

Understanding the Words of Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” -Mt.7:21-23

These are difficult words indeed. The fact that they are attributed to Jesus has only serves to complicate the matter for many a sincere student of the scripture. I mean, this saying would probably be easier to embrace if in fact one of the apostles had uttered it about Jesus. That is to say if for instance Peter had said, “Not everyone who says to Jesus, ‘Lord, Lord...’” It would still be difficult to swallow it just wouldn’t mar our image of an all-inclusive Jesus, who doesn’t nit-pick the efforts of His people regarding the sincerity of our faith and the earnestness of our efforts to obey and to please Him.

Having heard many an interpretive effort on this passage I can say that outside of the relatively clear emphasis by Jesus on the necessity of knowing Him there is left an open door for a tremendous amount of room for ambiguous speculation on the remainder of the passage, namely who’s in and who’s out at the end of the day. After all, Jesus must be speaking to Christians right? Who else would prophesy, [or even be able to] work miracles and deliverances in His name? Oh yeah, and we’re talking about getting into heaven as the context in v.21 so that pretty much makes it clear that some believers are in and others out...right?

Well, take heart, there is good news afoot! We can know what Jesus meant and we can know how He views our ministry efforts and values even our small attempts to know Him better. The interpretive key for us lies in understanding what Jesus meant when He used phrases such as, “Lord,Lord” and “Kingdom of Heaven”.

Understanding the Kingdom of Heaven Concept and “Lord,Lord”

Unfortunately much of modern Bible scholarship tends to filter it’s understanding of the Gospel message through a lens that’s fundamentally detached from the first century Jewish culture, language and traditional history in which it’s set. Just like in any language and culture there are a number of matters including history, stories and fables, figures of speech, tradition etc. which are unique to that particular culture and language. I like to use the phrase, “Holy cow!” to serve as a

modern-day example of what it would be like to understand a letter from one 20th century American to another by a team of interpreters thousands of years in the future. Unless the interpreters were quite familiar with certain cultural expressions of our day you can only imagine the vanity of effort in actually comprehending the author's original intent. The way we use this familiar expression actually has nothing to do with holiness or cattle! As a matter of fact you can't even interpret that one literally. Holy cow! is simply a statement that conveys a measure of surprise or disbelief. To neglect understanding the culture and language of the writer would be to most certainly grossly misinterpret the message and the intent.

And so this brings us back to the words of Rabbi Jesus in Mt.7:21-23. Let's start with the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven". There are two things we must know. First of all, in Jesus' day the name of God, YHWH or Yahweh, was never used. It was strictly prohibited by the Pharisees as a result of a strict literal interpretation of Ex.20:17. It was considered too sacred to be spoken and so in its place were used euphemistic alternatives or evasive synonym-substitutes such as heaven or power. That is to say, "kingdom of Heaven [God]" or the "right hand of The Power [God]" (see Mt.26:64). These phrases were referring in an indirect way to God Himself.

Secondly, the concept of the Kingdom of God was created and titled in part by the ancient Jewish sages (later called Rabbis) and most probably by the pharisees in particular to refer to the rule of God over an individual who keeps the written and oral commandments of the Torah (what most of us call The Law). As renowned Hebraic scholar, Dr. Robert L. Lindsey writes, "[the Pharisees] meant that any Jew who began to keep the Torah and the rabbinic interpretations of the Torah had come under the rule of the Law and was now in God's rule or Kingdom.¹" Jesus was familiar with this way of viewing and categorizing the Lordship and power of YHWH and this is why He used the term, Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus knew, as did His hearers, raised in the traditions and teachings of the rabbis, that He was referring not to a place, that is to heaven proper, but to an obedience to The Way, specifically in the midst of [redemptive] power demonstrations **2**. In simpler terms, whenever God worked His power in a way that could be seen or recognized in the natural realm, specifically when it related to the deliverance of His people, this was considered the Kingdom of God. As the sages taught, the proper response to the One who could demonstrate such power was to diligently listen to and obey His words. This idea is at the very root of the formation of national Israel in Moses' generation. God worked redemptively on Israel's behalf through the exodus events and then summoned that same people to Himself at the base of Mt. Sinai. He appeared wrapped in thick, smoke-covered glory and delivered the commandments to Moses to which all of Israel responded, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Ex.24:3). Thus the Kingdom of God was on display and as such the nation responded with the commitment to obey His words.

In the same way that Jesus spoke idiomatically of His movement, referring to it as the Kingdom of Heaven he also spoke idiomatically using the phrase "Lord, Lord". "The sages [of Jesus' day] felt that when a person confessed, "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone," indicating his or her intention to keep the Torah, that person came under God's rule and authority, and thus came into the Kingdom of God. Having accepted God's authority over him or her, the person was able to begin

keeping the commandments. 3” It was to this traditional rabbinic view on Kingdom inclusion that Jesus was referring when He said, “Many will say to me...’Lord,Lord.” In addition to this is must be noted that Jesus was pointing to His divinity by identifying Himself with the God of Israel as He appropriated the title “Lord” and applied it uniquely to Himself 4.

Putting It All Together

With these understandings in place it then becomes a fairly simple process of stringing together the various ideas to begin to build a framework for comprehending the main and plain sense of what Jesus was saying. In my own study I have found that in certain instances related to understanding a Biblical text it is very helpful to take ideas and concepts and substitute them for individual words or phrases and thereby construct a paraphrase that serves to bring forth a clarity related to authorial intent whereas [in idiomatic instances] a literal rendering of the text can muddy the waters of a plain or common-sensical interpretation. Obviously of course the real effort comes in mining the individual ideas and concepts often from a number of biblical and extra-biblical texts Using what we’ve learned above let’s go ahead and put together a paraphrase of Mt.7:21.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, but I have acknowledged your Lordship and professed my intention to follow you and your teachings!’ enters ⁵ my Kingdom, instead, that honor will belong those who actually do the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Though by no means a literal translation of the text, this paraphrase communicates the main ideas regarding what Jesus was actually saying to His first-century Jewish audience and of course what they would have understood Him to be saying as an itinerant, Torah observant, Jewish Rabbi.

A Brief Summary of Matthew 7:22-23

In summary form, we will present an introduction to the main ideas associated with the remainder of our text from v.22-23. As mentioned earlier many sincere students of the word have stumbled in their struggle to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? ’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

Following a logical approach to these verses we remember that it was Jesus who promised His disciples that they would, if they believed in Him, do greater works than did He (John 14:12). It was Jesus who sent out the seventy-two who returned rejoicing that even the demons were subject to them in His name (Lk.10:17-20)! It was Jesus who gave such a Great Commission to His disciples to preach the gospel, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper and make disciples of every nation (Mt.28:18-19; Mk.16:15-18). Clearly, only Jesus’ disciples will do the works that He did especially in light of His critical statement in Mk.3:23-25 ““How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself,

that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.” Right? Maybe not. There were even in Jesus’ day a number of rabbis that had a reputation for being able to drive out demons or see miraculous answers to prayer simply based on their faith in God.

Jesus, in speaking to His accusers in Matthew 12:27, answers them, “And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out?”. His disciples recalled a story during their own brief itinerancy saying, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.” (Lk.9:49). Luke tells of certain itinerant exorcists who, inspired by the power wielded by the apostle Paul, tried to follow in his footsteps, “Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so.” (Acts 19:13-14). With this in mind we can hopefully see that Jesus wasn’t threatening His true followers with hellfire for walking in bold ministry faith while struggling in their hearts to know Him in a deep way. His Jewish audience certainly wouldn’t have understood it that way based upon their historic-traditional understandings that served to contextualize Jesus’ words and what they referenced, which as we have previously noted, was their backdrop.

To help us understand this further we must look at Jesus’ words at the end of v.23. He said, “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” Today when we think of lawlessness we might imagine riots in the street, public brawls, and the brazen looting of stores and markets. These things are no doubt lawless but for Jesus’ hearers His meaning was clearly obvious. To be lawless was to not follow the law, or even more specifically, the teaching of the Torah. When one did not live according to the commandments given by God to Moses for the nation of Israel one was considered law-less, that is without regard for the law, or the commandments of God. Therefore, what Jesus is really saying in Matthew 7:21-23 is that in order to be included in the kingdom, or under the reign of God, of which He is Head one must not only proclaim one’s intention to follow Him, one must actually obey His commands. Elsewhere He says essentially the same thing to His disciples, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (Jn.14:14). As we have seen earlier, other itinerants were able to go around and use His name for ministry purposes expelling demons and seeing healings. Of course, Jesus would have recognized that when these things happened in His name the kingdom of heaven was near or on display and that was a glorious thing. But one needed not merely to experience the impact of this kingdom, such as the ten lepers in Lk.17:11-19, one needed to become its citizen, and this He taught happened when we not only acknowledge His Lordship but submit to His leadership.

Footnotes:

1 Robert Lindsey, "Jesus, Rabbi and Lord," (Copyright © by Margaret Lindsey and HaKeshet, Inc., 1990, 2009) Published by Jerusalem Perspective Online, p.34
<http://www.JerusalemPerspective.com>

2 As a supplementary note, Jesus, though borrowing the term and traditional concept of the Kingdom of Heaven from the sages, used it uniquely to refer to His own ministry. No longer was the Kingdom a generalized concept but now it was a specific, present-tensed reality of which He was and is supremely the Head.

3 Robert Lindsey, "The Kingdom of God: God's Power Among Believers," 1 January 1990, Jerusalem Perspective
Online, <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/2445/>

4 For additional information see:

David Stearn, JNTC (Jewish New Testament Commentary) (Clarksville, Maryland: Jewish New Testament Publications 1992), pp.4,34 Matthew1:20N, 7:21N

5 I have substituted the verb form "enters" in place of the NKJV rendering "shall enter" as a means of emphasizing the present-tensed rejection of many who are saying "Lord,Lord" as opposed to emphasizing a future-tensed rejection reality implying "Many confessors have now entered [the Kingdom] but later they will be rejected. For a brief discussion on Hebrew to Greek [proverbial] verb-tense translations in Mt.7:21-23 see: Robert Lindsey, "Jesus, Rabbi and Lord," (Copyright © by Margaret Lindsey and HaKeshet, Inc., 1990, 2009) Published by Jerusalem Perspective Online, p.121 <http://www.JerusalemPerspective.com>



Want to insert a picture from your files or add a shape or text box? You got it! On the Insert tab of the ribbon, just click the option you need.