

Almost On The Road To Heaven

A story is told of,

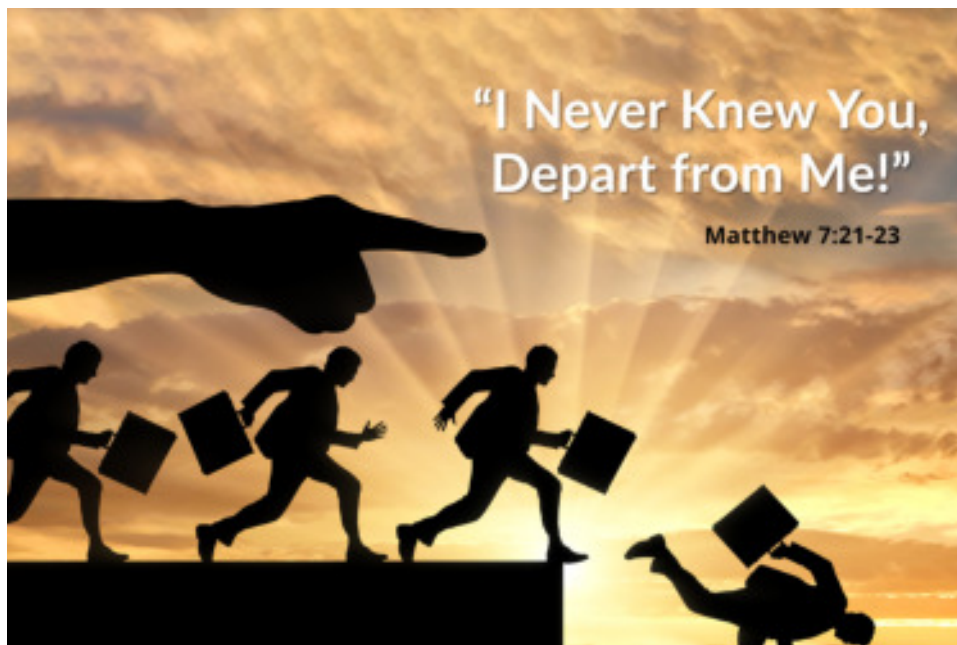
An elderly Scottish woman who traveled around the countryside selling housewares. Whenever she came to a fork in the road, she would throw a straw into the air; and when it dropped to the ground, she would go in the direction it indicated. The residents in the area knew of her strange custom. One day a friend saw her tossing the straw several times before choosing the path she would take. He asked, "Why did you do that more than once?" "Oh, the straw kept pointing to the road on the left." she replied, "and I wanted to go the other way because it looks so much smoother." She had continued casting her straw to the wind until it fell in the direction she wanted.¹

That story reminded me that as a youth I did something almost like that. I had a black ball with a window on the bottom. If you turned the ball upside down, it would give you an answer to a question that you asked. So, when I wanted to know God's will, I prayed first. I would ask God to guide the answer that the ball displayed. Then I would turn the ball

over and read the answer. But frequently, I did not get the answer I wanted.

So, I rationalized that my prayer must not have been serious enough. So, I prayed more earnestly telling God that I really wanted to know His will. Then I turned the ball over again to discover the answer. Sometimes I would turn the ball over three times and take the best two out of three answers. There were many games that I played trying to get the answer I wanted! The truth was I wanted my desire, just like the elderly woman in the story. I also tried using a "fleece" as Gideon did. I would even repeat that process too! Eventually, I realized that I was

not honest and stopped using such gimmicks. Since then, I have just prayed and asked God to make His will obvious to me! Most Christians want to know God's will. Even some unbelievers reach out to God in times of crisis.



When I think about God's will, I am also reminded of Paul's companions in Acts 21:10-14. In that passage, the apostle Paul and his companions were staying in the house of the evangelist Philip in the city of Caesarea. While there, a prophet named Agabus warned Paul that if he went to Jerusalem, he would be bound and delivered to the Gentiles. Because of the prophecy, Paul's companions and local residents begged him not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul ignored their pleas. Then verse 14 says,

1. Roy Zuck. The Speaker's Quote Book. Kregel Publications. 1997. p. 409.

And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, “The will of the Lord be done!” Acts 21:14 (NASB)

The verse reveals the men trusted Paul to the will of God.

On a previous occasion, Paul had wanted to go into Asia to preach the gospel. However, Acts 16:6 tells us that it was not God’s will for Paul to do that. Then in the next verse, we are told Paul wanted to go into Bythynia and preach the gospel. That was not God’s will either. From our perspective, preaching the gospel to unbelievers would seem to have certainly been God’s will for us, but God did not want Paul to do that in Bythynia for some reason. That is an important lesson. What we think is God’s will may not actually be God’s will for you and me! Sometimes we assume that we know God’s will for our life and merrily move in that direction, only to discover later that was not God’s will for us.

Our Study. I wanted to start this study by talking about the will of God because our study is about doing the will of God. Our study is from Matthew 7:21-23. While it is a very well-known passage to many Christians, I believe many have missed an important principle. We are going to discover four major principles in this passage.

The Criteria For Entering Heaven. The first principle is found in verse 21. It says,

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Matthew 7:21 (NASB)

Jesus started His illustration by surprising us. He said there will be people who will say to Him, “Lord, Lord” but they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. One would think that anyone who called Jesus “Lord” was a serious believer, and would enter heaven.

Romans 10:9-10 tells us that at the moment of saving faith, a person submits himself or herself to Christ. It is a sign that a person is truly a believer. Saving faith is more than just believing some facts about Christ. Remember that James 2:19 says that even the demons believe in Christ and shudder. So, to be

a believer means that saving faith is more than just believing facts about Christ.

Romans 10:9-10 tells us that someone who truly believes in Christ will call Him Lord. The passage says,

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; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. Romans 10:9-10 (NASB)

So, it would seem that the people in Jesus’ illustration in Matthew 7:21 would be real Christians. They called Him Lord. But Jesus reveals in Luke 6:46 that some people do call Jesus, “Lord, Lord” in this life and do not do what He says. The verse says,

Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? Luke 6:46 (NASB)

What they claim is not real. That is Jesus’ point. The word “Lord” comes from the Greek word *kurios*. It refers to someone who is a master. If we read the opening verse of some of the books written by the apostles Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and John, we would discover they used a word that makes some of us uncomfortable. They used the Greek word, *doulos*, which means slave. They called themselves slaves of Christ. The truth is a believer is truly someone who is a slave of Christ. A true Christian wants to be a slave of Christ. They humbly submit themselves as slaves to Christ as their Lord.

Jesus is not our employer, our mayor, or our president. Instead, Jesus owns us, if we are a Christian! That is the correct sense of the word Lord! Notice that when Jesus said, “Lord” in Matthew 7:21, He repeated the word. In the Greek language a writer added emphasis by repeating the word. I think we are familiar with Isaiah 6:3, where it says that God is holy, holy, holy. That may, in fact, be what the passage is teaching us. But in the Hebrew, the word is also repeated to make the emphasis that God is holy.

So when Jesus said they will call Him, “Lord, Lord,” He

emphasized the fact that they will try to convince Him they were committed to following Him. But Christ will know that was not true. He tells us that they will try to convince Him they were really committed to Him. But He knows their hearts. He cannot be deceived. So, Jesus tells us at the beginning using their false claim.

Must do the Will of the Father. Then Jesus says at the end of the verse that only those who do “the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.” Now a second time, we learn that these people never truly submitted themselves to Christ. They are not going to heaven.

Frankly, it unsettles me that there are going to be people who will claim that Christ is truly their Lord, but it will not be true. Most likely they called themselves Christians. The word “Christian” appears in the New Testament in Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. The Greek word for “Christian” means one believes in and follows Christ. Today it is almost synonymous with being an American. In some parts of our country it is like a custom. But that is not what the word means.

So, even if these people call themselves a Christian, the title did not accurately describe them. They had just added Jesus to their life. They did not actually follow Him. This reminds me that some years ago my wife and I visited the San Xavier del Bac mission, which is south of Tucson. While we were there, I noticed a sign on one of the displays. Since then I have returned and discovered the sign has been removed, but at one point the sign was posted and read as follows,

With the coming of the Christian missionaries, the desert people added tenets of the new faith to their religion of nature. This faith was expressed using symbols of metal, embroidered cloth, carved wood, and painted canvas.²

The message of the sign was that the natives had just added Jesus to their existing lifestyle. They did not really believe in Jesus as Lord. Jesus was not their Lord, period. They were simply placing Jesus along with some other gods and goddesses. They may have called Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” but that

was not true. Jesus knows who is striving to do the will of the Father.

This gives us our first principle.

Principle #1 Only Those Who Do The Will of God Will Enter Heaven.

The Claim of Many at the Judgment. Jesus’ second point is found in verse 22. The verse says,

*Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’
Matthew 7:22 (NASB)*

There are three things to notice in this verse.

Many Will Say. First, notice that Jesus said, “Many will say to Me on that day.” Notice the word “many.” This helps understand the meaning of, “Not everyone” in verse 21. It is not someone or a few. It is many people. That is, there will be many people who will call Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” and then be sent to eternal condemnation. Jesus’ message is that many people who have sung praises to our Lord, such as, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” are not going to heaven. They may call Him Lord, and shout, “Praise the Lord,” but they are not going to heaven. That is what Jesus communicated.

We have already learned from the illustration of the wide road and the narrow road in verses 13-14 that most people are walking on the road that leads to destruction, ruin, or waste, and not the road to life. That was also Jesus’ message in the parable of the Sower of the Seed. In that parable, Jesus described four soils on which seed was thrown. Then He told us that only one of the four soils produced fruit. Two of the soils received the gospel and were excited about it. That implies they were involved in the church in some way. In the Parable of the Tares, Jesus told us that some people in our churches only look like Christians. They are not truly Christians. In the parables of the Pearl of Great Price and The Hidden Treasure, Jesus told us that those who will enter the kingdom of heaven are those who are willing to give up

². Sign posted at the San Xavier del Bac mission in Tucson, Arizona of the United States of America.

everything. It is important to notice Jesus has been emphasizing that few people are actually walking down the road that leads to eternal life. Here in verse 22, Jesus emphasizes that many are deceived. They think they are going to heaven! They think they are a Christian. They have listened to sermons, sung hymns and worship songs, and been involved in ministry.

Many Defend Themselves. The next important statement is that Jesus refers to “on that day.” That refers to the Day of Judgment. Revelation 20:11-13 describes the day of judgment. In this passage the apostle John says,

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Revelation 20:11-13 (NASB)

This describes the judgment of unbelievers. We are told that God is sitting on a white throne. The white stands for purity or holiness. Everyone is gathered around it. Books are opened and the people are judged according to their deeds. In Matthew 12:36, Jesus tells us that the words people have spoken will be judged too! Every careless word will be judged. It will not just be the deeds you performed, but also the words that you spoke. Luke 11:30-32 also tells us that people will be able to talk to one another during the judgment. It is an amazing passage of Scripture. Here is the passage. Jesus is speaking,

For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of

Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. Luke 11:30-32 (NASB)

Notice Jesus said that on the day of judgment, the Queen of the South will stand up at the judgment to condemn the Jews who were alive when Jesus walked the earth. Then He added that the Ninevites will also stand up on judgment day. Think about this. God is sitting on the throne. People are there who are being judged. What did Jesus say will happen? The Queen of the South will stand up at the judgment and condemn them. That means she will be speaking at the judgment. At this judgment, the unbelievers will be there. I wonder if believers will be there as well. Scripture never tells us, so that is speculation. But it is an interesting picture that Jesus paints for us. Judgment will be occurring. People will be allowed to speak and hear. What God will say to someone about what they did wrong, others will be able to hear it. That is intimidating, but it helps us to understand our passage.

This helps us understand Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:22 where He says they are going to appeal to Him. That is why Jesus told us in verse 21 they will call Jesus “Lord, Lord.” Therefore, on the day of judgment, many will say that they had prophesied, cast out demons, and performed many miracles in Jesus’ name. That is going to happen on the day of judgment. That is what Jesus is saying. They are going to be defending themselves. They are going to try to convince Jesus they truly are a Christian and deserve to go to heaven.

Notice that these people are emphasizing the ministries they had performed. I wonder how they determined that they were doing the will of the Father. Did they use a black ball with a window on the bottom as I did? For many people, serving God makes them feel good about themselves. Did ministry motivate these people who tell Jesus, “Lord, Lord”? The truth is they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Their Ministries. The third important statement in verse 22 is the type of ministry these people claim they had done! They said that they had prophesied, cast out demons, and

performed many miracles in Jesus' name. Now how could they do miracles in Jesus' name or cast out demons? There are three possibilities.

The first possibility is that they may have actually done those things. God may have allowed them to do those things. According to Numbers 23:5 and 24:2, Balaam prophesied for God when the Holy Spirit came upon him even though he was a false prophet. Judas, the disciple who betrayed Christ, is another example. When Jesus sent the disciples to go to the lost sheep of Israel in Matthew 10, Judas and the other disciples preached the gospel, healed people, and cast out demons. How could an unbeliever do that? Judas did. The answer is that Jesus enabled him to do that.

A second possibility is that Satan may have empowered them to do these things. 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12 tells us that Satan will empower the antichrist to do miracles. The third possibility is that they may have lied. So, which is the most likely view about their statement? I believe the first and last are the most likely possibilities. Scripture does not clearly say.

Whatever the correct view, Jesus' point is that many people have been and are involved in ministries who are not going to heaven. They are going to hell. But they look good on the outside. What is worse is that they have deceived themselves. It is one thing to be a Pharisee and to know that you are not real. It is something else to deceive yourself. These people are deceived. These people think they are going to heaven. They will call Him Lord. I find it interesting that in this passage of Scripture that Jesus never says you never called Me Lord. Jesus never tells them that they did not prophesy, they did not cast demons, and that they never healed. They will think they are Christians. They think they are entitled to go to heaven, but they are not.

They are pastors, church leaders, teachers, and ministry workers. There are many examples of individuals who have been in ministry who were not believers. Some I have known because they became believers later in life and told me. They looked like believers to others. They thought they were believers. John MacArthur said this in a sermon titled, "Empty Words," on this passage.

They're in the church up to their neck involved, and

they know the gospel, they know the theology but they don't obey the Word of God. They live in a constant state of sinfulness.³

These self-deceived people are involved in the life of churches. This gives us our second principle.

Principle #2 Having A Ministry Is Not Proof You Are Going To Heaven

Jesus has just taught us that having a ministry does not guarantee that someone is a Christian and that they are going to heaven. Jesus just demonstrated this in these two verses.

The Conclusion of Christ. The third principle is found in verse 23. The verse says,

And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' Matthew 7:23 (NASB)

Now Jesus concludes His illustration. He gives us two reasons why He will tell these people, who are involved in the life of the church, why they will not go to heaven. First, He will tell them on the day of judgment, "I never knew you!" That is, they were never Christians. They were not believers at some point and then lost their salvation. They were never real. They deceived themselves. If there is any doubt that they thought they were real, just read verse 21 and 22 again. They will declare that they called Jesus "Lord" and performed various ministries for Christ. That is called self-deception.

The second reason these people will not go to heaven is that they practiced lawlessness. That is the proof they were not real. They practiced sin! 1 John 3:7-8 describes the person who practices sin. It says,

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil . . . 1 John 3:7-8 (NASB)

3. John MacArthur. "Empty Words" June 8, 1980

This passage says that if we practice righteousness, then we are righteous. This does not mean that every believer no longer ever sins. This is not describing sinless behavior. 1 John 1:8, and 10 teaches that if we claim we are sinless, then we are liars. This passage is describing someone who is striving against sin. They are seeing victory little-by-little. Little-by-little they are seeing that they are sinning less and less. This happens because God has declared believers to be righteous.

Believers are positionally righteous in Christ. Believers are declared righteous because we truly believe in Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 helps us understand why God declares us to be righteous. The verse says,

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. Corinthians 5:21 (NASB)

Believers have been given the righteousness of Christ. Also, the Holy Spirit works in the life of a believer to make them want to be like Christ, and believers will sin less and less. We become more sensitive to sin. As a result, we hate our sins and strive to sin less. We confess our sins and seriously want God's forgiveness. Now I have a question for you. Have you stopped to think about the pattern of your sins? Are you seeing increasing victory over various sins? What is true about you? These people thought they were Christians. Jesus never disagreed with their claim that they had called Him Lord or that they had performed those ministries. Jesus will tell them He never knew them, and the proof will be that they were practicing sin. Are you more motivated by some ministry than by living righteously and obediently studying His Word?

1 John 3:10 tells us that those who practice sin are like the devil. They may hate certain sins because of the consequences of those sins. They may even be embarrassed by their sin. But they do not hate sin! They are involved in the life of church and maybe love being involved in some ministry of the church. They may sing Jesus is Lord, but He is not actually the Lord of his or her life. The ministry helps them feel good about themselves. Frankly, most people enjoy doing good things. But ministry does not save a person, and it is not proof that someone is a Christian. This gives us the third

principle.

Principle #3 Increasingly Practicing Righteousness Proves You Have A Relationship With Christ!

Conclusion. I began this study with some illustrations about seeking the will of God and a desire to do the will of God. Now as we conclude this study, we need to read 1 John 3:23. It teaches us that if we want to do the will of God the starting point is to believe in Christ. The verse says,

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ . . . 1 John 3:23 (NASB)

God's will starts with believing in Christ. In Matthew 7:23, Jesus refers to this starting point as having a relationship with Him. Remember, Jesus will say to these unbelievers on judgment day, "I never knew you!" He referred to someone having a relationship with Himself. Jesus wants a relationship with us. When someone believes Christ died for their sins and was resurrected, they begin a relationship with Jesus. Then Jesus says in verse 23 the proof that someone is a real Christian is that they will practice righteousness. Practicing righteousness is also the will of God. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 says that it is the will of God that we abstain from sexual sins. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us that it is the will of God for us to give thanks in everything. 1 Peter 2:13-15 tells us to submit to every human institution. That includes children submitting to parents, wives submitting to husbands, employees to employers, citizens to civil government, laymen to church leaders, and everyone to God. However, God is not part of every human institution. 1 Peter 4:19 says it is the will of God that we suffer. 1 Peter 1:15-16 reminds us that God wants us to be holy. All of these passages describe what it means to practice righteousness. This gives us the message of the study.

Principle #4 Will of God Begins With Salvation, We Become More Righteous, and

the Overflow Is Doing Ministry!

I hope that is true of you! That is the true will of God.

I would like to close with an illustration about commitment to the will of God. It is given by Dr. Paul Tassel.

In the days of the Roman Emperor Nero, there were a band of soldiers known as the “Emperor’s Wrestlers.” They were picked from the best and the bravest, and recruited from the great athletes of the Roman amphitheater . . . Before each contest they stood before the emperor’s throne and cried: “We, the wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O Emperor, to win for you the victory and from you, the victor’s crown.”

When the great Roman army was sent to fight in Gaul, they had great success and this band of wrestlers were the best. They were led by their centurion Vespasian. But news reached Nero that many Roman soldiers had accepted the Christian faith. Therefore, this decree was dispatched to the centurion Vespasian: “If there be any among your soldiers who cling to the faith of the Christian, they must die!” The decree was received in the dead of winter. The soldiers were camped on the shore of a frozen inland lake.

It was with sinking heart that Vespasian, the centurion, read the emperor’s message. So, Vespasian called his soldiers together and asked the question: “Are there any among you who cling to the faith of the Christian? If so, let him step forward!” Instantly, 40 wrestlers stepped forward two paces, respectfully saluted, and stood at attention. Vespasian paused. He had not expected so many, nor such excellent ones. “Until sundown I shall await your answer,” said Vespasian hoping they would change their minds.

Sundown came, and again the question was asked. Again the 40 wrestlers stepped forward. Vespasian pleaded with them long and earnestly without prevailing upon a single man to deny his Lord. Finally, he said,

“The decree of the emperor must be obeyed, but I am not willing that your comrades should shed your blood. I am going to order that you march out upon the lake of ice, and I shall leave you there to the mercy of the cold and ice.”

The 40 wrestlers were stripped and then, falling into columns of four, marched toward the center of the lake of ice. As they marched, they broke into the chant of the arena: “40 wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee, the victor’s crown!”

Through the long hours of the night, Vespasian stood by his campfire and watched. As he waited through the long night, there came to him fainter and fainter the wrestlers’ song. As morning drew near one figure, overcome by exposure, crept quietly toward the fire; in the extremity of his suffering, he renounced his Lord. Faintly but clearly from the darkness came the song: “39 wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee the victor’s crown!”

Vespasian looked at the figure drawing close to the fire and back at the men on the ice. Then he took off his helmet, shoes, socks, and all of his clothing, and he walked out on the ice, crying, “40 wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee, the victor’s crown.”

This is an example of absolute commitment to Christ. May we, who call Jesus Lord, have the same commitment to strive for victory over sin, to live righteously for Christ, and from that minister for Him!