

Who is Heaven For?

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Preacher: Lachie Macdonald

[0 : 00] Well, heaven and the kingdom of heaven is a theme that takes up many people's thoughts, many people's minds, isn't it? You can look up any manner of things and see much about heaven.

You can read poems, you can read books, you can think about people's hopes that are espoused through nowadays the pages of their social media accounts. You can listen to songs, great songs, Brian Adams, heaven, Bob Dylan knocking on heaven's door, Led Zeppelin, stairway to heaven, food that is good is described as heavenly. Heaven is a word that is synonymous with everything that is good, everything that is enjoyable, everything that is pure. Heaven is a place where everything will be okay. Heaven is a place of goodness. Heaven is a place where God is, that's it, by its very definition. And here's the question then we have this morning. How do we get there? How do we get to heaven? How do we secure a place in God's eternal kingdom? Who is heaven for?

Now, I might blow your mind with this answer, but the answer is heaven is for the Christian believer. Heaven is for those who follow Jesus, the one who has been convicted of their sin or waywardness, their brokenness, and the one who has trusted and surrendered themselves to the care and to the keeping of the Savior Christ, the one who has followed Him, the one who has come to Him, the one who remains in Him. When it comes to heaven, there is exclusivity. When it comes to the root, to heaven, there is exclusivity. Not everyone will be there. That's an indisputable fact if you read your Bibles. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 7, 21, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

He also stated in John 14, 6, you all know that verse, don't you? I am the way, I am the truth, and I am the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. So I have good news for you this morning.

You are all invited. We are all invited to the kingdom of heaven. We are all offered a place in God's kingdom of light and goodness and satisfaction. The bad news this morning is only some of us will be there. We're all asked to come, but only some people will respond.

[3 : 06] Some folk will have the best of intentions, but will never follow through. They will remain just that, good intentions. On the other side of things, there are those who will be wayward, those who will be rebellious, but who will repent and who will turn and who will surrender themselves in faith and trust to the Savior Christ. That's the point that Jesus is seeking to elucidate with this parable as He speaks to those around about Him. As He's being challenged by the religious authority, those who are learned in the law, those who are perturbed by Jesus' presence, by His ministry, by His teaching, they're bothered by Him, and so they're challenging Him, by what authority do you do these things, Jesus? Just who exactly do you think you are? Listen, mate, this is our arena. This is where we operate. The temple is ours, and we are in charge here.

And you're coming in, you're upsetting the balance, you're overturning the tables of the money changers, you're driving people out. We're on a good thing here, Jesus, and you're ruining it. So they don't like it. He's challenging them. He's exposing their hearts as He cleanses the temple in verses 12 to 17.

He likens the hearts of those religious men to the fig tree in the next section. All the fruit, all the leaves of fruit, all the leaves of piety, but no fruit evident, no spiritual fruit there. It was absent. The religious, the chief priests, the elders of the law, these were the men who should have known exactly who Jesus was. They're the ones who, when Jesus came on the scene, should have said, this is it. Here He is, the one that we've waited for, the one who was prophesied since 700 years, the one who we've heard about all our lives, the one who we've sought to follow, the one who we've read about in the law. Here He is, the fulfillment.

But they don't. They don't get it. They don't see Him. They had this legalistic veneer, you could say, of religious respectability. But that's just what it was. It was a veneer. It was a mask. It was a disguise. It was a costume. It's like the baddie at the end of a Scooby-Doo episode, isn't it? And they're unmasked. Aha! They're not really that person. If it wasn't for you pesky kids, I could have got away with it. For all of their knowledge of the law, for all of their religion, for all of their ceremony and tradition and religious rite, they rejected the forerunner to Jesus, John the Baptist, and the message that he preached of repentance. And now they're rejecting the Christ, the Messiah, Jesus, Son of God, and therefore their fate, you could say, is sealed.

By contrast to that, you have the common people. You have those who are the outcast of society, those who are treated with disregard by those of high morals, those who are at the opposite end of the social scale and the moral ladder, you could say. These people who were the tax collectors and the prostitutes, those who were looked down upon by the religious, well, they're seeing Jesus and they get it. They want to know what he's all about. They want to hear his teaching. They're surrendering themselves to him in faith. These people who have lived with wanton disregard for the things of God, those who have lived rebelliously in their lives, and Christ comes and they are changed. And as a result, their place is set at the king's table. Their seat is marked. Their place is promised in God's eternal kingdom. So the first point that we have to drive home this morning with zero ambiguity is that religious observance will not save your soul. Being here today is of little importance when it comes to the matter of salvation in one sense. It doesn't matter how religious we are.

[7 : 26] It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how much tradition we uphold. It doesn't matter how many meetings we might attend. It's not about what we wear or how we speak. It's not the public image that we promote. Indeed, it's not about how much you deny yourself. It's not about how much you pray or how much you read the Word. But life comes through the Word. None of these things in and of themselves can save us.

They may make us feel better about ourselves. They might satisfy a legalistic mindset where we say, yep, I'm okay, that's me, ticked my mark for the week. Might bolster our sense of spiritual pride or self-righteousness, but it won't save us. Away from me, for I never knew you, says Jesus.

Salvation is in Christ and in Christ alone. A place in heaven is found and received and secured in Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus. It is by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. Only Jesus saves. Only Jesus can save. And he will save all who come to him, all who commit to him, all who will believe in him, all who will trust him, all who will serve him.

That's who the Christian is. We can kid ourselves with other things. We can get ourselves lost in Presbyterian tradition or other things, but the truth remains the same. It's Jesus who saves.

[9 : 25] So, as he continues to challenge the religious establishment who misunderstand and misrepresent him, who malign him and mock him and ultimately kill him, Jesus tells them a parable. A parable is something that he does. Often he employs parables, often throughout his ministry, in order to teach a spiritual truth. He casts something familiar and physical alongside something spiritual in order to illustrate a point. An earthly story with a heavenly meaning is how we would explain it to the children.

Let's look at this parable then in verses 28 to 32 and begin by looking at a couple of similarities. On immediate inspection, we might say, well, everything about these boys seems to conflict, don't they? One says he'll work for his father and he doesn't. The other says he won't work for his father, but he does. But there are similarities that we need to consider here first. Firstly, that they have the same father. These boys have the same father. They live in the same family. They're brought up in the same environment, and yet they're different. If any of you are parents, you'll know that raising your children, you'll look at them and you'll say, wow, these children are the same, yet they are different. They have been brought into the world and lived in the same family. They have the same values promoted to them. They have the same behaviors set as an example for them, both good and bad by parents. And yet, they are completely different, different in nature, different in the way in which they act. And yet, many people will look from the outside and say, wow, aren't they alike?

You know, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. The point is that these two boys were in the same home, same nurturing, same upbringing. The elder brother may have had some slight privileges, but the similarities probably outweighed the differences. But they have two different responses. The fact that there's a different response from these guys sends us back to one of Jesus' first parables, kingdom parables and the parable of the sower, that there are different responses to the gospel, that there are different responses to the gospel in this room today. There are those who have the fruitful heart, the willing and receptive heart. There are those who have the shallow and superficial heart, those who have the crowded heart, and those who have the hard, impenetrable heart.

We are all offered the opportunity to come and dine at the king's table. We are all offered a place in his eternal kingdom, but many of us are disinterested in that. Many of us might even be feeling a wee bit sleepy at this very moment, a bit bored, a bit disengaged, not really interested. But these are matters of eternal significance to you in your heart and in your life. You have all been invited, but what are you doing with that invitation?

We all have the opportunity. We've all been asked. We've all been invited, but only some will respond. One brother responded positively, another negatively. That's flipped on its head.

[12 : 40] We'll go through that. They have the same father. Secondly, they're given the same command as I follow on. Son, go and work today in the vineyard. No more was expected of the elder than of the younger brother. Same father, same home, same requirements, same expectations, same upbringing, same command. The broader lesson that we could learn from that is that God the Father is the Father of all and expects the same from all of us. He has one law, one truth, one standard of judgment. He calls us all to repentance. He calls us to faith. He calls us to discipleship, becoming more like Him. If we are following Jesus, if we have surrendered to Him, if we have accepted His Lordship, His mercy, His grace in our lives, if we have come and followed and remained and loved and served, and if we do share Him in the world in which we live, then we are His people.

He asks the same of everyone, come to me and no rest for your souls. There is no distinction in the gospel. There is no ladder, you could say. There is ground that is level at the foot of the cross, as some people might put it. He asks the same of the religious and the irreligious, the rich, the poor, the black, the white, the young, the old, the good, the bad. The fundamental duty that we have is to repent of our sin and turn to Him in faith. Believe what He commands. I am the resurrection and the life.

If you believe in Me, you will live even though you die. Do you believe this? Do you believe this? The call of the Christian is to believe the Savior, to do what He says to go where He sends. So, there are similarities. They had the same father, they lived in the same home, they had the same command. There are, of course, some differences, differences between these two guys. The first son refuses to work, but then does. I will not. I'm not going. I've got better things to do with my time.

Now, what we have to understand is in the culture of the day, that was a kind of moment for the audience. They would think, He said, what? Oh, no, you didn't. You can't say that. They would never say that.

Bring dishonor on the family, rude to his father, rebellious, disobedient, bringing shame on the family name. Hmm. Jesus often did that. He used kind of shock tactics, didn't He, to kind of elicit a response from His audience, to make sure that they weren't falling asleep, you know? We see everything from the pulpit. Jesus always used familiar phenomenon in order to draw people in as a hook, to draw them in, and then shock them with something that might have been there. So, here the first son says, nope, not going to do it, and that's a moment, but then he eventually relents. He repents, and he does it. Who does he represent? Well, of course, he represents the non-religious community, those who are not religious. The tax collectors and prostitutes of verse 31 immediately come to mind. Those who have absolutely no intention of obeying God's command. They have another agenda altogether to suit themselves and to satisfy their every whim and desire, and God does not feature in that whatsoever. However, as we read, I will not, he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Time passed. We don't know how much time. We can assume it was a fairly short amount of time in this situation, but we don't know how long, but time had to pass. Time had to pass, whether it's a short period of time or a long period of time. There was still time involved in this son changing his mind, and we see that in life, don't we? We see that in our own experience, perhaps, that we knew the gospel from an early age, that we were taught the principles of God, that we were encouraged to receive Christ, but we kept at arm's length. We stubbornly refused it. We saw the call of the world and everything that was put before us that was going to be much more satisfying, much more fun, much more fulfilling.

[17 : 15] Peer pressure, the call of the world, the excesses of the godless culture in which we live in post-Christian Scotland. We see that. There has to be time, and yet so many fall to the call of the world, shall we say, and the promises of everything that is out there, regardless of risk. As my old minister once said, and it's always stuck with me, the craving overcomes the fear of consequence. The craving overcomes the fear of consequence, and people go looking for that fulfillment and satisfaction in all manner of things, only to find themselves enslaved and degraded by them. And then what happens? Feelings of guilt begin to come up. There's guilt, there's unfulfilled yearning, there's shame, until by God's grace and in His providence, people come to a point where they come to their senses, like the prodigal son in Luke 15, and they turn from the life that they've been pursuing to pursue the Father, to return to the Creator, who is waiting with open arms for the prodigal, for those who have rebelled, for those who have said, I'm not going, I'm not doing that, I'm going to find satisfaction myself. At the opposite end of the spectrum, of course, there are those for whom it is their own self-righteousness, their own goodness that keeps them away from God and from salvation. No need for submission in that regard, because I'm a righteous man. I have done all things well. I am in control.

I look down on these sinners all around about me. That's perhaps a more dangerous place, a harder place to be when it comes to salvation. Rigid, moralistic, self-righteous. So listen, regardless of whether we're in the spiritual wilderness, out there, far from God, pleasing ourselves, satisfying our own wanton desires, or whether we're at the coal face, you could say, rigid, moralistic, self-righteous, upright, all of these things. Regardless of where we're at on that spectrum, the law of God is written into the heart of man. That's what we know from His Word, isn't it?

The law of God is written into your heart and into my heart. And that's why we have a conscience. And that's why we know right from wrong. And that's why we're bothered when we do stuff that we know is not right, even when nobody else sees it. That's why we're bothered by regret. That's why we have guilt and shame in our lives. And ultimately, that is what brings conviction. Conviction which leads to repentance, hopefully, leads to repentance in some, leads to remorse and regret in others.

After saying, though, he changed his mind, the other translations say he regretted it, which is probably a better translation. There's a Greek word here called *metamillomai* that's used, and it means to repent or to regret, to have remorse, to change one's mind, to go in a different direction. He thought it over, his outlook changed, he's convicted of his waywardness, and he repents of it. We say, well, what does repentance mean? Well, repentance means to be sorry, to have remorse, yes, to have regret, absolutely. But it's more than that, isn't it? Repent is to turn, it's a physical action. It's to turn away and to pursue a different direction, to go in a different direction, to do a 180 and go in the opposite direction. This son repented of his rebellion by turning, by changing direction, by obeying his father's command, realizing what he'd done was wrong, changing his mind, changing course, and getting to work. And essentially, that's a picture of the Christian believer, isn't it? Realizing that we are wrong, realizing that we are sinful, realizing that we are broken, taking ownership of that, acknowledging that before the holiness and presence of God, and changing course from selfish motives to a heart filled with worship for the God who has made a way for us to be saved. Many of us can identify with that. I'm sure, having lived a life of rebellion for a time, having wasted years in corrupt behavior, being wayward in thought, mind, and in deed, and then becoming convicted by those things, and turning and coming to faith, looking back with regret over ruined relationships and ruined lives. Some people feel that regret, feel that remorse, but that's kind of as far as it goes, full of regret, full of remorse, burdened by that, but it stops there. For others, that remorse and that regret, that burden, leads to repentance.

It leads to a calling out to God for forgiveness of our sin, and as a result, life and direction of life has changed completely. I wonder where you're at today.

[23 : 04] Is your life, is your heart full of regret and remorse for things of the past, of the brokenness of life and the hardship and the hurt that you've experienced? Does it stop there? Or have you repented? Have you turned to God? This son was remorseful, he was regretful, but most significantly, he repented, he turned, and he went and did what he'd been asked to do. 2 Corinthians 7, Paul says, godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. Tim Keller's helpful in this area. He says, the Bible makes a clear distinction between true repentance and mere regret or remorse. Both are characterized by sorrow and distress, but otherwise they are completely different. First, worldly sorrow does not regret, does not, worldly sorrow or regret does not produce any real change while repentance does. Why? It is sorrowful over the consequences of a sin, but not the sin itself. If there are no consequences, there is no sorrow. Therefore, as soon as the consequences go away, the behavior returns.

Second, worldly sorrow stays regretful, while repentance removes all regret about the past. Removes all regret about the past. So, what are you today? Are you full of regret or full of repentance?

Secondly, briefly, quickly, the time is marching on. The second son agrees to work, but he doesn't. He's a good, well-mannered, well-intentioned guy. His father says, go and work. He says, I'll do it, father. But as Matthew Henry says, he said better than he did, and he promised better than he proved.

What happened? What came in the way? What stopped him? Well, we don't know. We're not told. Jesus doesn't elaborate, but we can assume that something came in the way. There will always be something, isn't there, that will detract us, distract us even. There will always be something that will come in our way, but it comes down to priority, doesn't it? Perhaps somebody came by for a visit. Perhaps he forgot. Perhaps he was distracted by some form of entertainment. Perhaps it was just too hard.

The prospect of, I'm not working for a day in the vineyard. Not in this heat. Maybe he just thought, well, it's just too much. I just don't want to do it. He meant well. He meant to obey his father, but as one commentator put it, buds and blossoms are not real fruit.

[25 : 52] Who's Jesus referring to with this boy? Well, it's the religious community, isn't it? It's the chief priests and the elders of the law. It's the Pharisees. It's the religious community. Those who talk a good game, those who say the right things, those who've got the Christian behavior down to a tee, those who can religion it up with the best of them, but they don't live consistently. They don't live with integrity. They might say the right things in one setting, in one place, but something different in another. Jesus called them hypocrites. They pretend to be righteous, pretenders, talking of loyalty and obedience, but not practicing it. Religion is a matter of image. It's not a matter of the heart. The religion is just a facade. It's a veneer. It's a mask. All of this then prompts Jesus to ask them another question. Which of these two boys did the will of the father? Of course, they say, well, easy peasy. It was the first, of course. But by answering, their answer traps them, doesn't it? They were trying to catch Jesus out. They're conniving and plotting to catch him out, to trap him, to ensnare him. They want him gone. They want him dead.

They know they can't answer his first question because he'll catch them out. He asks them another question. They don't give it enough thought, and he does catch them out. Their own words condemn them here. I guess the question we have to answer for ourselves this morning is which son best represents our lives? Which son best represents the way in which we live, where we are?

Jesus is saying, look, talk is cheap. What counts is your performance, so to speak. You can say anything, but what you do is of significance. How did James put it? He said, faith without works is dead.

We can't just have good intentions. Good intentions will get us nowhere. We might have good intentions, but they won't usher us in to heaven. They may be good. They may be noble, but if they are just good intentions, then that's all they will be. Good intentions.

Jesus lays it down in no uncertain terms. He says, look, here's something you can be certain of. The tax collectors and the prostitutes, the scum of society, the outcasts, those you disregard, they're getting into the kingdom of heaven before you with all of your religion, with all of your tradition, with all of your ceremony. They're getting into the kingdom before you because they get it. They understand it's not about them or what they've done, but it's about me and what I am doing. They accepted John's teaching. You rejected it. They've accepted me. You're rejecting me. They're all talk, these religious men. They're all form. They're all appearance. They're like the fig tree, all leaf but no fruit. And yet the outcasts, those who are despised, they're coming to God and trusting in Him, repenting and turning off their truth. And even when the religious saw them doing that with John the Baptist, still they didn't get it. Still they didn't believe. Jesus says they rejected John's message of righteousness. They rejected John's fruitful ministry, those who were coming to faith. The consciences of the sinners were working, but the consciences of the religious were not because their pride and self-righteousness was drowning it out. So as we conclude this morning and as we consider for ourselves, where do we fall on the scale, on the spectrum? You could say from first brother to second brother. As we go back to our opening question, who is heaven for? It's really what Jesus is seeking to answer in this parable. Who gets into heaven? Ultimately, it's not the religious.

[30 : 22] Ultimately, it's not the immoral. We say, then who? If it's not for the religious and it's not for the immoral, then who is heaven for? Heaven is for those who receive Jesus Christ. Heaven is for those who trust in Jesus Christ. Heaven is for those who surrender themselves to Jesus Christ, who turn to Him for forgiveness. And repenting of it, turning to Him. I wonder this morning, are you lost in your sin, lost in your rebellion? Well, turn to Jesus, and know forgiveness, and know fulfillment, and know a place in His eternal kingdom? Or are you lost in your goodness? Are you lost in your religion?

concerned with, concerned with, consumed by all of the externals, by painting a good picture for those around about you? Exceptional in every religious rite and act and ceremony, but dead to Christ.

Give your heart to Jesus before it's too late, and you too will have a place in His eternal kingdom. Who gets into heaven? Who gets into heaven? Who is heaven for? Heaven is for those who trust and who give their lives to Jesus. Heaven is for those for whom they can say, it is well with my soul. Shall we pray?