

The Cost of Following Jesus

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Date: 08 January 2023

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[0 : 00] Our reading this evening is from Matthew chapter 19, verse 13 to 30, which is found on the Church Bible, page 986. Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them.

But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them. For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. Just then, a man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

Why do you ask me about what is good? Jesus replied, There is only one who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments. Which ones?

He inquired. Jesus replied, You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother and love your neighbor as yourself.

[1 : 08] All these I have kept, the young man said. What do I still lack? Jesus answered, If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.

Then come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to the disciples, Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to 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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, Who then can be saved?

Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Peter answered him, We have left everything to follow you.

What then will there be for us? Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

[2 : 24] And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. Well, good evening, and let me add my welcome to Darren's.

My name is Simon, I'm one of the training ministers here at St. Silas. Let me pray as we come to this passage together this evening. Father God, would you draw us near to hear you speak through your word.

Give us expectant hearts and changes as we see the Lord Jesus and his message with greater clarity. This we pray in his name. Amen. Well, it's probably the last time I can wish people a Happy New Year about people rolling their eyes.

So, Happy New Year. It's 2023. And as Darren mentioned, it is Back to Church Sunday here at St. Silas. It is an opportunity for us to get our bearings again with church and remind ourselves why it is that we meet together here on a Sunday.

[3 : 37] And I wonder if you would think of yourself as a churchy type of person. Are you a person for whom church going comes naturally? Or does this feel a bit foreign, even if you've been here for quite a while?

Maybe for some of you, you're asking that question as maybe this is your first time here with us. Now, I know a number of years ago when I had the privilege of working with the Christian unions, as Josh is currently working with, when we had events and invited people along, I'd often talk to people's non-Christian friends and ask them what they thought of church and of the Christian life.

And the jokey answer that came back so often was, Oh, I could never go into a church. I would just burst into flames on the way in. And it made me smile, but it was kind of giving something away. There was an assumption there that church is for the good people, the right people. Therefore, church is just not for me. There's a certain kind of person that gets to go into a church, and I'm not that person.

And it was amazing how many people thought that way. And so, an important question for us as we come into church and as we hear God speak through his word is, Who is it for?

[4 : 48] Who is church for? Or even bigger than that, who is Jesus' kingdom for? What makes someone welcome or rejected? What makes someone right for access to this kingdom?

And that question is hugely important to get right in our heads. And in the passage that Joanne read for us, it's something that Jesus addresses quite directly.

And he addresses it through the three people we meet in this passage. A humble child, an upstanding citizen, and a confused disciple. So we're going to look at those three people this evening.

And so, our passage starts off with people in a crowd around Jesus bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing. Now, that might seem a bit strange to us, but it's the first century.

And to bring a child to a Jewish teacher or rabbi for a prayer of blessing would have been a totally normal thing. And what should be a pleasant scene of children being blessed by Jesus is rudely interrupted by, of course, the disciples.

[5 : 53] Who else? But, verse 13 tells us that the disciples rebuked the people who brought their children. So imagine, a woman brings a baby and then a burly fisherman says, go away, you're not welcome.

I mean, it's kind of ridiculous, isn't it? Like, what worst thing could you do to this humble situation? Because in their eyes, coming to Jesus is an important thing.

There's no place to bring kids to him because they're not important. What a waste of this man's time. They already equate proximity to Jesus with status in some way.

And that's a thought that's going to run through this passage. But if we've been reading through the gospel, we might think, well, these disciples just have terrible short-term memory loss, don't they? If we were to go back to chapter 18, we would see that the disciples, in a big argument about who's the best between all of them, meet Jesus saying something completely different. So if you just flick back a page to chapter 18, verses 1 to 4, we find Matthew's written this.

[6 : 57] So who is the kingdom for?

Remember? The kingdom is for little children. Those who are weak with nothing to bring, nothing to impress. The lowly and humble nature of a child, Jesus says, is the right thing.

And the disciples are having a contest about greatness, and Jesus says, you're so, so far wrong. What you need is to be more like this child.

In fact, those who aren't like this child won't actually be welcome in the kingdom. And the disciples are so resistant to this idea that one chapter later, they're actually trying to keep the children away. And so Jesus reinforces this in chapter 19, verse 14. Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them. For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

[8 : 16] So our first answer, very simply to the question, who is the kingdom for? It's met with, the kingdom is for little children who have nothing to bring. Isn't that surprising?

The first people Jesus wants to bring forward here are those who have nothing to bring to him. No way to earn anything. And we might find ourselves asking, along with the disciples, well, why? What's so important or impressive about this child? What's so special about people who can do nothing for themselves? It's a really good question.

And it's one that's going to keep us moving through the rest of this passage. Seeing how these children compare to our second person, who is a religious, rich, young man.

So our second point. Jesus challenges the man who comes on his own terms. That's verse 16 to 24. Now, something that we're going to have to think through as we come to this next person in our passage is what we think someone who is living a blessed life looks like.

[9 : 24] Now, the kind of hashtag blessed thing all over, like, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, it's become not much past an ironic joke at this point. All the kind of hashtag blessed posts.

It's millionaires and celebrities with perfectly curated online presences, with pictures of their sun-drenched holidays, beautiful homes and cars and bodies, and strangely photogenic food, all

telling us that they are so hashtag blessed.

Let's face it. It's just a way to brag about how good your life is whilst trying to pass it off as humble. Like, it's the most ridiculous thing. But there is a kind of cultural half-belief behind that, isn't there? Something that says, well, if there is a God who blesses people, then these must be the blessed people, because they've got everything. They've got all the stuff that, you know, I want.

They've got the life that I wish I had. They go on a holiday that I wish I could go on, and therefore they must be the people that God really loves, because, well, they're wealthy and successful and great. The problem with that kind of thinking is just think about the exact opposite.

[10:28] Oh, God must hate the poor, then. Those people who have nothing, oh, God must be so against them. I mean, we can never think like that. It's just so horrendous, isn't it? And thankfully, we have a Bible full of God saying that he, in fact, loves the poor, so this just can't be the right picture.

So a good question is, well, what does God think about the rich? What does he think about the people who have been blessed with such material wealth and prosperity? And an answer to that question steps this man in our passage today.

We find out in verse 22 he's young, rich, and devoutly religious. One of the great and the good of Israel. He comes to Jesus and notices not stopped by the disciples.

And he asks Jesus the question, verse 16. Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life? And I wonder what you make of that question.

How do you hear it in your mind? In what way is this man in your head saying it? On the face value, it actually might sound like quite a good question. This man wants to do the right thing.

[11:40] He's asking the right person. And then the answer from Jesus just seems a bit enigmatic in verse 17. Why do you ask me what is good? Jesus replied.

There is only one who is good. So Jesus picks up this man's desire for what is good and asks, well, why are you asking me? And why has this man come to Jesus asking him as if he is the authority on what is good?

He clearly thinks that Jesus is more than just another rabbi of some form. But exactly what he thinks of Jesus isn't yet clear. But if you look closely at Jesus' second statement there, you'll see a capital letter that could look out of place.

Jesus replied, there is only one who is good. This isn't a claim that there is somewhere out there one godly person that we just need to find. This is a claim that there is the one good person.

God alone. The only one who is good and defines goodness itself. Maybe if this man stopped to think at this moment, he would have been able to see the implication that Jesus is giving.

[12:51] And what he's claiming to be here. But Jesus goes further than this, following on, if you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments. To which the man responds, which ones?

And again, if you just stop and think about that question, isn't it really, really weird? A faithful Jewish person who believes that they are a good law follower says, which commandments should I follow? Surely all of them is the answer that the entire Bible would tell you. Where do you start to think, oh, maybe there's ones that I don't have to keep? So what is this man looking for? Well, Jesus continues in verse 18.

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. And love your neighbor as yourself. So Jesus picks five of the Ten Commandments.

And then the second of the two greatest commandments. And noticeably, these are all things that are externally visible. These are all things that someone could look at your track record and say, yeah, you have done those things.

[14:02] And he says to this man who, in these things especially, is obedient and faithful, that he has to keep these. And so the man naturally replies, all these I have kept, what do I still lack?

And again, as we're following this man through the story, I think it's really hard to pin down what's going on in his head. Because all these I have kept, what do I still lack?

Isn't that strange? A kind of, all these I have kept, I'm doing really well. What do I lack? I'm still not sure I'm getting it right. There's something unsure about this man.

He thinks that his record is good, but he's not sure he's actually got the right answer. There's a self-assurance, a self-confidence, and a pride on one hand, but a doubt and a fear, and something missing on the other.

And he's right. Something is missing. And Jesus in verse 21 brings this out. Jesus answered, if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

[15:08] Then come, follow me. And you can almost imagine this man and the disciples all immediately going very quiet indeed. Jesus' answer pushes this man's thinking to its logical conclusion.

How good do you think you need to be? Well, as good as the one who the law has come from. In fact, you need to be perfect. If he's seeking to earn eternal life from God, then he would, in fact, have to be perfect.

And so the big hurdle this man faces isn't some extra work he's missing. Jesus isn't saying, actually, this one extra thing is the thing you need to do, and then you'll get what you're looking for. What's really being challenged here is the basic loyalty of his heart.

Because in verse 22, Jesus tells us, what Matthew tells us, when the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth. And immediately we see this man's heart is on display, it's exposed.

He wants to do things for God. He wants to earn his place. But when confronted with the cost of his wealth, he falters. Jesus knows that for all this man's goodness, his obedience and his actions, he's actually breaking the first command.

[16:28] That very prime command, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. He's breaking it because he worries that, actually, that would take him away from his wealth.

His heart is split. He wants to follow God, but he really wants to hold on to his money. And so he walks away sad. He doesn't get around to Jesus' invitation to follow him because he's blinded by what it would cost him.

His greatest blessing is also his greatest obstacle. And Jesus confirms this in what he says in verses 23 and 24. You can follow along.

Jesus said to his disciples, truly, I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

How hard is it for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Impossible. Jesus takes the largest animal anyone knows in Israel and the smallest gap he can think of and he says, put one through the other and it's still harder than that.

[17:39] For this man, it looks like he had everything right. He was an obedient law keeper with status and riches and even youth. And he's living a life full of blessing, but actually the whole thing was keeping him from God.

To be told to give everything away for the sake of heavenly treasure, comes as a sharp stick to a tender heart. He isn't so close to the kingdom as he thinks. And so let me ask, as we look through this passage, where do you think he went wrong?

At what point in this conversation do you think that he started wandering off into the wrong path?

Well, I think the answer is all the way back in verse 16 when he says, teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

How can I earn it? Well, I must be able to because I'm pretty good. I've done this whole law thing really well. I've got to be able to get this from God. In fact, if I do all the right things, then he'll owe me.

Doing, doing, getting. For all his goodness, this man really believes his place in the kingdom of God can be earned.

[18:53] That he can acquire it for himself. And everything else he says in this story has merely confirmed that. And it ends up in him walking away from Jesus. Now, there's some big questions here about the cost of following Jesus.

And we'll come back to that question about the cost that we pay in following Jesus in our final point about the disciples. But for now, I want to just focus on how this man's riches and good deeds have become an obstacle to him entering the kingdom.

And I think, if we were really thinking rightly, verses 23 and 24 would probably panic us a little bit.

Because here in the modern West, we are, in comparison to most people in all of history and almost all of the world right now, comparatively very rich.

And it seems from Jesus that a hashtag blessed life might actually be cursed. Because it distracts us away from following Jesus and divides our loyalty to him.

We are people who've been blessed with much and this passage says that our riches, our comforts, our stuff, and our status may well be the thing that keeps us from him. This cuts completely against the grain of our society and our culture that so keenly values wealth and independence and success.

[20 : 17] This tells us that actually the poor are more likely to come to Jesus like little children with nothing. Because they have nothing to bring. This passage is a serious warning to all readers of the dangers and deceitfulness of wealth.

And hear this loud and clear. Your stuff and your status may well be the biggest obstacle to you following Jesus. Do you believe that?

Or do you kind of just think you can have both? Because this passage really pushes against our feeling that actually maybe I can have it all at once. I can have the Lord and have my Christian faith and it not cost me anything.

I can keep all the rest of my stuff and this passage says that cannot happen. Now, if you're finding yourself maybe a little bit panicked by that, then we have some good praying to do at the end of this sermon in response to this story.

But we actually find ourselves in good company with, again unsurprisingly, the disciples. And so we move on to our third and final point. Jesus comforts the anxious disciples.

[21 : 31] And so we pick up the story in verse 25. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, who then can be saved? Kind of the right question, isn't it? The disciples are clearly as impressed with this guy as they were unimpressed by the children.

They think that a man this holy and this blessed and this wealthy must just be a shoo-in for the kingdom. Yet they watch him talk to Jesus and wander away sad. And the disciples' worldview is just torn open by this episode.

they've been equating wealth and blessing with God's favor. They think God must really love you if you're an important person of status. That's why when the children come they just think not important, go away.

They think when they look at this guy wandering away from Jesus, if he can't make it into the kingdom, what hope is there for any of the rest of us? And so Jesus says to that in verse 26, with man this is impossible.

But with God all things are possible. Very simply, a man under his own effort can't make his way into the kingdom. There's not some sense in which a human being can climb a mountain to God and under our own steam make it there.

[22 : 49] There's nothing a person can do, nothing to earn, no way to him on our own effort. Without the grace of God, salvation is fully impossible.

Neither the wealthy nor the poor would be saved. Because obedience is in fact just the right response to living in God's world under God's rule. It doesn't actually earn you anything.

And nobody will ever be able to access the kingdom on their own terms. But instead, God invited people to access the kingdom by receiving it like little children.

Coming with nothing except trust in Jesus. The gospel here is that without the grace of God no one can be saved. But with the grace of God even a rich man can be saved.

But their wealth might still be the obstacle prevents them ever coming to him. It is absolutely possible to be rich and godly but it is extremely rare and very hard to do.

[23 : 58] And when Jesus tells this man to sell all he has and give it to the poor he isn't giving another work to enter the kingdom of God. He's pointing out how divided the man's heart is by his riches. But to this Peter in a panic just blurts out in verse 27 we have left everything to follow you what then will there be for us?

And you kind of sit there and think oh good Peter's here. It's really encouraging for me thinking that if I was there I would be the dumb one asking the dumb questions but I wouldn't have enough courage to say it. Peter just plows through and says it.

It's always very helpful but he's asking is it worth it? Have I given up these things for the right reasons? Will there be a reward for following Jesus?

Have I made the right decision? Should I just go back to my nets and give up on this? Yet in response to this anxious question from Peter his worry his confusion a question that's almost

inappropriate given what's just happened Jesus comforts the disciples with what he says in verses 28 to 30 they will be rewarded.

They have already chosen to follow Jesus. They have left their lives behind to follow him so they are on the right path. They will receive the kingdom but their access to the kingdom just isn't a reward for moral effort.

[25 : 22] It's a gift of grace that they receive by following Jesus. And so Jesus points them to the future after his coming death, resurrection and ascension there will be a day when Jesus' kingdom comes in full when he sits on the throne when the world is renewed and he rules and he says in verse 28 that on that day these disciples who followed him will rule alongside him.

Tell me from your point of view what in life could you do that would be good enough that you would get to rule over heaven with Jesus? And if the answer is anything then you're a total fool because it's ridiculous isn't it?

I was thinking that we actually should turn up to God and say you owe me ruling over this place with you. Like what could you do? Now that's something that's given as a gift.

That unbelievable incalculable blessing is given to these disciples because they follow Jesus not because they have done something worthy of it. As we follow along in verse 29 everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

You can't buy an inheritance you can't earn an inheritance you're just given an inheritance. What people give up to follow Jesus whatever it is will always be worth the reward that they receive in his kingdom.

[26 : 59] These disciples have made the right choice in giving up their livelihoods their jobs their families to follow Jesus and that kind of renders the comparison of costs from one disciple to another a bit irrelevant.

The point is that they're all following and this will all come because God is gracious and it will just defy human expectations and Jesus just tells us that in verse 30 but many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.

Our expectations of the kingdom are going to be wrong. They are not what the world expects them to be and so as we come back to our very first question who is the kingdom for?

Well we're told that the kingdom is for those who follow Jesus moral effort and earthly blessing will never have anything to do with that. We aren't told what happened to the rich young man in this passage but he's young so maybe later on in life he figures out that he's completely mucked it up and comes back around and says help please can I follow you?

But we don't know. If he was in his right mind he might start to think that all this earthly wealth that he has that is so transitory well it's definitely worth losing to follow Jesus and have all that heavenly treasure and just think he could give away all of his wealth to the poor which would be a blessing for him and a blessing to the poor and he would inherit eternal life.

[28 : 30] If he was doing the spiritual maths well he would have just followed immediately. It's absolutely worth the cost. We come back to that real truth that wealth is dangerous seriously dangerous and seriously likely to keep us from following Jesus.

For some of us like the disciples it can be a huge hurdle to really believe that Jesus is not the rewarder of moral superheroes. That's not what he's about. There will be a reward in heaven for following Jesus but it will not be something that we have earned.

That remade world and all of its privileges are only ever going to be gifts of grace from a kind and compassionate God that we don't even a bit deserve and they are only found in following Christ. In the end God wants our hearts and ourselves not our stuff. Obedience has to follow what we believe. It has to be that way round. But it will cost us to follow Jesus.

In fact it will cost us everything. The hymn When I Survey puts it really well I think when it ends with the words love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all.

[29 : 49] It will cost you everything to follow Jesus but you will get infinitely more in his coming kingdom in an eternity. For every single one of us it will mean the cost of our loyalty to this world, to this life, to our pride, and to our wealth.

it's going to cost us that. It has to. Because a divided heart that says I'm going to hold wealth and God together and try and do both at the same time is just following wealth. But the specifics for each person are going to be different.

For some like this man it means the cost of your material wealth. For some of us that will be the case. For some people it might be the cost of relationships. whether those be having to walk away from a family that doesn't believe and reject you or for some people necessarily meaning staying single for a whole life for the sake of following Jesus.

For some it will be losing status, losing a job, losing prospects, losing out on popularity and respect, being shunned and rejected by a community or a workplace or even friends that you love.

the point is friends that whatever the cost is and there is a cost for all of us it is absolutely worth paying for what we receive in Christ.

[31 : 14] We must avoid the trap then of comparing that cost to someone else's. What it costs you is between you and the Lord. It's not wise to go and start comparing it to the person next to you or a close friend.

That is not going to help. No man under his own effort will ever make it into the kingdom yet with God's help even little children with nothing to bring are welcome and confused disciples who've given up everything do you know what they're welcome to.

And so finally we can be sure of this and the truth of Jesus offer only by looking to him. We know that the cost is worth paying because the gospel shows that the ultimate cost has already been paid for us.

The cost of our forgiveness of our salvation was Jesus' life itself but he paid it gladly and willingly out of obedience to the father that we might live.

The price that we cannot afford is paid freely by Jesus and whatever we give up in comparison completely pales in response to the grace that we receive in him.

[32 : 26] the kingdom is open to all that is open to you. If you don't know Jesus come and follow him. Don't let good deeds or riches or anything else distract you from him.

Come with nothing. Receive the kingdom like a child and walk with him every day until he welcomes you home into his kingdom. And with that in mind let's pray. Father God thank you that in Christ you welcome us into your kingdom.

Father some of us will have serious repenting to do when we consider how distracted we are by the things of this world by our own record by our own wealth. But Father give us eyes to see the things that we need to give up but also eyes to see your grace and your goodness displayed in Christ that we may follow you.

Thank you that you have prepared a day when we will live and reign with you in the new creation.

Keep us faithful to that day enjoying the gospel and being sure of your saving grace in Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.