This is what put them on the "wide road to destruction" (Matthew 7:13), because they of all people **should** have recognized who Jesus was. They knew all those scriptures about the Messiah in the Old Testament, but it was a Gentile who was responding in faith to Jesus, not them.

Is the context here about only a few people throughout history being saved? No, it's about the stupidity of the Jews back then, who thought salvation was only open to them, when it was obvious it was open to anyone; and it wasn't based on any efforts or performance of their own, it was based purely on trusting Jesus. In other words, they, of all people, were missing the whole point of why God had sent Jesus, which was to save anyone and everyone who believed in him for life, healing and salvation.

But missing the obvious seems to be a problem for more than just them, because five of the ten virgins (or bridesmaids) in **Matthew 25** also had their brains in a bucket. They'd been specially chosen to escort the bridegroom to the wedding banquet by lighting the way for him with their torches - since the banquet was traditionally at night - but did they think to bring oil with them to keep their torches lit? What on earth were they thinking?

Is the context about them being lost? No, it's about them being stupid. "Foolish" is the word used to describe them (verse 2), not lost. But why should being stupid get such a serious reaction from Jesus, to the point he not only wouldn't let them into the banquet, he also didn't want anything to do with them (verse 12)? Because their stupidity was inexcusable. They'd been given the best opportunity of all, escorting the bridegroom to the banquet and sharing it with him. They'd been given front row seats, just like the Jews who'd had Jesus come as one of them and offer salvation to them first. And this is how they treated him? It was inexcusable how dumb they were being. So Jesus hit them with some high-voltage shock treatment to wake them up. "Keep up this stupidity," he yelled, "and you can kiss the kingdom goodbye. You'll be on the outside looking in, wishing you hadn't been so idiotic."

Those silly bridesmaids could, of course, refer to any person in any century who misses the obvious, including us and any other person claiming to be Christian today. Because WE'RE the ones now with the front row seats given the opportunity to escort the bridegroom to the wedding banquet to share in all that God sent Jesus for. We are now the Jews to whom the understanding of Jesus being the road to life has been given. We are the ones given the chance to grasp the gospel message and what it means for all humanity. We are now the Gentile centurion given the chance to see the obvious.

So what is the obvious? Is it that only a few are going to be saved? Or is it only those putting out the effort to enter through the narrow door who will be saved? Is that what God wants us to believe and preach as the good news of the gospel? It's important to know because Christians can be inexcusably stupid too, as we see in **Galatians 1:6** - "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all." Paul is astonished. "How can you be so stupid?" he's saying to them. It's inexcusable. Anyone into a gospel other than the obvious true gospel "let him be eternally condemned," Paul said in **verses 8 and 9** - the same language Jesus used for the Jews of his day, too.

So what is the obvious true gospel? Here it is, from Jesus' own mouth, in **John 17:4** - "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." And what was that work? **Verse 6** - "I have revealed you." Jesus came for one simple reason: to show us what God is like. How? Through himself, **John 14:9** - "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

So what did people see in Jesus? They saw him doing exactly what the Old Testament said he would be doing in **Isaiah 61:1** - "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." All of which Jesus repeated in **Luke 4:18-19**, and proceeded to do exactly as Isaiah predicted in the next three and a half years of his ministry.

And what people saw was obvious, that God loved them, because Jesus' entire life was given to serving and healing. He refused nobody in need, **Matthew 8:16-17** - "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.'" It was just as the Old Testament said, so no wonder Jesus was upset at the Jews for being so stupid, because they knew these scriptures by heart. The same in **Matthew 12:15-18** - "Many followed him, and he healed all their sick....This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight..." Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies of the Messiah exactly, not only proving to the Jews who he was, but also showing that God's grace was open to all.

And there are so many **OTHER SCRIPTURES** that speak of God's wish to save everybody, too - OBVIOUS ones like:

- 1) **John 3:16-17** - "For God **so loved** the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whosoever** believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to **save the world** through him."
- 2) **John 12:32** - "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will **draw all men** to myself."
- 3) **1 Timothy 2:3-4** - "...God our Saviour, **who wants all men to be saved** and to come to a knowledge of the truth."
- 4) **1 Timothy 4:10** - "we have put our hope in the living God, who is **Saviour of all men.**"
- 5) **Colossians 1:20** - "...and through him to **reconcile to himself all things.**"
- 6) **1 John 2:2** - "(Jesus is) the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but **also for the sins of the whole world.**"

The emphasis in scripture is not on who's going to be lost, it's good news about our Father God "who," **Ephesians 1:3-6**, "has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his **glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.**" Our Father's pleasure and will - before he even created us - was to bring all of us into his family based entirely on his "glorious grace," freely given without anything expected from us.

It's scriptures like these that help me because I can't help wondering how Christians can tell people God loves them when they limit God's grace to only the few who fulfill certain conditions.

Ah, but, didn't Jesus himself say in **Luke 13:24** - "*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to*"?

But again, who's Jesus talking to? He's talking to his fellow Jews, MOST of whom at that time thought they were a shoo-in for entering the kingdom of heaven based on their efforts to obey the law. But the "narrow door" Jesus was talking about wasn't the law, it was HIM, **John 3:36** - "**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.**" And **1 John 5:11-12** - "God has given us eternal life, and **this life is in his Son.** He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

What "effort" was Jesus talking about instead, then? It was the tough mental effort his fellow Jews needed to make to **switch their trust to him**, because HE was the narrow door - and only door - into the kingdom, not the law.

And we can understand that today because Paul tells Christians to make the same effort, **Hebrews 4:11** - **“Let US, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest.”** That’s exactly the phrase Jesus used in Luke 13 - “make every effort” - so what does Paul mean by it?

The context, again, makes that clear, in **verses 1-3** - **“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did, but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.”**

In context Paul is talking about the Israelites, who had exactly the same gospel message preached to them that we have preached to us. The gospel’s never changed. It’s still about “the promise of entering his rest,” or “entering the kingdom of heaven,” as Jesus phrased it in Matthew 7. It’s also about HOW a person enters that rest, and that’s, unfortunately, what the Israelites missed entirely. The gospel, therefore, was “of no value to them,” which is tragic because they were the one nation among all nations who’d been given the chance to enter God’s rest, and they blew it. They’d been given front row seats, just like the five bridesmaids, but they missed the show.

Why? **“Because those who heard did not combine it with faith.”** It was exactly the same problem Jesus had with the Jews of his day, too. They heard and saw the same clear message, that the way into God’s kingdom was trust in Jesus, but it too fell on deaf ears. But why, when it was so obvious? Jesus was doing remarkable miracles, proving without doubt he was the Messiah. He also did remarkable miracles with the Israelites, but none of it was of any value to the Jews or the Israelites because it didn’t translate into faith.

But that’s the whole point of the gospel. It’s supposed to create faith, because trusting Jesus is the only road to life. He’s the only one who can get us safely into God’s kingdom, which he demonstrated again and again to the Israelites as they faced huge obstacles on their way to the Promised Land and Jesus got them safely through every one of them. He demonstrated the same thing to his fellow Jews, that no matter what sickness they suffered from, he could heal it. Jesus was clearly, then, “the road to life,” in whom all their needs were provided for.

The gospel’s always been about faith. But when Paul talks of the Israelites NOT having faith, what was it faith in? It was faith that **“his work has been finished since the creation of the world,” verse 3**. Everything we could ever need to get us into God’s kingdom was completed for us already, from the moment of Creation. How? Through Jesus, as we just read in Ephesians 1:3-6. The gospel message, therefore, has always been that Jesus is our road to life, and all WE need do is “combine” that message with our faith. And in context, that’s the “effort” WE put in; it’s to keep believing what God has already done for the eternal life of all human beings through Jesus.

And where is our effort mainly directed to keep this belief alive? **2 Timothy 3:14** - "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of...and how from infancy **you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ.**" The Scriptures keep us on track. They are what keep us focused, because they constantly remind us of God's incredible love for all humanity, expressed and demonstrated beyond all doubt through his Son.

So be "a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who **correctly handles the word of truth,**" Paul says in **2 Timothy 2:15**, taking into account that Christians can be inexcusably stupid. And to those who are inexcusably stupid, like we were, like the Jews in Jesus' day were, like the five bridesmaids were, and like Israel in the Old Testament was, God has this to say in **Hebrew 4:3** - "So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest."

To miss the point when God has made it so clear, is inexcusable. It makes God very angry. And he demonstrated his anger by kicking the Israelites out of the Promised Land. Out into "the darkness" they went, where they've remained ever since. But are they lost forever? No. God hasn't forsaken them, **Romans 11:1-2**. Instead, he called us Gentiles to show them the way, **verse 20**. How? "But they (Israel) were broken off because of unbelief, and **you stand by faith.**" We Gentiles, like that wonderful Gentile soldier before us, get the point of the gospel message. It's faith. It's trusting the one God gave us to get us all safely into his kingdom.

And to those who don't believe that, who limit God's grace to only a few being saved and therefore miss the entire point of what God has done for us in his Son, God doesn't hesitate in expressing his feelings. He is extremely angry. And hopefully that serves as warning to wake us up and get the gospel understood correctly. Because God doesn't want to lose any of us, but if not losing us means some high-voltage shock treatment to wake us up, then so be it, as we see in **Mark 16:14** - "Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; **he rebuked them for their lack of faith, and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.**"

Faced with clear evidence, whether it be the miracles Jesus did for the Israelites, or healing every sickness among his fellow Jews, or the clear evidence of scripture for us today, there is only one response God accepts, and that's faith in what he's provided for us in his Son.

Am I missing something, then, I've asked myself? Paul's answer to Timothy was, "Keep studying, son. Handle the word of truth correctly, then you'll have nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. Because it's the scriptures that make you '**wise for salvation through faith in Christ.**'"