

Depend solely on God

Mark 10:13-31 - Littlebourne 24th October 2021

Two weeks ago we saw the seriousness of sin. Jesus told us that in response to sin we must be willing to give up anything - to be willing to cut off limbs if that would help us. We should battle our sin, do our best to follow the commandments that God sets out for us and live as he wishes. But today, we're going to see that Jesus warns us against thinking we can do enough of this to merit salvation. That we can, of our own effort, save ourselves.

v13-16

13 And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 15 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." 16 And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

People are bringing Jesus children and yet again, the disciples are not on the same page. Like the man casting out demons in Jesus' name 2 weeks ago, they want to restrict who is with Jesus. Jesus responds in the same sort of way - he tells them that those they wish to exclude are in fact included.

"Let the children come to me, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"

What does it mean that the kingdom of God belongs to children? That whoever does not receive it like a child shall not enter it?

I want to return to these questions later on, first let's look at the story of the rich man.

v17

17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this event. Matthew tells us this was a young man (Matthew 19:22), Luke tells us that this man was a ruler (Luke 18:18). All three gospels give us the impression that he's rich.

This rich, young ruler comes up to Jesus in seemingly the right way - he runs up, and kneels, and asks a very important question. He's deferential, respectful. The disciples don't try and stop him. Now at first glance, all is good - he's clearly invested and understands that Jesus can answer him and tell him what he needs to *do*.

But Jesus turns things on their head.

v18-20

*18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.
19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.'" 20
And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."*

Now some that deny Jesus' deity look at this verse and claim that Jesus was saying he isn't God. I don't think that's what's happening at all. Jesus is using a penetrating question, to get to the heart of the matter. He doesn't say that he isn't good - indeed elsewhere he does say he's good and we are told he is without sin, which in light of this, looks more like a claim to be God than a denial.

Jesus lists off some commandments - you might notice that these are five of the ten commandments, plus a commandment against fraud. The man says that he's followed them all, since he was young.

But notice which commandments are missing from the ten. The ones listed are in a sense some of the 'easy' ones of the ten. It seems on the face of it fairly clear whether you've ever murdered or stolen. I think our rich young ruler was probably thinking in this way when he says he's followed these commandments.

But that's not to say that they are actually easy to follow - Jesus makes clear elsewhere that even the commandment against murder is one that many have transgressed in heart if not in deed. The most important missing commandment of the ten is the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me." In other words, put God first. That's a commandment that none of us can claim to have followed rightly.

When Jesus was asked about what the greatest commandment was, his answer was “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). No body, save God alone, is good when we measure against that commandment.

v21-22

21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Jesus shows this rich man that his riches are the barrier between him and God - he puts his love of riches before his love of God, violating that most important commandment.

In spite of his initial enthusiasm, this man is ignorant of his heart - he believes he's doing the right thing, following the rules, but the issue is deeper than the outward form of action, the issue is in his heart. What he desires, what he values, is required to be in step with the command to put God first. He has kept some of the laws, outwardly, but he is not keeping the spirit of the law, or the most important commandment in the law, inwardly, at all.

v23-25

23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

We've all I'm sure heard the phrase - "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Over the years, strange explanations have been produced, it seems to dull the impact of it. Some have pointed to a supposed gate in the walls of Jerusalem that could fit a camel, but only an unburdened one that stooped down. There's no evidence for this. Others have said that maybe there's a mistranslation here and that the word for camel has accidentally replaced the word for rope, which is similar. Again, this looks like it's seeking to dull the impact of what Jesus is saying, with little evidence.

I think the correct interpretation is that Jesus is pointing to the impossible. It is impossible for a camel - what would have been the largest animal in Israel - to fit through a tiny hole like the eye of a needle. It's absurd.

Think about the amount of wealth that this rich young ruler had. We see in verse 22 that he had 'great possessions'. He may well have had land and houses, but not houses with central heating or electric lights. No television or endless running clean water. He couldn't take a hot shower whenever he liked. He had no refrigerator to keep food fresh in the heat of Israel. He certainly couldn't get almost whatever he wanted from anywhere in the world delivered to his door. How much richer are we, today, than he was? And yet the disciples - who for the most part were not rich, and left what riches they had to follow Jesus - are amazed that anyone, even those as comparatively materially poor as they are, can enter God's kingdom after Jesus says this.

v26-27

*26 And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"
27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."*

Jesus says "With man it is impossible" to be saved. We cannot, in our own ability save ourselves.

The problem really isn't how rich or poor we are, or how well we have kept the commandments. The problem is reliance on the earthly and the material and the self, rather than on God. We don't put things in right order - we don't value following Jesus more than we value other things. Our hearts are out of whack. We, none of us, follow the most important commandment.

But what is impossible for man is more than possible for God. "For all things are possible with God".

The rich young ruler asked "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" What must he *do*? But that's the sort of thing Jesus says is impossible - you can't *do* your way into relationship with God, you can't *do* anything to earn God's favour or be rewarded with salvation - the one who does the doing is Jesus, in his death and resurrection.

v28-31

28 Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." 29 Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

There's a bit of a self-congratulatory note to the way Peter says to Jesus "we have left everything and followed you" - not like that rich young ruler who wouldn't, we're better than him. The ESV says Peter began to say this, as if Jesus then interrupts him to cut him off and make things clear.

Now read carefully what Jesus says - that those who give up everything for the gospel will receive a hundredfold *now* what they have given up, as well as persecutions, and that they will receive eternal life in the age to come.

At first glance, I read it as receiving back what we have given up in the age to come, which on the face of it makes more sense. What are we to make of the receiving in the present age?

First, what we receive in this present age is not necessarily a direct replacement for what we've lost - Jesus gives us a list of valuable relationships and things, but it's not necessarily the case that we lose one thing and gain a direct replacement. I think this teaches that broadly what we will gain in following Jesus today outweighs what we lose.

Secondly, I think this is expressing the concept that the kingdom of God is already and not yet - that it's breaking in to the world, it's here, but not at its fulfilment. We experience some of it - in being united with Christ, in receiving the Holy Spirit, in fellowship with each other, communion with God, but we don't see the fullness yet of what is to come. We are born again in this age, inwardly, we look forward to being born again outwardly in resurrection bodies, in the age to come, in eternal life.

Now the lifetime to come is without suffering and loss - but Jesus makes clear that in this age, persecution is to be expected. For those Jesus was talking to, suffering and persecution was their lot in life - as far as we know, only one of the twelve disciples would die from natural causes - John. Judas Iscariot would commit suicide after betraying Jesus and the rest (plus Matthias, Judas' replacement), tradition has it, were martyred for their faith. For Christians in the first century, suffering and persecution were the norm - yet the church grew.

Paul, who suffered much for his faith, says in Romans 8:18:

For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Now this last phrase "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." A similar expression has come up before when Jesus is talking to the disciples after they have been discussing which of them was the greatest (Mark 9:35).

I think Jesus is warning his disciples not to think that by giving up things themselves, as they have, that they are better than others, or that they deserve more reward. Just as the rich young man trusted in his own ability, in following the law, the disciples run the risk of reliance on themselves in thinking that by giving up material possessions they have gained salvation through their own actions.

Conclusion

Now this brings us back to the beginning. Why does the kingdom of God belong to those who receive it like a child?

A child is dependent on adults for everything important - food, shelter, everything the child needs is given to them, freely and with no expectation of anything in return. What could a child give in return for all the essentials of life?

I think this is what Jesus means by a childlike receipt of the kingdom - dependence on God, with no pretence that we could offer anything in exchange. That nothing that we do is or can be enough to merit salvation.

We need a childlike reliance on Christ for our salvation, not on ourselves. We are as helpless children, unable to offer anything in exchange. Small children take gifts eagerly, they don't pause to think what they'll potentially owe in exchange, they just take and enjoy.

The rich young man leaves sorrowful - he had all that mattered in earthly material existence, he felt he was doing well in following the commandments, but he still lacks security, he's still not sure he will have eternal life. Such is the life of one who relies on himself for salvation.

"No one is good except God alone". If true, perfect, goodness is limited to God - if God's standard for good is something that only He reaches, then what hope is there for us? In ourselves, there is no hope. We must receive salvation as a gift.

Romans 6:23:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The free gift of God - to receive it is to recognise that we can't save ourselves and we must rely fully on God to save us. Take this free gift and enjoy it.