

The Hard Sayings of Jesus

Bible Study #8

¹⁴ “For many are called, but few are chosen.” -Matthew 22:14, NLT

REACTIONS TO THIS SAYING OF JESUS

READ CONTEXT: Matthew 22:1-14 : Many are called, but few are chosen

COMMENTARY

In the original text of the Gospels, these words appear once—as a comment on Matthew’s parable of the marriage feast. In the course of transmission of the text it came to be attached to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard also (Mt 20:16), where it appears, but it is not really relevant there.

In form this seems to be a proverbial saying; other sayings with the same construction are found elsewhere in ancient literature. Plato quotes one with reference to the mystery religions: “Many are the wand-bearers, but few are the initiates”¹⁹; that is to say, there are many who walk in the procession to the cult center carrying sacred wands, but only a few are admitted to the knowledge of the innermost secret (which confers the prize of immortality). Two sayings with this construction are ascribed to Jesus or his disciples in the second-century *Gospel of Thomas*. In Saying 74 one of the disciples says to him, “Lord, there are many around the opening but no one in the well.” (The well is the well of truth; many approach it without getting into it. In this form the saying has a Gnostic flavor; in fact, Celsus, an anti-Christian writer of the second century, quotes it from a Gnostic treatise called the *Heavenly Dialogue*.)²⁰ Jesus’ reply to the disciple is given in Saying 75: “Many stand outside at the door, but it is only the single ones who enter the bridal chamber.” (In Gnostic terminology the bridal chamber is the place where the soul is reunited with its proper element, and the “single ones” are those who have transcended the distinctions of age and sex. Hence Saying 49 makes Jesus say, “Happy are the single and the chosen ones, for you will find the kingdom.”)

The Gnostic ideas of the *Gospel of Thomas* will give us no help in understanding the saying as it appears at the end of the parable of the wedding feast. There the “called” are those who were invited to the wedding feast; the “chosen” are those who accepted the invitation. The king invited many guests to the feast, but only a few, if any, of those who were invited actually came to it. The feast is a parable of the gospel and the blessings which it holds out to believers. The invitation to believe the gospel and enjoy its blessings goes out to all who hear it. But if all receive the call, not all respond to it. Those who do respond show by that very fact they are “chosen.” Protestant theologians used to

¹⁹ Plato *Phaedo* 69 c.

²⁰ Origen *Against Celsus* 8.16.

distinguish between the “common call,” addressed to all who hear the gospel, and the “effectual call,” received by those who actually respond. In part two of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* Christiana and her family are taught this lesson in the Interpreter’s house by means of a hen and her chickens: “She had a common call, and that she hath all day long. She had a special call, and that she had but sometimes.” The only way in which the effectual call can be distinguished from the common call is that those who hear it respond to it. “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.”²¹

Paul insists that “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified” (Rom 2:13), and it is those who live “according to the Spirit” in whom “the just requirement of the law” is fulfilled. James, to the same effect, urges his readers to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (Jas 1:22).

The Gnostic teachers whose ideas are reflected in the *Gospel of Thomas* rather liked the idea that “the single and the chosen ones” were a small minority, provided they themselves were included in that elite number. On one occasion the disciples tried to make Jesus commit himself on the relative number of the called and the chosen, asking, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” (Lk 13:23). But he refused to gratify their curiosity; he simply told them to make sure that they themselves entered in through the narrow gate, “for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”

It has frequently been taken for granted that Jesus’ words about the relative fewness of the saved had reference not only to the period of his ministry but to all time. Enoch Powell has interpreted Jesus’ words “few are chosen” as an assertion “that his salvation will not be for all, not even for the majority,” and has insisted that “ignorance, incapacity, perversity, the sheer human propensity to error are sufficient to ensure a high failure rate.”²² They are sufficient, indeed, to ensure a 100-percent failure rate, but for the grace of God. But when divine grace begins to operate, the situation is transformed.

It may well be that Jesus was speaking more particularly of the situation during his ministry when he spoke of the few and the many. Even the casual reader of the New Testament gathers that there was a great and rapid increase in the number of his followers after his death and resurrection. Within a few months from his crucifixion, the number of his followers in Palestine was ten times as great as it had been during his ministry. And Paul, the greatest theologian of primitive Christianity, speaks of those who receive the saving benefit of the work of Jesus as “the many” (Rom 5:15, 19). No reasonable

²¹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer to Question 31.

²² J. E. Powell, “Quicumque Vult,” in *Sermons from Great St. Mary’s*, ed. H. W. Montefiore (London: Fontana, 1968), p. 96.

interpretation can make “the many” mean a minority, for, as John Calvin put it in his commentary on those words of Paul, “if Adam’s fall had the effect of producing the ruin of many, the grace of God is much more efficacious in benefiting many, since admittedly Christ is much more powerful to save than Adam was to ruin.”²³¹

REACTIONS TO THE COMMENTARY

QUESTIONS

1. This hard saying follows a parable about a wedding feast and concerns those who were invited and those who actually attended. What was Jesus’ point of parable? Do you see other important points?
2. Who are the servants who tell of the great feast? What is a modern corollary of those servants? What is it they are supposed to proclaim?
3. There were those who seized, assaulted, and murdered the servants. In our studies, we have talked about those who have been killed for their faith. Is this a reference to that?
4. Notice the King’s response in verse 7. Do you think God will send Heaven’s Armies to retaliate against those who hurt God’s servants who proclaimed God’s message? Has God done that? How does revenge play out in this parable? What could be another interpretation here?
5. Do you think it was fair for those who were invited to the wedding feast at the last minute and who may or may not have had the proper wedding garments on hand, to have been treated as unfair? Explain your answer.
6. What is the importance of clothes in the Bible? Is Jesus explaining something that we may not understand in today’s culture about the importance of certain clothes?
 - a. In early Christianity, the new identity of conversion was often pictured as donning a new set of clothes; the language of changing clothes was utilized to express the giving up of the old way of life and putting on the new Christian identity.²
 - b. It is thought that Jesus was speaking of a wedding, per say, but of the Last Judgment when God will determine our eternal fate. What do you think about

²³ J. Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, English translation (Edinburgh: St. Andrew’s, 1961), pp. 114–15.

¹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 392–394.

² M. Eugene Boring, “[The Gospel of Matthew](#),” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 418.

the concept of Judgment Day? Is it meant to scare us into obedience? Or is it a reality we need to contend with?

7. What makes Jesus' statement, "For many are called, but few are chosen," mean for us today? Is someone a Christian just because they say they are? Or are there other ways to determine that? What are they?
8. Have you heard about the doctrine of predestination? How does that theology play into this passage?
9. Do you think a lot of people will connect and experience God or just a few? Explain your answer.
10. What are the ways we can stay connected to the way and will of God so that on Judgment Day, we need not be afraid? What are other reasons for living in the way of God without a threat of hellfire and damnation? What do you think about hell? Does someone need to believe in it to believe in God? Do you believe in it?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

CLOSING PRAYER