



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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What Must I Do?

Luke 18:15-30

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Who is part of the kingdom of God? Who's saved and who's not? Who's in and who's out? Who gets eternal life and who doesn't? These are questions that most people wonder about. Yes, there are atheists who deny it all and there are "new-agers" who expect that when they die they'll somehow just be absorbed by the cosmos, but I've found that most people who believe in God and who believe in an afterlife believe that they're saved or that they can look forward to eternal life. I've met a few people who struggle with their guilt over sin and who are convinced they're damned because their particular sin is so bad that it can never be forgiven, but *most* people think that when they die everything will be okay for them.

The Protestant Reformation was about recovering the doctrine of justification *by faith*. In contrast, in the modern West it seems that we now affirm the doctrine of justification *by death*: with the exception of bad people—you know, really, *really* bad people—the way to heaven is to die. As simple as that. Even a lot of Christians who should know better default to this "justification by death" doctrine when an unbelieving loved one dies, I think simply because we don't want to face up the exclusivity of God's kingdom.

The people of Jesus' day had a similar struggle. They certainly didn't believe in justification by death. The Jews knew that the Lord had established a covenant with them. When he sent his Messiah to vanquish his enemies and to vindicate his people he would know his people by their faithfulness to *torah*, to the law he had given them. In the time of Jesus the key demands of the law that Jews focused on were circumcision, diet, the temple and its sacrifices, and their keeping apart as much as possible

from unclean gentiles. Do those things, they believed, and the Messiah would recognise you as one of his own when he came. And, of course, the Messiah would recognise some more easily than others. Everyone knew that the Pharisees would be particularly recognisable for their piety and faithfulness to the law. They were proud of that and many of the ordinary people looked up to them for their example.

We'll be looking at Luke 18:15-30 this morning. We're still in this discussion Jesus has been having with a mixed crowd since Chapter 17. It started when some Pharisees confronted him about the coming of the kingdom. Jesus responded with a rebuke. They were expecting the Messiah to judge the Romans and vindicate Israel, but Jesus describes something completely different. He describes the coming judgement in terms of the Lord using the *Romans*—bringing them down on Jerusalem and the temple—to judge *unfaithful Israel*. Last Sunday we saw how Jesus told them two parables about who the Lord would spare from judgement. The first was a poor widow—the sort of person that Israel was supposed to protect and care for, but whom most of the wealthy and powerful of the day ignored or abused. The second person was the humble tax collector who threw himself on the Lord's mercy as he prayed. In contrast, the Pharisee in the parable, who boasted of his righteousness and his good works was condemned. All along the way Jesus has been turning things upside-down. It's been his ministry all along. Everyone knew that lepers and the demon-possessed, prostitutes and tax collectors would *never* be part of God's kingdom, and yet these are exactly the people Jesus has been embracing. And on the other end of the spectrum, everyone knew without question that the Pharisees would be part of the kingdom, and yet they're just the people Jesus is rebuking.

With everything upside-down like this, people were wondering: If all this is true, how *do* I get into God's kingdom? And that's where Jesus turns next. Look at 18:15.

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

It begins innocently enough. Luke says that people were bringing their babies to Jesus. They wanted them blessed. And to us that seems like the most natural thing in the world. I remember the first Bible my parents ever bought me had pictures on the endpapers of Jesus sitting and hugging and laughing with little children. That's one of the images I have in my head when I think of Jesus and children. The other is of babies being brought to the baptismal font. We read this story as part of the liturgy for the baptism of infants and children. We're pulling the story out of context and twisting the meaning when we use it as a justification for infant baptism, but it does make the point that Jesus welcomes infants. We're excited to welcome infants into the church and to baptise them into Jesus, but the disciples were anything but happy to see this. Luke throws that little word "even" in there: the people were *even* bringing infants—as if babies were the last thing Jesus needed. The disciples were incensed at these people who dared bring their children to Jesus. They were probably poor and simple people who heard Jesus preaching good news to them. They were encouraged by Jesus, they saw God's redeeming love in him, and so they brought their children to be blessed by this teacher.

But as far as the disciples were concerned, these babies were below Jesus' dignity and not worthy of his time. It helps to remember that people in that time and place didn't look at babies and children the same way that we do. Socially speaking, children were at the bottom of the hierarchy—down close to slaves. In fact, the word Jesus uses in the next verse when he talks about these "little children" is a word that was also used sometimes for slaves. When Jesus sees his disciples rebuking moms and dads who were bringing their children he instead welcomes them.

But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, 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.” (Luke 18:16-17)

Again, we have to forget our own cultural thinking. We love kids. We indulge kids. Their culture was very much the opposite, at least in public. A dignified rabbi, especially, didn't welcome babies like this. But Jesus isn't worried about dignity or propriety. He welcomes the children; he encourages the parents to bring their babies to him. And then he says something even more shocking: It's too little children like these—and to grown men and women who are like them at heart—that the kingdom of God belongs.

Judgement was coming on Israel. Even the supremely righteous and upstanding Pharisees were cast out of the kingdom of God. And while they were all cast out, the little children were welcomed. We can gather that their poor and simple parents who trusted Jesus enough to push through the crowd so that they could bring their crying babies to Jesus for a blessing were being welcomed too. That's the attitude that Jesus is getting at when he talks about people coming into the kingdom like children. He's not saying that we have to be simple or stupid. I've heard far too many people say that Jesus is telling us to check our brains at the gate of the kingdom. That's not what he's saying. He's talking about trust: the simple and unflinching trust of a child. Think of your own kids. They trust you. In fact, it probably never occurs to them not to trust you, which is why it pains us so much as parents when we fail them. Even with our failures, even when we get angry and exasperated with our children and let it get the better of us, even when we fail to provide perfectly for them, they trust us simply and completely. And that's what Jesus is pointing to in these children. Like a hungry baby reaching out to her mother to nurse and never questioning the goodness of her mother, Jesus calls us to reach out to him in faith. Let go of everything—that's what repentance means—and take hold of him.

In the next verse Luke tells us that “a certain ruler” was waiting to ask Jesus a question. Now we see why the disciples were most likely turning away the parents with children: there was a rich and important man waiting to see Jesus. If he came down on Jesus' side he could lend credibility to the movement. Maybe he'd even donate some money. But Jesus puts him off to welcome lowly children—to welcome the least of these. The contrast between the babies and the ruler gives us a profound understanding of the kingdom of God and just how upside-down it is and just how opposed it is to the world's way of doing things. We're reminded here that Jesus came to preach good news not to the rich, but to the poor. And yet his disciples don't get it. And so Jesus' rebuke had to cut deeply—even if they didn't get it that day. How are the disciples going to enter the kingdom themselves when they can't even welcome the little children in?

But all this makes the rich rulers' question important. He asks:

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18)

He might have been a Pharisee, but we don't know that for certain. Most likely he was a wealthy man in the community who owned lots of property, employed people, and was generous in the synagogue. He was an upstanding member of the community. He belongs to another class of Jews whom everyone thought had a guaranteed spot in the kingdom: the wealthy. In that society land was wealth and the Lord's covenant promise was all about land. When Israel was faithful, God drove out her enemies and allowed her to settle in the land he had promised. When Israel was unfaithful, the Lord took the land away and drove her into exile. So people naturally took those who were rich in land as having the Lord's approval and blessing. Jesus hasn't directly addressed people like this rich young ruler, but the man had to be wondering. Jesus spoke of coming judgement on Israel. He rebuked the Pharisees for thinking they were guaranteed a place in the kingdom

because of their righteousness. Jesus instead gave the kingdom to widows and tax collectors—and now as he's waiting to ask his question Jesus gives the kingdom to little babies and says that to enter it you have to come in faith like a little baby. This man's thinking: What about me? He knows that he's more like the Pharisees than the poor widow. And he's business and world savvy—hardly like a baby. So what's his spot in the kingdom? What should he do with his life if he wants to be recognised as being faithful by the Messiah? What do I have to do to participate in the resurrection that the Messiah will bring? That's what his question is asking. But it's not just that. He addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher”. He's trying to ingratiate himself to Jesus and that's never a good thing to do. That's how the world's system works, but it's not how the kingdom works. And so Jesus now rebukes this rich young ruler:

“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” (Luke 18:19-20)

“Why do you call me good?” Was Jesus good? Of course. But, again, flattering God or flattering his messenger isn't the way into the kingdom. If you want a place in the kingdom don't flatter God for his goodness. No, *trust* in his goodness and do what he says. In other words: think of the faith a baby has for her mother or father and put that kind of faith in your heavenly Father.

After the rebuke, Jesus begins his answer by pointing the rich young ruler to the law and specifically to the Ten Commandments. And Jesus lists five of the ten: You shall not commit adultery, murder, steal, or bear false witness and you shall honour your father and mother. The law—summed up in the Ten Commandments—was what was to set Israel apart from the nations and it was by keeping these commandments that the Jews would be recognised their faithfulness when the Messiah came. And yet Jesus only lists five of the ten.

There's a reason for this that we'll get to in a minute.

In verse 21 the young man responds:

“All these I have kept from my youth.”

So had the Pharisees and so had most of the Jews. But this didn't answer his question, because Jesus has been saying that the Pharisees are out, so there's got to be more to this than just keeping the commandments. So he responds, “I've already done all of that Jesus. What more do I have to do?” And Jesus responds:

“One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Luke 18:22)

And this is where we see why Jesus only listed five of the Ten Commandments. He listed the five he knew weren't an issue for this man. Now, if he'd listed the others this young man wouldn't have realised he had a problem with them either, but in not listing them and then telling him to sell everything and to follow him the man realises his problem. What are the missing commandments? You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make a carved image—an idol. You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. You shall keep the Sabbath. You shall not covet.

Can you see how Jesus drives right at this man's problem as he tells him to give up his wealth to the poor and to follow him? This man had done the “easy” stuff. He wasn't a murderer or an adulterer or a thief. But he did have another god: his wealth. He did have an idol: his wealth. And his wealth was built, no doubt, in part on coveting what belonged to others. His wealth was built because he and many others failed to keep the Sabbath and the jubilee. They refused to the poor the land that was rightfully theirs according to the law and they refused every seven years to cancel the debts of the poor as the law demanded. And because of all this, because he abused the poor to build his own wealth and because he'd made a

god of his wealth, every time he called on the name of the Lord in the synagogue or in the temple or before his gentile neighbours, he took the name of the Lord in vain.

Brothers and Sisters, how often do we do just the same thing? We profess faith in Jesus, but when it really comes down to it we trust in our wealth. This is probably the biggest problem for Christians in the West. Even the poorest of us is rich by global standards and we trust in that wealth. We hold on to it like this man did and are tight-fisted with both God and the poor. We see it in our voting patterns too. How often do we vote for politicians who hold all sorts of evil positions because they promise to give us money? Ultimately far too many Christians vote money despite all the other things we talk about in the political realm. How often do we turn a blind eye to unethical practises—especially those that hurt the poor—because we'd rather see the value of our portfolio grow?

Maybe it's not money—I suspect money is a major obstacle for all of us—but there are other things too. We place our family or our job or our reputation or our education in the place of God. And Jesus gets at the question we need to ask of *everything* in life when he tells this man to give it all to the poor and to follow him. Whatever that thing is in our life that rivals our trust in and loyalty to God, whether it's money or education or reputation or even family, are we willing to give it up for the sake of following Jesus? Brothers and sisters, if the answer is “No”, that thing has become an idol for us. If we're not willing to let these worldly things go in order to lay hold of Jesus and his kingdom we have no right to call ourselves kingdom people. Like this rich young ruler, when we trust in these other things and then profess to be followers of Jesus we take his name in vain. I know this is a hard thing to hear. It's hard for me to hear too. It was hard for the rich young ruler. Luke says in verse 23:

But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was

extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For 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.” (Luke 18:23-25)

I'd be lying if I said that this didn't make me uneasy and sad and I think that's probably true of pretty much all of us. He couldn't do it. He couldn't give up his idol of wealth and there are many people in the Church today with the same problem. And so Jesus warns with this crazy illustration: It's easier for a rich person to enter the kingdom than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Biblical commentators and preachers have tried to blunt this for two thousand years: The word for “camel” sounds like the word for “rope”; Jesus said “rope”, not “camel”. The eye of a needle was a type of small gate in the city wall. But all of that misses the point. The camel was the largest animal in Palestine. The eye of a needle was one of the smallest things people dealt with in daily life. And a rich person entering heaven is as likely to happen as a huge camel passing through the tiny eye of a needle. Wealth is a powerful idol and it's impossible for most people to give up.

But, Brothers and Sisters, thanks be to God that our entrance to the kingdom is not dependent on our unregenerate hearts. Look at verses 26-30:

Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

“What is impossible with man is possible with God.” By embracing sin we made a mess of God's good creation. It's hard for us to see past today, past

the world we've made, past the wealth that moth and rust corrupt and that thieves break in and steal. But the fact that Jesus came into the world and the fact that he suffered humiliation and rejection and died for our sake and then rose from the dead is a reminder that the Spirit of God is once again breathing life into chaos. God, in his love and in his mercy, is restoring and remaking his creation. The resurrection of Jesus points to this. The resurrection of Jesus reminds us that there is something more and that there is something better. And so Jesus himself promises: if we will let go of these things that are passing away we will be free to take hold the kingdom of God. Letting go of what we know is hard. Letting go of tangible sources of security is hard. But, Brothers and Sisters, we have good reason to let go. In Jesus God himself became incarnate as one of us. He gave his life for our sins. He loves us that much. He desires reconciliation and restoration for us that much. And when he has done so much for us, he has a right to call us to come to him in trust like little children.

Consider that he doesn't leave us alone to wonder. He's given us his Word. He tells us all about himself and his goodness there. He tells us the story there: how we rebelled, but how he's never stopping loving us, and how he's worked down through the ages to restore, not only us, but all of his creation. He calls us to trust him by letting go of earthly treasure so that we can lay up even greater treasure in heaven—so that we can lay up treasure for that day after Jesus has returned and restored Creation, bringing earth and heaven back together so that men and women can fellowship with God and live in his presence. He knows it's hard to visualise that kind of treasure and so, in addition to his Word, he gives us his Sacraments. Friends, in the Font and at the Table he gives us a foretaste of his kingdom. He gives us his life-giving Spirit as we pass through the waters of Holy Baptism in faith. And each Sunday, here at his Table, he feeds us with the life-giving food of the kingdom.

Think of the Israelite spies Moses sent to scope out the promised land. Think of the wealth of produce they found there and the samples they brought back to the poor and hungry people who had been living in the wilderness. The spies brought back the promise of abundant life. And yet as amazed as the people were by the produce of the land, they were more fearful of the report of the fierce giants who defended it. They were afraid. God had promised to drive out their enemies, but it was hard to trust that promise in light of just how fierce the Canaanites were. Better to stick with the security they had in the wilderness. It wasn't much, but it was better than dying at the hands of their enemies. And through lack of faith, even with God's Word and the foretaste of paradise before them, they forfeit the promise because they refused to trust God.

Brothers and Sisters, may that never be us. Let your ears and your hearts be open to hear the Word of the Lord and as he gives us a foretaste of his kingdom here in the bread and in the wine let us learn to trust him. Pray that the Spirit poured into you in Baptism will renew your heart and turn it to Jesus. Let us begin letting go of the things of this kingdom that we might lay hold of Jesus and the things of his everlasting kingdom.

Let us pray: Lord God, we acknowledge in the collect that you are the strength of all who put their trust in you. We also acknowledge our need for your help because of the weakness of our nature. Grant us grace, we pray, to have the faith of little children. Grant us grace to let go of the things of earth that we might take hold of the things of heaven. Grant us grace, Father, that our lives may be witnesses of true faith and that our worship and our profession may never be occasions in which we take your name in vain. We ask this through Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.