

Life in the Kingdom: Being Rich... and in the Kingdom

Luke 18:18-30

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~When we do everything right but don't put the King first we miss His kingdom; at the same time Jesus guarantees those who give up everything to follow Him won't have sacrificed anything~

Welcome to the sixth week in our ten part series titled "Life in the Kingdom." In this series we have been looking at what Jesus meant when He referred to "the gospel." And what we have seen is that the good news Jesus preached was that abundant life is available to everyone, right now, who is part of His kingdom.

So the main message of the Bible then is not that you can go to heaven when you die, but that if you put Christ first in your life then you can live in the kingdom of heaven right now. Heaven after death is like an "add on" that people who live in Heaven now will get to enjoy forever.

So there are two camps of thought when it comes to heaven. The first camp has focused on "going to heaven when we die", and it is all about getting people to believe right things and pray a prayer. The second camp is all about "living in the kingdom of heaven now", and it urges us to reorient our lives so that Jesus is the center of everything we live for. The first camp makes converts who believe what Jesus taught; the second camp makes disciples who do what Jesus taught. And throughout the Gospels Jesus repeatedly says it is only those who put His words into action who gain the kingdom.¹

So in Mark Jesus started His teaching ministry with the words:

The time has come.... The *kingdom of God* has come near. Repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1:15)

And "repent" means do something different. Reorient your life. Put Christ at the centre because you don't want to miss the kingdom!

And Luke is especially great at telling us why. So when John the Baptist was arrested he sent two disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Messiah or if they should wait for another. And in Luke Jesus responds:

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the *good news* is proclaimed to the poor.... (Luke 7:22-23)

Who wouldn't want to be part of a kingdom like that!

¹ Take Matthew 7:24-27 as an example

So the arrival of Jesus' kingdom is good news. It's good news for everyone who has been bogged down by the pressures of life, or felt trapped in hopelessness, or grown fatigued by fighting sickness or sin or oppression. Jesus' kingdom is good news for anyone who has looked at life and thought 'there must be more.' And Jesus says "There is! God has something abundantly more for you – it's like treasure in a field. And if you get it, it will change your life today and forever. This is Jesus' gospel!

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Now this morning our text is found in Luke chapter 18 so go ahead and open to that. If you are using a pew Bible you will find that on page 742. In this text we get what Jesus was most concerned with when it comes to the kingdom.

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And the thesis I want to prove to you from today's text has two parts, and it is that: **When we do everything right but don't put the King first we miss His kingdom; at the same time Jesus guarantees those who give up everything to follow Him won't have sacrificed anything.**

Let's pick this up in Luke 18 verse 18.

[Read Luke 18:18-21]

Now this story is often titled "The Rich Young Ruler" and we get this by combining Matthew, Mark and Luke's accounts.² Each author gives us a few specific details.

So in Luke we find out that this man is a ruler; Matthew adds that he was young and rich, and Mark establishes he was passionate. In Mark he runs "to [Jesus] and [falls] on his knees before Him."³ And by putting these three together we see that this devout young man was wealthy, and had some kind of position of prominence in society; probably he was one of the synagogue leaders.⁴

And so when Jesus comes on the scene preaching God's kingdom this passionate, rich young man was intrigued. And he comes to Jesus in respect, dropping to his knees, calling Him Rabbi, and asking the "right" question. He asks "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now we will come back to the whole "good teacher" thing in a minute, because the words "eternal life" are central here.

Actually there are three synonyms in this account that make up the backbone of this story. "Eternal life" is the first. The second comes at the end of the exchange, in verse 24. There Jesus comments about what has just happened

² See Matthew 19:16-30 and Mark 10:17-31 for the parallels.

³ Mark 10:17

⁴ Hendriksen, William "New Testament Commentary: Luke" (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1996. pg 831.

and says: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God” – “Kingdom of God” is the second term. And then in verse 26 the disciples respond “Who then can be saved?” – “Saved” is the third.

And these three terms are used interchangeably to refer to the same thing – they are synonyms. Get this – in the Bible “eternal life”, “the kingdom of God”, and “saved” all refer to the same thing. And the big idea that they refer to sits at the very centre of Jesus’ message. This is His gospel.

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So the story starts with this rich young ruler asking Jesus “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And there are two things that make this the right question. So first, he recognizes that salvation is a free gift. And we get this as he uses the word “inherit” to describe gaining it. And “inheriting” is something that happens to a person simply because they are part of the family – it’s free.

But second this devout young man also recognizes that God is looking for us to “work out our salvation.”⁵ So he says “what must I *do*...” And throughout Jesus’ ministry it is always those who do Jesus’ commands who are saved.⁶ So this man asks the right question.

And so Jesus answers “keep the 10 Commandments; don’t commit adultery or murder, don’t steal or give false testimony, and honour your mom and dad.” And the young man says “I’ve done it all.”

Now he isn’t claiming perfection; he is just honestly saying “I’ve done my best to live out what God’s law requires.” So when he sinned he followed the Law and offered a sacrifice. This guy was devout.

If he had been part of our church he would have stood out. He’d be on the worship team. Maybe he’d be a deacon or a committee member. He’d show up for spring cleaning every year. He’d be part of a care group. And he’d give 10% of everything he earned to God. This is the kind of man he was.

And it is his notable character that sets the stage for the surprise in the rest of the story – Jesus tells us this man doesn’t get the kingdom. So let’s keep going. Look at verse 22.

[Read Luke 18:22-27]

Now there is a great deal here, but we need to start by coming back to the young ruler calling Jesus “good.”

⁵ Philippians 2:12

⁶ See Matthew 7:24-27; James 2:14-16 and John 14:23-24 for example.

Jesus' response here has confused a lot of people and it is actually one of the verses Muslim apologists use to try to convince Christians that Jesus never claimed to be God. After all here Jesus seems to say: "Hey, don't call Me 'good', only God is 'good', and I'm not God, so don't call Me 'good'." Certainly if you take this verse by itself then it does say this. But the problem is that this verse doesn't sit by itself, it is part of a story. And in this story Jesus corrects a man who seems to do everything right but still misses the kingdom. And Jesus' response to being called "good" brings this out.

Now every Jew knew that God was the ultimate good. So in Psalm 119 David prays:

You are good, and what You do is good;
teach me Your decrees. (Psalm 119:68)

And so by calling Jesus "Good teacher" this man was saying he believed Jesus was from God. Nicodemus says virtually the same thing though he doesn't use the word "good". He said:

Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." (John 3:2)

And that's the essence of what this rich young ruler is saying as well. But unlike Nicodemus who ends well, Jesus knows how this exchange is going to end – the man isn't going to get the kingdom – and so Jesus calls him on his claim.

He says "You call Me good, so you're saying I'm from God – it turns out you're right. But being right doesn't help you here. After all it's pretty dumb to say "I know this is what the God of the universe wants from me, I'm just not going to do it." And that is exactly what happens here.

This devoutly religious man, who has spent his life doing God's work, just tells God's good teacher "forget it!" And in doing this he becomes the poster-boy of ridiculous. **When we do everything right but don't put the King first we miss His kingdom...**

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Friends, the thing with Jesus' kingdom is that it demands to be of absolute importance or it refuses to have anything to do with us at all. Jesus says:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.... Seek first [God's] kingdom and His righteousness... (Matthew 6:24;33)

Now that verse ends "and all these things will be added to you as well." But that doesn't mean "seek God, give Him what He wants, in order to get Him to give you what you want." For Jesus God and His kingdom is the treasure. And if you could get God you'd be ridiculous to seek anything alongside.

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Now we need to deal with what Jesus asks this man to do – namely “sell everything you have and give to the poor. Then come follow Me.”

Probably you’ve heard this preached before, and so probably you’ve heard someone say something like “what Jesus asks this guy to do is unique. Jesus doesn’t ask everyone to sell everything they have and give it to the poor.”

And then that preacher probably went through scripture listing wealthy people like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David and Solomon all who God never asked to sell what they had to follow Him. In fact God kept increasing most of these guys wealth everywhere they turned.

And the point was “see, there are godly people in the Bible that didn’t sell it all so don’t get too concerned about this story. This is the way I have heard this preached. And when I heard it, I grabbed on because I didn’t want to lose my stuff. But there was always this nagging sense that something didn’t sound right.

And so when I would dare to pray “Jesus do you want me to sell my stuff?” I would quickly plug my ears and yell “lalalalala” just to make sure I couldn’t hear what Jesus was saying. And the reason I would do that is that the way verses 24 and 25 go it is obvious Jesus’ words weren’t just talking to this guy.

Jesus says “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone – anyone – who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Now this is one of Jesus’ ‘crazy’ statements. And Jesus makes statements like this all the time. So we read:

[Jesus] said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”
Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59-62)

And Jesus said:

Anyone who loves their father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:37-28)

So Jesus was constantly making it awful hard to follow Him. I don’t know if you get this but Jesus was always turning away droves of people who wanted to follow Him. He wasn’t trying to build a mega church. So the text today is nothing unique. But the not so weird thing that happens when we come across

statements like this is we do our best to explain them away. So I suspect you have heard about the gate called “the eye of the needle” in Jerusalem.

In case you haven’t, the story goes there was a small personnel gate in the walls of Jerusalem that could be opened after the main gate was closed for the night. And if a traveling merchant arrived late with his camel laden with wares, then he could unload the camel, get it down on its knees and have it wiggle through “the eye of the needle.” The point of Jesus’ words then would be it is difficult or maybe really annoying to get into the kingdom of heaven if you are rich. You are going to have to put your wealth down and wriggle in order to make it happen.

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Now there are two problems with this story. First, while there is a gate in Jerusalem called “the eye of the needle,” and it can be found in the Russian Church in the Old City, it was built in the 16th century after some monk – probably a wealthy one – suggested its existence as a possible way to understand this text and it caught on.⁷ But before the 16th century there is no talk of this, so there was no gate like this in the 1st century.

The second problem with this is that Jesus isn’t making the point that it is difficult for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of heaven. He is making the point that it is impossible. And that’s the word He uses in verse 27 – “impossible.”

Now we can disagree with Jesus, or we can assume He was exaggerating, but the text clearly states that the reason rich people don’t make it into the kingdom is that they aren’t willing to give up their wealth to follow Jesus. Friends, many rich people are willing to divide their lives between Jesus and money, but to convince them to sell it all and follow Jesus would take a miracle. And that is what Jesus says: “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

Now in the very next chapter we get an example of this miracle. Zacchaeus the rich tax collector meets Jesus and his life gets rocked. He realizes Jesus’ kingdom is way more valuable than everything he’s accumulated so we read:

Zacchaeus stood up and said... “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:8-9)

So good news, miracles happen! While the vast majority of wealthy people go away sad thinking Jesus asks is too much, some do, by grace, encounter Jesus and get the kingdom. But hear this, 100% of those who do have their attitudes towards money completely transformed as they enter. They realize nothing they have has any value in comparison with the kingdom, and so like Zacchaeus the thought of giving generously is joy to them not sacrifice.

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⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye_of_a_needle

Now while that rattles around in our heads we need to clear up two things. First, all of us in this room are wealthy. If this was Uganda there might be some question, but the fact is if you make \$12,000CND a year you are among the wealthiest 16% of everyone who has ever lived.⁸ So Jesus is talking to us.

Second we need to voice the concern that the church today has a bad reputation when it comes to money. We don't even have to talk about TV evangelists; the fact is so many pastors have used guilt to get people to give money that most of society figures the church is money hungry. Have you come across that?

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I've got to tell you all that preaching is based off erroneous misinterpretations. This might shock you but the New Testament does not teach that we are to tithe.

We've talked about this before, but tithing is an Old Testament principle, it's connected to the Old Testament Law, and it is not something that Christians are bound by any more than we are required to wear clothing of all one material or not trim the edges of our beards.⁹ So if you haven't heard this before, this pastor is telling you stop tithing because it will kill your faith.

And here is why: tithing will do one of two things to you. It will heap guilt on you if you can't hit 10%, or it will clothe you in self-righteousness if you do. And that's because when we tithe we buy into the lie that the first 10% is God's and the remaining 90% is our own. If that were the case, then when we gave God His portion His demand on our life would be met. And if we gave beyond 10% we would actually be putting God in our debt. The truth however, is that Jesus died to save us, and that is worth a whole lot more than 10% of \$50,000 for 35 years.

Let me take this a step further. If you made a million dollars a year and gave 90-95% away, and then felt justified that what was left was yours to do as you pleased, you wouldn't have satisfied God at all.

You see the dollars don't matter to Jesus. He's not short on cash. And so, while there are a few references to tithing in the New Testament, they are all criticisms of the Pharisees who self-righteously thought they were pleasing God, it's in 2nd Corinthians that Christ followers learn how we are to view money.

So we are going to look there briefly. This was Paul's chance to say "Hey tithing is the rule, you don't have to like it, you just need to obey." But he doesn't. In fact he goes the other way. He says:

Since you excel in everything.... See that you also excel in the grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test

⁸ Look up <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/get-involved/how-rich-am-i/> to calculate your wealth.

⁹ See Leviticus 19:19-27 for these two examples. Also see <http://fortgeorgebaptist.ca/media/2015-04-15-giving-to-god-new-testament-style> for a sermon dedication to this topic.

the sincerity of your love.... For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:7-9)

So giving New Testament style has nothing to do a percentage, it is all about living our lives like Jesus lived His – that’s discipleship. And so Paul says the motivation for our giving comes from understanding how much Jesus gave.

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Now Jesus was rich in heaven – right? – but He gave it up to be born in a barn, to grow up as a carpenter’s son, and ultimately to suffer an excruciating death on the cross. That’s what Jesus gave up to show God’s love to you.

And because Jesus did that for us He expects us to reflect it to the world. He wants His children to look like Him. So this means a couple things, first, if your giving doesn’t hurt, if your life is still comfortable, if your giving hasn’t affected your lifestyle, then you probably aren’t giving like Jesus gave. If this is you stop embezzling God’s wealth to build your own kingdom and start building His. Second, if your giving isn’t inspired by joy, if you aren’t giving like Zacchaeus because you’ve seen the kingdom, then you aren’t giving like Jesus gave.

So brothers and sisters, all of us need to stop thinking 90% of what we’ve got is ours – it’s not, 100% is God’s. And some of us need to stop feeling guilty when 10% is impossible. And others us of need to stop congratulating ourselves because we are so rich that 15% doesn’t impact our lives at all. Friends, the percentage is irrelevant, it is the Zacchaeus heart that says “Jesus I’m all in, everything I’ve got is yours” that honors God. And when a rich person says this a miracle has happened in their lives.

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Now I say this sensitively, but if as you hear this you’re thinking “Jesus is asking too much of me, He’s not entitled to everything I’ve got. He’s lucky I’m as generous as I am” then Jesus’ words are for you: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

I don’t think I could say that any more offensively to a room full of rich people, but this is what Jesus says. And this is why in verse 26 the people respond “Who then can be saved?” And Jesus says “It’s impossible for the rich to get saved, only God can pull this off.”

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Alright, I’m going to leave that there because I can’t stand any more. I need some grace. How about you? The good news is grace is where Jesus finishes. What we find is that **When we do everything right but don’t put the King first we miss His kingdom; but Jesus guarantees those who give up everything to follow Him won’t have sacrificed anything.** Let’s pick it up in verse 28.

[Read Luke 18:28-30]

Now Peter is the classic disciple. He usually gets it wrong, but ultimately he gets it right because his heart is good – he loves Jesus.

And we get both those sides here. Speaking of himself and the other 12 he says “we’ve given up everything Jesus. We’ve left it all behind to follow You.”

And Jesus’ response says two things. First He says “Yes Peter, you guys are in. You’ve got the kingdom. I mean haven’t you seen God show up? How about that time when the boat was sinking and all of a sudden someone came walking on the water and spoke to the storm – remember that? Or how about when 5000 people were hungry and God made lunch for all of them out of one boy’s fish sandwich? Hasn’t it been awesome to see the kingdom breaking into the world?”

And I would ask you this. Friends, don’t you have stories of God showing up in your life? Stories of provision and rescue and demonstrations of divine love? If you’re a Christian you’ve got those stories, don’t forget them. And don’t stop expecting more. Jesus’ promise is no matter how much you’ve tasted the kingdom there is infinitely more available. This is God we are talking about.

And when you’ve tasted the kingdom then you get joy that flows no matter what is happening around you. And Peter and the 12 are examples of this. They saw the kingdom so clearly that even when they were being killed for their faith – crucified upside down, boiled in oil, clubbed with sticks and bashed with rocks – not a single one recanted because what Jesus had given them was so much more valuable than even life itself.

And so the second thing Jesus says to Peter here is you’re wrong, you haven’t sacrificed anything to follow Me. To sacrifice is to give up more than you get back. And that never happens with the kingdom. No one who gives up even the most valuable earthly things – possessions or spouses or siblings or parents or children – to get the kingdom ever finds themselves outgiving God. He won’t be bested, and that’s grace.

So brothers and sisters, Jesus does call you to give up everything to follow Him. Don’t let anyone tell you different, and don’t let anything stand in the way. And don’t try to divide your devotion; even 90% for God and 10% for something else won’t work. And I urge you don’t go away sad, like the rich young ruler, thinking about what you are called to “sacrifice.” Instead like rich Zacchaeus, focus on the value of the kingdom, and say “Jesus I’m all in, everything I’ve got is yours.” And when you do you will find yourself giving up the trinkets of earth for the treasure of heaven; a treasure we get now that lasts forever. Do you want that treasure?