HOW MANY WILL BE SAVED?

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Scripture quotations are from the NRSVue.

How many will be saved? Jesus’ saying about the narrow gate (Matt 7:14) seems to suggest that few will be: “the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

But there is more to that saying than first meets the eye. Let us consider the saying in detail.

the saying

Jesus’ saying about the narrow gate appears twice in the Bible, at Matt 7:13-14, in the sermon on the mount, and at Luke 13:24.

Matt 7:13-14, ““Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14 For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Luke 13:24, “Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

Matthew has “gate” (Greek πύλη), whereas Luke has “door” (Greek θύρα). So the figurative terms of the metaphor differ. But in both cases the literal term (what Jesus is really talking about) is the same: the means of salvation—presumably our good works, since he advises us to “*strive* to enter . . .”

The sayings also differ in that Matthew expands the metaphor in two ways. First, he adds “road” as a parallel to “gate.” Second, he presents contrasting images: on the one hand, the “wide gate” and the “easy road”; on the other hand, the “narrow gate” and the “hard road.”

the contexts

More importantly for the question of those who will be saved, the contexts of the sayings differ.

Matt 7:7-14 has several sections.

7:6: profaning the holy

“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”

7:7-11: ask, search, knock

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? 10 Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? 11 If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

7:12: golden rule

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

7:13-14: narrow gate

“Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14 For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

7:15-20: tree and fruit

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

Luke 13:23-30 has several sections.

13:23: will only a few be saved

“Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” He said to them, . . .”

13:24: narrow door

“Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

13:25-27: barred door

“Once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ 26 Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ 27 But he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’”

13:28: inclusion in the future kingdom

“There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.”

13:29: messianic banquet

“Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and take their places at the banquet in the kingdom of God.”

13:30: first and last

“Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

In Matthew, the narrow-gate saying does not seem much tied to its context. The sayings about profaning the holy, ask-search-knock, the golden rule, the narrow gate, and tree and fruit do not seem to address an overarching topic. Rather, they seem to be somewhat randomly thrown together.

In Luke, on the other hand, the narrow-door saying seems more integrated into its context. To the question, “Will only a few be saved?” we have a coherent answer: the narrow door, the barred door, inclusion in the future kingdom, the messianic banquet, and first and last. These all have to do with the overarching topic of who will be saved.

It seems to me, then, that the Lukan context is likely to be more original than the Matthean.

the narrow door saying in its Lukan context

The narrow-gate saying in Matthew is rather isolated. With no context to temper it, it seems to say that few will be saved.

But the narrow-door saying in Luke has a context that tempers the meaning of the saying. The opening metaphor (the narrow door) can be interpreted in relation to what follows it.

*The barred door*: The narrow door is a warning, and the barred-door saying is a warning. But in the barred door, the emphasis shifts to urgency: get in before the homeowner (God) bars the door. The emphasis on the shortness of time is similar to sayings in Jesus’ two eschatological discourses in Luke, 17:20-37 and 21:5-37. Examples: Luke 17:31, “On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away, and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back.” Luke 21:34-36, “Be on guard so that . . . that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man.” (See also Luke 12:35-40, e.g., “39 if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” And the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Matt 25:1-13.)

*Inclusion in the kingdom*: The kingdom here is future. (Since the patriarchs [Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] and the prophets are dead, they will only be seen in the future kingdom, after the general resurrection.) The emphasis is still on those who are in and those who are out.

*The messianic banquet*: “People from east and west, from north and south” suggests gentiles. The theme of the “ingathering of the nations” (their conversion at the end times) is frequent in the Old Testament. (See Ps 102:21-22; 107:2-3; Isa 2:2-3; 42:6-7; 55:5; 60:3-14; 66:18-21; Jer 3:17; Joel 3:11-12; Zeph 3:9-10; Zech 8:13, 20-23; 14:16-19; Mic 4:1-2.) A similar emphasis can be seen in the references to the gentile mission in the New Testament. (See Matt 24:14; 25:31; 28:19; Mark 13:10; Luke 24:47; Rom 4:17-18; 16:26; Gal 3:8; Rev 15:4; 21:24; 22:2.)

*First and last*: Now the emphasis shifts to the contrast between Jews and gentiles. For example, in Matt 8:11-12 Matthew uses the saying about the patriarchs in the kingdom (Luke 13:28) to contrast Jews and gentiles: “I tell you, many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The contrast of Jews and gentiles is also suggested by the older and younger brothers in the prodigal son parable (Luke 15:11-32); by the first-invited and the later guests in the great banquet parable (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24); by the earlier and later laborers in the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16); and by the wicked tenants (Matt 21:33-46, e.g., “43 the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits”).

In context, then, the narrow-door saying in Luke is not as severe as the narrow-gate saying in Matthew. In Matthew, few are saved. It is true that in Luke also (13:24) “many will try to enter and will not be able.” But the Lukan saying then veers toward emphasizing the inclusion of the gentiles. The phrases suggest a large number of people: 13:29, “people will come from east and west, from north and south”; 13:30, “the last will be first.” The implication is that many gentiles (in contrast to fewer Jews) will be saved.

So the narrow-gate saying, in its probably more original context, is less severe than it appears in its isolated state in Matthew’s sermon on the mount.