

All or nothing

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[0 : 00] So Luke chapter 18, verse 9 and following. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

[1 : 14] Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. A certain ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder.

You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, You still lack one thing.

Sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. When he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy.

Jesus looked at him and said, How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, 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.

[2 : 21] Those who heard this asked, Who then can be saved? And Jesus replied, What is impossible with man is possible with God. Peter said to him, We have left all we have to follow you.

Truly I tell you, Jesus said to them, No one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

Do take your seats. And if you've lost your place, we're in Luke chapter 18. Do have those verses open in front of you if you're able to. There are in life often situations where half measures are no good.

Where it simply will not do to be half-hearted about a commitment to something. You have to be all in if you're going to get anywhere. Nobody expects to go and be a serious contender at the Olympics without having dedicated their whole life up to that point to that specific goal.

You cannot hold anything back if you want to succeed in that scenario. And the question this morning is, Are you going to give that level of commitment to following Jesus?

[3 : 41] Will you dedicate yourself to the kingdom of God with that kind of level of commitment? Because when Jesus speaks to this young ruler, verse 18 and following, when he speaks to his disciples afterwards, that is the kind of commitment that Jesus says he's expecting.

Absolutely, totally all-consuming. That's what God demands. That's what God deserves, isn't it? And if you're not willing to commit at that level, well then you're nowhere at all.

You might as well not bother showing up. Maybe that sounds a little bit blunt, a little bit brutal. Bear with me. We're going to dig into the details of this passage and see if we can figure out a bit more of what's going on as Jesus says these things and ask ourselves, Is it worth it?

If that is what it takes, will I take this plunge or not? Will I give that level of commitment? Here's the situation.

Jesus is still on his journey to Jerusalem and he's approached, verse 18, by this man who Luke describes as a certain ruler. Unsurprisingly for someone who's a ruler, we learn, verse 23, that he was very wealthy.

[5 : 00] So he's often known as the rich young ruler. And this man comes with a laudable goal, doesn't he? He comes saying he wants to inherit eternal life and he believes Jesus might well have answers for him.

So far, so good. He addresses Jesus as good teacher and this is where things get slightly trickier, isn't it? Jesus answers by asking, Why do you call me good?

No one is good except God alone. Now, as you might imagine, skeptical commentators seize on the opportunity here to put distance between Jesus and God to say, Aha!

Jesus denies that he is God. But Jesus doesn't do any such thing, does he? Actually, Jesus invites this ruler to reflect on what he's really saying.

If he calls Jesus good, what does that imply? Well, it implies Jesus' divinity. And that, of course, has implications for Jesus' ability to make demands of this man.

[6 : 09] I mean, it's true, isn't it? No one is good except God alone. Romans 3.23, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It's true. No one is good.

It's true, but we're apt to forget it, aren't we? We tend to compare ourselves to others instead of to God's absolute holiness.

We tend to think of ourselves, most of us, I think, we tend to think of ourselves as good people because we think goodness is a relative term. And I suppose by most standards that most people use, most of you listening to me today, most of you are probably pretty good people.

But the thing is, God doesn't grade on a curve. God doesn't say, okay, I'll choose the best 40%, however good they actually are. I'll have the 40% that are better than the rest.

No, God doesn't kind of sit there adjusting the boundaries to get the right percentages of A's and B's and F's, and good thing too, after last year's debacle. Except I say it's a good thing God doesn't grade on a curve, but it's not, is it?

[7 : 20] It's not really a good thing at all because the pass mark in God's exam is 100%, isn't it? Absolute perfection.

That's what it is to be good. Nothing else could possibly suffice because God is perfect. God is absolutely holy. And so Jesus says to the ruler, verse 20, you know the commandments.

You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. In other words, you already know what God expects of you. You know the law of Moses.

Why are you asking me what you already know? God has made his expectations perfectly plain. You want to inherit eternal life? Keep the commandments.

And I think there's a slight note of impatience in this ruler's response. All these I've kept since I was a boy, he says. Yes, I know all that. I know the commandments, but I can't be all. I know there's something missing.

[8 : 22] I know there's something more. Well, clearly he hasn't really understood, has he? He hasn't actually taken on board this reality that no one is good except God alone.

He believes he's kept the commandments. He hasn't even reflected on the most straightforward sense of what Jesus says here. No one is good but God alone.

Clear implication. This man is not good. If that's true, he can't be correct that he's kept all these commandments, and nor, of course, have you or I.

In some senses, at least, he might be correct in what he says. He may well not have slept with another man's wife. He may well not have killed anyone in cold blood.

But it can only be true that he's kept these commandments on a kind of minimal understanding of these commandments. Certainly can't take into account the fuller interpretation that Jesus proposed, where the attitudes behind murder stand condemned alongside the physical deed.

[9 : 27] And the command not to commit adultery, that can be broken entirely within one's own mind, says Jesus. He clearly doesn't understand this kind of fuller sense, does he? Of course, the idea that he's wholeheartedly honored his father and mother since he was a boy seems rather far-fetched at best.

Folks, if you want to think through some of that further, you might benefit from a read-through of the Westminster Larger Catechism. Okay, it's not the most readable of documents, for want of a better phrase, but questions 100 through 149, they unpick these ideas and help us to think through, well, what are we really saying when we say, you shall not murder?

What does that actually imply more fully for you and for me? So, for instance, the seventh commandment, the Westminster Catechism helps us to see the seventh commandment not only forbids adultery in a minimal sense, but when understood in the light of the whole of Scripture, also commends modesty in apparel and forbids wanton looks.

Just to take a couple of examples. It's worth a read-through. It's very easy to find online. But Jesus' response to this claim that this man has kept all these commandments, his response to the claim is not to say, oh, no, you haven't.

Jesus knows what's inside this man's heart, and so Jesus can be specific. Jesus moves from the law, from the commandments in general, to the specific, to say to this man in verse 22, one thing he still lacks.

[11:05] When Jesus heard this, he said to him, you still lack one thing, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. See, verse 23 makes it very clear.

Jesus knows the heart of the problem. The problem in this man's heart. Because when he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy.

Now, when Jesus says, this is what you lack, what's he doing here? Is he saying, okay, you've kept the law, great, here's another thing to do on top of that. Is he saying, here's a task to do for you to be worthy of salvation.

Is he prescribing a universal command? Or is he somehow expecting something of this man that he doesn't expect of everyone? Well, I don't think it's a new command.

I think that this is a general implication of the law as it stands, applied specifically to this man in this situation. See, God's law doesn't command that everybody sell everything and give it to the poor.

[12:16] You can breathe a sigh of relief. But the law, seen holistically, seen in a fully orb'd sense, the law clearly does intend to bring us to a point of self-denial, doesn't it?

Not just in the command against stealing, but in the number of times that God's people are commanded to care for the widow and the orphan and the refugee. And so as Calvin puts it, Christ therefore does not mean that the young man wanted one thing beyond the keeping of the law, but one thing in the keeping of the law.

Here is a point on which he has clearly failed to obey the law. This isn't something extra, but at least for this man, this is what was already expected by the commandments that he knew.

How do we know that? Well, his response. When commanded to sell all, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. And in that response, in his sadness, he shows us that covetousness reigns in his heart, doesn't he?

His problem isn't that he has great riches per se. The problem is the great riches have him. They have a hold on his heart that he will not give them up.

[13:37] You can tell, can't you, how precious something is by your response when you're asked to give up that thing. And in this case, in this case, this rich young man shows that the money, the possessions, are more precious to him than Christ is, more precious to him than this offer of eternal life.

He's more devoted to his wealth than he is to his God. Certainly here he doesn't demonstrate the implicit trust that we were talking last week about being central to this call to receive the kingdom of God like a little child.

There's no trust here, is there? This man's interested in eternal life. He wants to approach God, but he's not completely sold.

He's not all in. And that doesn't cut it. The God who said, you shall have no gods before me, is not interested at all in playing second fiddle to this man's riches.

The rich young ruler does not truly treasure God's kingdom. See, if he saw the infinite worth of a relationship with God, if he properly understood what he was missing out on by making this decision, if he really understood, then surely all of his riches would be a price well worth paying.

[15:08] For this man. For him, his wealth has first place in his heart. And in his covetousness, he breaks God's law.

And so the question then is, what is it for you? If Jesus were to stand in front of you and to say one thing you lack, what would that thing be?

Maybe, maybe like the Pharisee, verses 9 to 14, maybe you're congratulating yourself on the sins that you do not commit. Maybe like this young man, you're focused on the commandments that you have kept.

Maybe like this ruler, you're coming to Jesus interested in eternal life. Maybe like the disciples, verse 28, you think you've given up much, even given up all you have to follow Jesus. There might be many positives in your life to which you can point.

Many good things that are commendable. There might be many reasons why you and others might say that you are good. And yet, for all those good things, what is the one thing you lack?

[16:25] J.C. Ryle, he warns us, many are ready to give up everything for Christ's sake, except one darling sin. And for the sake of that sin, are lost forevermore.

See, if you're willing to surrender to Christ on every count save one, then that one thing is more precious to you than his.

If you will surrender everything except, then you're nowhere. Total commitment, or there's no point. So what is the one thing that you lack? Most of us, I suspect, I suspect are clinging to at least one of the big three of our age.

Maybe the big three of every age. Money, sex, and power. Jesus keeps on talking about money, doesn't he? Why? Well, because it has such a powerful hold on so many of us.

[17:31] Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So how many of us tell ourselves that we are generous people, but the actual proportion of our income that we give away is tiny?

How many of us believe that we're not covetous, and yet spend hours browsing homes that we could never afford, and holidays will never go on, and cars will never drive? Money might have a hold on your heart, and that might be true whether you have lots of money or very little.

How many of us claim to be sold out for Jesus, and yet the way we use what we have shows otherwise? How many of us are devoted to money such that we work and work and work at a job that, if we're honest, we know takes us away from our families more than it should?

Or dare I ask, how many families both parents work, not because it is truly the best use of their time and energies in glorifying God, but because they will not give up what their second income provides.

It's certainly not a universal ill for both parents to work. The question is, what's the motivation for doing it? The question is, what hold do riches have on your heart?

[18:51] See, we reassure ourselves, don't we? We say the command to this rich young ruler is not a universal command, and true enough, it's not. But if it was the heart issue for that man, of the 40-some people sat in the front of me, and of the however many listening to me in your homes, well, isn't it reasonable to think that it might have a hold on one or two of your hearts?

One or two of our hearts, I should say. What is the one thing you lack? Money? I don't mean lack money.

What is the one thing you lack that you are devoted to money? University Christian Unions. It's not that many years ago before I was more familiar with them.

University Christian Unions are full of young women saying, I love Jesus, but I love my boyfriend too. And I'm going to ignore that command not to be yoked to an unbeliever, because it's not very convenient.

One thing you lack. Or saying, I love Jesus, but I love my boyfriend too, and I'm scared he'll leave me if I stop sleeping with him. And to be honest, I quite like it too. In that situation, is the relationship, the experience, not more precious to you than obedience to God's commands?

[20:13] It's common in Christian Unions and hardly the only place where this kind of attitude pertains is it. So you ask yourself, who is more precious to you? Who is more precious?

The God whose commands are intended to offer life to the full? Or the girlfriend, boyfriend, partner, who is actually pulling you away from God?

Whether that's because they don't believe in him at all or because they say they do, and yet are complicit in disobedience to his commands. Mark tells us, King Herod liked to listen to John the Baptist.

And John said to him, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife, and Herod would not give her up and his soul was lost. What is the one thing you lack?

Or how do you use the power that you possess? Do you use that power to accumulate more? Or do you use it for the good of those over whom you have power?

[21 : 22] Maybe you don't think you have much power. But you almost certainly have more than you think. Many the home is dominated by the petty tyrant so frustrated by his lack of power elsewhere that he exercises dictatorial control in the one place that he can.

Many a manager chooses not to empower his employees but to belittle and to demean. Or where do you resent your lack of power? Reinhold Niebuhr, he reckoned all humans struggle with a sense of being dependent and powerless.

We hate to feel powerless with the original temptation in the Garden of Eden to resent the limits that God put on us. God says, don't eat from the tree and suddenly that is the one thing you want to do. And that's our nature, isn't it? To resent our limits. To refuse to accept our finite nature. We do not like the reality of our dependence on God.

Again, that dependence as we're commanded to receive the kingdom of God like little children. We do not like this dependence. We have this will to power. We have this desire to dominate.

[22 : 40] To cling to power in whatever form. Some of us, we cling to power by refusing to forgive. You can keep control in a relationship, can't you? By never letting something go.

By never moving on. By holding that wrong that was done to you against the other person. Or you can hold on to power by refusing to admit your own sin.

Because you're so focused on their sin. So how are you clinging to power? Where are you refusing to permit God to be in control? To have the authority? What is the one thing that you will not surrender?

The one thing you lack. Jesus exposes this rich young man's idolatry. Jesus shows him what had first place in his life.

So what idolatry is he exposing in our hearts today? Under the heading How to Make a God, Tim Keller writes the following.

[23 : 42] It's long but helpful. He asks, what's an idol? An idol is anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God.

Anything that you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit God is anything that is so central, so essential to your life that if you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.

An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion, your energy, your emotional, your financial resources, you can spend most of those things on it without a second thought.

Of course it's worth it. It can be family, children, career, making money, achievement, critical acclaim, or saving face and social standing.

It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skills, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, even success in the Christian ministry.

[24 : 50] When your meaning in life is to fix someone else's life, we might call it codependency, but it's really idolatry. An idol is whatever you look at and you say in your heart of hearts, if I have that, my life has meaning.

Then I'll know I have value. Then I'll feel significant and secure. There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to anything.

Perhaps the best way to describe that relationship is worship. So what is it that you are worshipping? Examine yourselves.

What is the one thing that Jesus says you lack? And when you examine yourself and when Jesus shows you your heart, when he does that, do not follow in this man's footsteps.

He went away sad because he was very wealthy. But that very sadness was a gift. that Jesus exposed his heart to him. And if he'd had eyes to see, he could have followed Jesus.

[26 : 11] He could have cast off that which encumbered him and he could have followed the master. So when you are sad because you see what is precious in your heart, well, don't turn away, but press on.

How do we do that then? Let's turn briefly to the last few verses of our reading. Jesus looked at him and said, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Indeed, 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. Those who heard this asked, who then can be saved? Jesus replied,

what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Peter said to him, we've left all we had to follow you. Truly I tell you, Jesus said to them, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

Now, notice first the breadth of Jesus' warning. How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Again, don't be too quick to think that your riches, that your money is not a barrier to you.

[27 : 32] But, but why is the disciples' response so despairing? I mean, surely they know they are not among the rich. they don't possess great wealth.

They have, in large measure, already given up the wealth that they did have. So why so despairing? Well, because their assumption is that riches are a mark of God's blessing.

This is the prevailing attitude of the Old Testament people of God. And so the thinking goes, if even those who enjoy God's blessing can't be saved, then what hope is there for anyone?

what hope for the rest of us if even those who are well off can't enter into the kingdom? And well for us that that is their attitude because it provokes the precious balm of verse 27.

What is impossible with man is possible with God. Say it to yourself again, what is impossible with man is possible with God.

[28 : 38] what human beings cannot accomplish, God is yet able. My friends, you and I cannot rid ourselves of our sin. We cannot muster the power to escape its clutches.

We cannot renew our hearts such that we desire to do good. We cannot do it. It is impossible for us. So if you are all too conscious of the idols of your heart that have been exposed this morning then do not despair and don't think that you need to go and find within yourself the will and the power to divest yourself of these things because that which is impossible for you is possible for God.

God can break the hold of riches on your heart. God can break the pattern of covetousness that consumes you. God can increase your love of him so that neither sex nor the emotional attachment of a sinful relationship retain their power.

God can show you again and again your dependence on him such that you will realize it more and more. He can soften your heart such that the effect of that softening is that you know your need of him rather than that you rebel and cling to power.

He can show you how much you have been forgiven and equip you to forgive others. He can do it and more than that he will do it.

[30 : 14] Come to him in penitence. Come to him willing to surrender. Come to him saying Lord I believe help my unbelief. Come to him asking that he take away your love of sinning.

Come to him like little children. Come to him trusting not in your supposed goodness but in his alone. come to your savior.

Come to him and whatever you might be called to surrender you will not fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

My friends the infinite worth of your savior is so far greater than any earthly price. let's pray.

Lord Jesus show us your infinite worth we pray. Show us that you are worth any price and show us what price you want us to pay.

[31 : 28] show us what has a hold on our hearts today Lord. What is the thing that we lack?

What occupies the place that you deserve? Lord help us. We are finite.

We cannot do it. We cannot even understand ourselves. Show us yourself. Show us ourselves and give us the power as you work in us that we might be transformed for your glory and for our good.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.