

When you travel to a different country, you discover different cultural values. You might hear cultural rules that you need to be aware of like “Never shake hands with your left hand,” or “When you meet a person, you bow to them first before speaking” or “when a younger person meets an older one, the younger allows the older to speak first out of respect.”

You can also see cultural differences respond in strikingly different ways to the same situation. In her book “Quiet” Susan Cain notes an interesting cultural difference that shows up when considering shy children. She writes “One study comparing eight to ten year old children in Shanghai, China and southern Ontario, Canada found that shy and sensitive children were shunned by their peers in Canada but made sought after playmates in China. Shy children were more likely to be considered for leadership roles in China. Chinese children who are sensitive and restrained are said to be *dongshi* or understanding, a common term of praise.

Similarly, Chinese high school students tell researchers that they prefer friends who are “humble” and “unselfish,” “honest” and “hard-working.” American high school students seek out the “cheerful,” “enthusiastic,” and “sociable.” “The contrast is striking,” writes Michael Harris Bond, a cross-cultural psychologist who focuses on China. “The Americans emphasize sociability and prize those attributes that make for easy, cheerful association. The Chinese emphasize deeper attributes, focusing on moral virtues and achievement.”¹

So do you get what she’s saying? Different cultures can view the shy and sensitive person in a totally different way. In a North American context we can conclude there’s something wrong with that person. But in China, they’re a sought out playmate who would likely be considered for a leadership position.

It can surprise us to discover that places exist and people who have very different values to ours. But sometimes we discover that those different values are worthwhile considering and maybe even adopting.

The same is true when we consider the values of the world compared to the values of heaven. We don’t have to do much to discover and adopt the values of the world. We see them all around us in people – on the Web – in movies or on TV – in the way people talk and act. But the values of heaven are initially unnatural to us. We don’t live there. We don’t really know what it’s like to live there or how life goes there.

¹ Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*, New York, Broadway Books, 2013, 187.

But the more we discover about heaven as described in the Bible and the more we observe and learn about Jesus' life who came from heaven, the more we realize our need to learn about and adopt kingdom of heaven thinking and living. Jesus teaches about the kingdom of heaven values throughout Matthew. He also lives them out in His interaction with others. He calls us to respond to the arrival to the kingdom of heaven with His coming.

So today, we are going to learn some of the kingdom of heaven's values through Jesus and His teaching. We will see the earthly values Jesus challenges and kingdom of heaven values introduced. We will then see how we can respond so that kingdom of heaven values grow in us. Then we begin to enjoy the wonder of kingdom of heaven living while still on earth.

We find this in Matthew 19. Last week, we did the first 12 verses where Jesus teaches about marriage, divorce and singleness. Today, we pick up where we left off at Matthew 19:13 and we will go to verse 26. The text is found on page 694 in the Bibles in front of you.

Matthew 19:13-26 (ESV)

¹³Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." ¹⁵And he laid his hands on them and went away.

¹⁶And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."²²When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, 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." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Some people, likely parents, bring their children to Jesus so He might lay his hands on them and pray. Isn't that a beautiful picture? Parents bring their little ones to the Lord so that He can lovingly touch them and pray over them. Jesus had already brought a child into the midst of the disciples to teach them about greatness in the kingdom of heaven back in Matthew 18.

But the disciples do not see this as beautiful. They rebuke the parents. We don't really know why the disciples responded like this. Disciples were generally very devoted to their teacher. They tried to protect them from too many interruptions. So they may have thought that Jesus was way too important to spend time praying for children.

But Jesus speaks up for the children. He says to the disciples "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Now there's a lot in that statement. Jesus talks about not only children, but *little* children so maybe those who are 2-5 years old. Jesus instructs the disciples not to hinder the children from coming to him. So either the parents or the children themselves really wanted to get near Jesus. But His most powerful statement is reserved for the end – "for to such belongs to the kingdom of heaven" or "the kingdom of heaven belongs to those like these little ones."

What is it about little children that Jesus refers to here? It could be their vulnerability. Little ones don't see danger or those who might have bad intentions for them. It could be their weakness. They cannot overcome adults or large animals by their physical strength. It could be their lack of status. Though valued by their families, the little child did not have high status. That belonged to the king or emperor, then the people of his court; religious leaders and military officials. Little children dwelt near the bottom of societal importance. Or it could be their faith. Most little children are very trusting of those who take care of them. They look to them for food, security and help. If their parents tell them something about the world or the way things are, they believe them.

So little children are vulnerable, weak, low status and trusting. Yet Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to those like these little children.

What are the upside down values of the kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of heaven values those like little children not those who have power, strength and status in the world. I could spend time on each characteristic of a child we talked about. But let's think about child like faith for a moment. If a child grows up in a Christian home, their parents will instruct them about the ways of the Lord. A child may make a profession of faith at a young age. Then as they grow into teen and young adult years, they face the test of making this faith their own. They begin to question and may not take at face value some answers they received as a child. The more they dig, the more they discover.

Hopefully, they find a lot of answers to their bigger questions. Hopefully they see how Christianity stands up well to hard questions from history, reliability of the Bible, philosophy, archaeology and science. They might ask questions about some of the harder portions of the Bible or behavior of Biblical characters that does not look very good at all. Each inquiry can strengthen their faith. Their faith no longer resembles the faith they had when they were 4 or 5.

But there are times when we reach the end of our understanding about some inquiry or question about the faith. Some questions cannot be completely answered. Some things about God cannot be completely understood. How does the Triune God fit together as one God, three persons? How can Jesus have two natures – divine and human? What about those hard parts in the Old Testament where Israel wipes out an entire population?

At some point, we have to take God at His Word. Just like we trusted our parents or caregiver's word when we were 4 and 5, we have to trust God like a little child when we realize we have come to the end of human understanding. Those who refuse to do that, struggle to enter the kingdom of heaven. Everything has to be explained to their satisfaction. Usually this results in a denial of some God moment in the Biblical Story like "Jesus wasn't born of the virgin Mary. He was born of Joseph and Mary and became a great prophet. Or Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead because we know that can't happen scientifically. But Jesus was raised spiritually and that should inspire us." Do you see where that leads – away from the kingdom of heaven? There are churches and whole denominations who function this way. But those who come like little children are willing to trust the Lord with matters beyond them. They will enter the kingdom of heaven – because you enter it by faith in Christ. So the kingdom of heaven values those who come to Christ like little children – acknowledging vulnerability, weakness, and came in humility and faith.

The account continues with a man coming up to Jesus to ask a question some people today still ask. "Teacher what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" This man seems to honestly seek an answer. He is concerned about eternal life for some reason. He wants to know what he needs to do to get it. Jesus picks up on the man's use of the word good. "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good." Jesus is not saying "God in heaven is good and I Jesus am not good." He directs the man to change the location of goodness that leads to eternal life. The man locates goodness in a deed he himself can do. "What good deed *must I do* to have eternal life?" But Jesus says only God is good." What does that have to do with the man's question? if God is the only one who is good, then we

cannot possibly do some good deed that will earn our way into eternal life. We can only get eternal life on account of the goodness of God not our good deeds. But Jesus does not stop to let the man ponder this.

He answers his question, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus says, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” So is Jesus saying there’s another way to heaven besides salvation through grace? Well, technically I guess you could argue that if a person kept the commandments absolutely perfectly in thought, motive and action, they could present themselves before God as righteous. But since everyone has sinned and fallen short of giving God glory all the time, keeping the commandments is not another way to salvation. When we try to keep the commandments, we realize how much we need God’s grace, salvation and power because our sinful nature longs to disobey them. Yet Jesus works with the young man.

So the man asks “Which commandments?” Jesus answers by quoting the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 5th commandment along with Love your neighbor as yourself. Each requires external behavior that can be verified if they are obeyed. The young man says he has kept all of these. We might think that’s pretty arrogant. But it’s possible for a person to not murder and commit adultery and steal. We might find it harder to accept that he never lied. Maybe he did what was necessary to honor his father and mother. Yet even if he had kept all these commands, he himself recognizes it’s not enough. “All these I have kept, what do I still lack?”

Something was missing. Some doubt lingered in his mind. He had done all the religious requirements. He would likely be considered a good moral person. But “what do I still lack? Jesus answered “If you would be perfect or go the whole way, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” The young man hears this and turns away sorrowful for Jesus had put a finger on the man’s true god: His many possessions.

Here we discover another upside down value of the kingdom of heaven. **The kingdom of heaven values those who completely trust themselves to Christ not those who trust in good deeds or their possessions. (19:16-22).** Jesus asked a lot of this young man. Yet, Jesus identified the obstacle in his life that kept him from the kingdom of heaven. The young man trusted his own keeping of the commandments. He trusted his own possessions. But all these kept him from putting his trust in Christ.

Does this mean Jesus commands us to sell everything, give our money away to the poor and follow Him?

Whenever I was confronted with this question I used to immediately run to 1 Timothy 5:8 as a counterpoint. “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” So the apostle Paul wrote against neglect of family responsibilities and the need to provide. I would run to this verse whenever anyone suggested that Christians should sell everything they have, give it to the poor and follow Jesus. I think I overemphasized 1 Timothy 5:8 to ensure I got to keep my possessions.

I used to love collecting possessions. I used to love buying stuff and having more and more of it. But then we had to move. It’s a real drag packing up a bunch of stuff, some of which you never use. Then when my Mom died, we had to deal with her stuff. She didn’t have a lot of stuff left. I’ve told you this before but I was struck as we packed up her apartment how she didn’t need this stuff anymore. It was a deep lesson. Now I don’t like most stuff. I am devoted to continually getting rid of stuff so that we don’t have to deal with it anymore and we can focus on much more important things.

An abundance of possessions can steal our hearts away from Christ. An overconfidence in our own ability to do good deeds can blind us to our desperate need for Christ. Somewhere there is a healthy balance – yes we need to provide for relatives and immediate family – but we also need to sell what we don’t need and give it away to the poor to help others.

So we have seen a couple of the kingdom of heaven’s values. This kingdom with Christ as King values those who come as little children – acknowledging vulnerability, weakness, not needing big status in the kingdom and trust. The kingdom also values those who completely trust Christ with their lives and security not their possessions or good deeds.

There’s one more in the final verses of this passage. The young man leaves and Jesus doesn’t run after him. Instead He says to His disciples “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, 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.” Riches and wealth present a huge obstacle to entering the kingdom of heaven. It’s not just a little stone in our shoe. Jesus says it is virtually impossible for a person of great wealth to come to Christ. He emphasizes this with his camel through the eye of a needle illustration. The needle eye was the smallest opening in anyone’s home. The camel was the

largest animal in Israel at that time. So Jesus uses this to illustrate the great difficulty riches present to entering the kingdom.

The disciples understand exactly what He's getting at because they are blown away. Why? They believed, like everyone else that if you were wealthy, you were blessed by God. In fact, God promises blessings for obedience back in the Old Testament like in Deuteronomy 28. So people believed God blessed rich people and they were well on their way to live in the kingdom of heaven. They had a head start over the common people.

But when Jesus drops this bombshell, the disciples conclude that salvation is almost impossible. If those who have a head start of God's blessings of wealth face great difficulty in being saved, who can be saved? Jesus replies with those comforting words, "With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible." What is impossible yet possible with God? Jesus could mean it's impossible for wealthy people to be saved on their own. But with God it is possible. But He could also be saying "It's impossible for anyone to be saved on their own. But with God it is possible." Both are true. But here's our last upside down kingdom value for today. **The kingdom of heaven values those who give their whole heart to Christ not those who put some or all of their trust in wealth.** Does this mean it is wrong to be wealthy? No. But an abundance of possessions or finances can lead our hearts away from God. Think about how much time it takes to manage a richness of possessions. The more cars a person or family has, the more maintenance required. The more money, the more responsibility to steward it effectively; the more time needed to pay attention.

The more money, the more opportunities. This can lead to a constant state of busyness and excitement in pursuing all the opportunities. More possessions require more storage space. This requires more time spent sorting through things that will not count in eternity. More possessions are also more likely to lead to waste. When you have an abundance of clothes; toys; gadgets; books, it's possible to lose some or ignore some therefore wasting those possessions and resources used to obtain them.

According to Freed Up Financial Living Workbook, 10% of clothing gets worn 90% of the time. 1/3 of clothing never gets worn. Why? We bring new clothes home and they don't look the same under our lighting as they did in the store, they don't match an outfit the way we thought they would, they don't fit quite right, or we just didn't need them in the first place. An abundance of wealth and possessions can lead us away from God. Why is it that when people come back from Honduras, they often talk about many Hondurans being so joyful despite having so little? Might it be because

lasting joy is not found in an abundance of possessions? Jesus says “Seek first the kingdom of God and all you need will be provided for you – food; clothing; shelter. For those of us living in abundance, we need to heed this. Those of us living in want need to keep trusting the Lord and depending on our brothers and sisters for help.

So we’ve seen some upside down values of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven values those who come to it like little children; those who trust in Christ and not their good deeds or possessions; those who give their whole heart to Christ, not a heart divided between wealth and Christ.

What do we need to do in light of this? Matthew 4:17 **The upside down values of Jesus’ kingdom require our repentance and reshaping.** To repent means to turn around – to turn towards God – to turn away from the world’s values and turn towards heaven’s values. We need to repent if we have been living according to the world’s values in any of these areas. Then we need God to reshape our thinking and behavior. We need to first “Be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This transforming work is done by the Holy Spirit as we present ourselves to God and submit to His reshaping work. We will more and more live according to the kingdom of heaven while we live on earth.

Just before we close, I want to address a group of people here today who may have tuned me out a while ago. I hope I can recapture your attention for these last moments. Some of you may have tuned me out because you’re not really concerned about living in the kingdom of heaven. That’s not important to you. You’d rather pursue whatever it is you’d like to pursue – not what seems to be the boring life of the Christian. But I’d like you to notice something here. If anyone might be the picture of success today, wouldn’t it be this young man? Think about it. He was young. He had a good reputation. He was wealthy. Those are three pretty great advantages. Usually people have to work for years to get a good reputation. If you’re young, usually you don’t have very much wealth. Yet this guy had it all when he was young. Yet he asked “what do I still lack?”

Could it be that whatever you’re pursuing apart from the kingdom of heaven might not really deliver what you think it will? Life in the kingdom of heaven is not easy. It’s not a decade at the beach or easy street. It is a taste of heaven’s kingdom while we still live on earth. It’s life with Christ. It’s doing life together, empowered by the Spirit. It’s discovering the beauty and wisdom of the commandments and the power to live them out and discover that it’s actually

a delight to obey Christ – not drudgery. I don't know where you are. But I pray that the rich young man's encounter with Christ will stay with you and instruct you about what's most important.

For those walking with Christ – you might be feeling pretty vulnerable; weak; powerless; failed; guilty; poor; with little or no status. You're qualified for the kingdom of heaven. Your king has not forgotten about you. He watches and walks with you each step of your day. Yes, different cultures have different values. Different kingdoms have different values – the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world. Which values will we live by from this day forward?