Many Are Called, Few Are Chosen

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," March-April 2016

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

One of the most hopeful and comforting passages in all the Bible can also be a source of major confusion and misunderstanding in the Christian world. The passage in question is Romans 8:28-29:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

The confusion centers on the subjects of God’s calling and predestination. If it is true that believers are predestined by God, then how can many be called and few chosen, as Jesus preached? Why would God call someone and not choose him or her? Why does He not just choose everyone? And if we are predestined, then we cannot fail, right?

These kinds of questions suggest that we need to take a look at the statement, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” It is found in two locations: Matthew 20:16 and 22:14, both from the mouth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Another commonality is that they are also both found at the ends of two parables, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard and the Parable of the Wedding Feast. The placement of Christ’s statement makes it significant to the true meanings of the parables.

In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, some laborers work all day and others work parts of the day, but they are all paid the same wage. Those who labored for the whole day complain, while those who worked shorter periods are thankful. The owner of the vineyard tells the complainers that he is paying them only what they had agreed to when he hired them (Matthew 20:13).

Jesus concludes the parable in verse 16 with two well-known statements. The first one, “The last will be first, and the first last,” means here that all receive the same salvation no matter when they are called, early or late. The second one, “For many are called, but few chosen,” will require more explanation, which is more clearly seen in the second parable.

The King’s Invitations

The second place where “For many are called, but few are chosen” occurs is Matthew 22:14, at the end of the Parable of the Wedding Feast. This parable must be understood in its context, that is, as a continuation of His thought at the end of Matthew 21:

“Therefore I say to you [the Jews], the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet. (Matthew 21:43-46)
At this point, Jesus launches into a parable designed to show the chief priests and Pharisees what they had done by their stubborn refusal to listen and change. It is easy to see that the king in the parable represents God the Father, and his son, of course, corresponds to Jesus Christ.

The story is simple. A marriage has been arranged for the king’s son, and the initial invitations were sent out so all on the guest list could make plans to attend. In those times, travel over long distances was far slower than today, so plans needed to be made long in advance. However, those invited, though possibly honored by the invitation, declined to attend the wedding.

So, a second, more urgent invitation was sent out to the same people, as time was getting short, but the invitees paid little heed to it, caught up in their own activities and ventures. They stated by their actions that they cared little for the king and his son. In fact, they were sufficient unto themselves with their farms and shops; they felt they had need of nothing (Revelation 3:17).

Proving their contempt, they treated the king’s servants, who had personally borne the invitations to them, with great disrespect and even killed some. The king was rightly furious, and he mustered his forces to avenge his maltreated servants to erase the disrespect shown to him. His kindness and generosity had been spurned, and he responded with wrath.

A third invitation had to be sent. For this one the guest list changed from the specially invited to the everyday person, some of which were good while others were bad. In this way the wedding was finally furnished with guests.

**Wedding Garments**

Commentators report that the custom in those days was for the one hosting the wedding feast—in this case, the king—to provide garments for the wedding guests. These wedding garments were simple, nondescript robes that all attendees wore. In this way, rank or station was covered, so everyone at the feast could mingle as equals.

Revelation 19:8 defines this symbol: “And to [the Bride of Christ] it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” The wedding garment identifies the righteous, those who lived according to God’s ways.

When the king entered the wedding hall, he noticed that one guest clearly stood out from all the others because he was not wearing a wedding garment. Having the man brought forward, the king asked: “Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?” (Matthew 22:12). The sense of his question is one of incredulity. It might be better phrased, “Why are you not wearing a wedding garment, even though one was provided for you?”

The man was plainly not dressed correctly for this occasion. His lack of a wedding garment was another example of extreme disrespect for both the king and his son. Again, the wording, “And he was speechless,” indicates that he was without excuse. It was not just that he lacked a wedding garment, but that he did not wear one on purpose. He had defiantly refused to put one on.

This is why the king reacts so swiftly and harshly: “Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13). His judgment is not against the man’s lack of a wedding garment per se, but that he did not intend to wear one. He was, in fact, determined not to wear one.
The man without the wedding garment desired the honor of attending the wedding feast, but he did not want to follow the custom of the king. He wanted to do things his own way. His lack of proper dress revealed his inner rebellion against the king and his instructions. So the man was executed as a rebel.

It is here that Jesus inserts His somewhat cryptic phrase, “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). God’s calling clearly corresponds with the king’s invitation, and indeed, the invitation went out to both the original guest list (Israel/Judah, whose people were killed in war and whose city, Jerusalem, was burned; Matthew 22:7) and then to mankind generally. We can conclude that, while God’s calling is widespread—going to “as many as [His servants] find” (Matthew 22:9)—those who respond to His invitation and whom He subsequently chooses to wear a wedding garment are a far smaller group.

**Foreknown? Predestined?**

Considering the statements made in Romans 8:28-29 that God’s chosen were foreknown and predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, yet seeing that many are called but few chosen, we are left wondering who was foreknown and who was predestined.

Years ago, Herbert Armstrong took a safe approach in his teaching on this subject. He taught that predestination applies to the church as a whole group. In other words, in the beginning God knew that He would raise up the church to do its work in the world and to nurture His called-out ones.

More recently, we have understood this to be far more specific. The Bible indicates that God foreknew several individuals at least from before their births (Isaac, Jacob, Samson, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, etc.), so His foreknowledge includes specific people. It makes perfect sense that God would want certain individuals to perform in a particular way when He wanted special things done, as that is a pattern God has used in the past.

However, God’s foreknowledge and predestination “to adoption as sons, . . . according to the good pleasure of His will” (Ephesians 1:5) is not an absolute guarantee of salvation and eternal life. The Bible is unambiguous in its assertions that a person can lose his salvation (see, for instance, Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:12; 4:1; 6:4-8; 10:26-31). If an individual could not lose his salvation, then why does God provide so many passages warning us of the possibility?

God is not a liar and does not warn without cause. These warnings are given because God has cause to give them! While God is sure of His ability to work out the salvation of every person He calls, each person has his part to play, that is, he must believe and cooperate with God throughout the sanctification process, growing in the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. This is why the apostle Paul urges us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). In other words, though God chooses us, we must also choose Him.

An individual’s sins could cause him to lose this awesome opportunity. Yes, God is eager to forgive all our sins and set us back on the path of righteousness, but that act of mercy cannot begin if we do not seek forgiveness and repentance from Him. A sin is unpardonable if one refuses to ask God to pardon it.
A person can also turn away from God so willfully that he becomes a rebel against God, repudiating his former belief and “tramp[ing] the Son of God underfoot” (Hebrews 10:29). Christ’s sacrifice does not apply in such a case because it cannot be applied twice to the same person. As the writer of Hebrews says, this is considering the blood of the covenant, Christ’s own blood, to be common and an insult to the Spirit of grace.

Further, why would He reveal that there will be a Lake of Fire for the incorrigibly wicked if it would not be needed? Certainly, the Devil and his demons will be cast into it, as well as the Beast and False Prophet (Revelation 20:10), but Hebrews 10:26-27 indicates that this is also the fate of those who “sin willfully after receiv[ing] the knowledge of the truth” (see also Hebrews 6:8). By the way, the Lake of Fire imagery stands behind Jesus’ illustrations of Gehenna fire as well as the fate of the man not wearing a wedding garment: “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is why God warns us so often and so urgently in the pages of the Bible—because He does not want to lose those He has called to salvation!

**Ensuring We Are Chosen**

So often, it is easy to let down in our thinking, assessing that, because we believe we are members of the end-time church, we can relax in our conduct and spiritual growth. Perhaps we regard ourselves as automatically chosen, that we “have it made.” That is dangerous thinking! Our emphasis, especially now as the times worsen, had better be on working to make sure we are chosen.

How is that done?

The Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:18-23 both warns and advises us on the course of our lives once we hear “the word of the kingdom” (verse 19). As Jesus explains, some, of course, never get beyond mere hearing of it, and Satan does his dirty work to keep them in the dark. These people, though technically called, will likely rise in the second resurrection, when they will be able to respond to God without Satan’s interference. Members of God’s church, however, are far beyond this stage.

In verses 20-21, Jesus describes those who receive God’s Word “with joy,” but they lack depth—their spiritual roots are so shallow that they are easily withered by adversity. Upon encountering their first trial, they fold like a cheap suitcase. We have probably all known someone who, at the thought of losing a job because of keeping of the Sabbath, rationalized that God would not want him to fail to support his family and so left the church, considering God’s way to be too difficult.

Another group appears in verse 22: those in whom “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word.” Some among us in former days partook of a slice of success in this world, and their wealth and position eventually became more important to them than doing what God asks of His people. They, too, spurned their calling. We read of similar people in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, who declined the king’s invitation to care for their farms or businesses.

Such a person becomes distracted by the world and chooses to prioritize God, not first, but further down the list. Because he does not spend time with God or thinking about His way, he stops growing.
As Jesus puts it, “He becomes unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22). In other words, he quits producing the kind of character growth God wants to see in him. His transformation into the image of Christ comes to a standstill.

Matthew 13:23 describes the group we must be in to be chosen: “But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” The ones whom God commends are those who bear fruit. They do this by overcoming their old sinful natures, seen in the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21), and growing in the traits of their Savior, seen in the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

This bearing of fruit is the requirement of being chosen, as Jesus makes abundantly clear in John 15:1-8. Notice verses 1-2: “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch that does not bear fruit He takes away [margin: lifts up; or removes, cuts off]; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” He ends the passage by saying, “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (verse 8).

What happens when one of the called fails to bear fruit? In verse 6, Jesus expands on what He said in verse 2: “If anyone does not abide not in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” The unfruitful branch’s ultimate end is the Lake of Fire. We fail to produce spiritual fruit at our eternal peril!

The more important question is not “Were we individually predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ from before the world was formed?” but “Now that we have been called, are we producing the fruit that glorifies God, transforming into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 12:2)?” If we do this, we will indeed be among the chosen—the elect—and glorified with Christ.