

The Question of Life

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[0 : 00] Verse 13 to 30. All right, today's Bible reading is Matthew chapter 19, starting from verse 13.

As Matt said earlier, this is contrasting of two groups of people. One, the children, and the other one, the rich young man.

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

And he laid his hands on them and went away. And behold, a man came up to him, saying, Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

And 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.

[1 : 18] And he 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.

Honor your father and mother. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All this I have kept.

What do I still lack? Jesus said to him, If you would be perfect, go. Sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

And come, follow me. And when the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, Only with difficulty will the 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 the rich person to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved?

[2 : 30] But Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter said in reply, See, we have left everything and follow you.

What then will we have? Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, In the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and the last first. Who has braved the weather to be here?

Although now it's holding off, so that's good. Okay, we're looking at that passage from Matthew chapter 19, verse 13 to 30. Who will enter the kingdom of heaven?

[3 : 55] Christianity must be able to say more than that, but it must never, come what may, say less than that. Are we may rightly expect the Bible and Christianity to address all sorts of issues, important issues, to answer our fundamental philosophical questions about life?

Why do we exist? What's the nature of reality? What does it mean to be human? How should we live? We should expect the Bible to answer our theological questions. Who is God? What's God like?

How can we know him? We should expect the Bible to answer our ethical and moral questions.

What is good? What is evil? Why are some things good? Why are some things evil? How should we live?

We should expect the Bible to address pressing social issues of our day. The Bible has much to say on many topics, but it must also prepare us for the future.

It must also prepare us for death and for life after death. Because if there truly is an eternity, as Jesus taught, as the apostles taught, if there truly is an eternity, where we spend eternity is the most important question in life.

[5 : 11] I mean, even the obvious comparison of the relative scale of each proves that to be the case. What have we here? 70, 80, 90, swiftly passing years.

What have we then? Days without end. The world, the population of our world is ageing. The number of people over the age of 65 has tripled since 1950.

It will triple again. Now 6% of the world's population are in that age bracket by, apparently, by 2100, if the Lord hasn't returned by then. How will we say that?

2100? I don't know. But by 2100, 20% of the world's population will be 65 and over. We have an ageing population in Australia, in the world.

Most of us expect to live longer than generations past did. And so, policies around retirement age and superannuation and aged care and housing, all these policies matter.

[6 : 16] But all of us, 100% of us, face a far more important future, don't we?

This present life, whether God grants each of us 50 years or 100 years, this present life is not the stage, it's the dressing room.

How do we prepare for what comes next? Who will enter the kingdom of heaven? That's the question Jesus answers in this Bible passage.

In fact, throughout this passage, the reading we had, there are different phrases, but they're all describing the same reality. This comes up again and again, verse 14, to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

Verse 16, have eternal life. Verse 17, enter life. Verse 21, have treasure in heaven. Verse 23, enter the kingdom of heaven. Verse 24, enter the kingdom of God. Verse 25, be saved.

[7 : 18] Verse 29, inherit eternal life. They're all talking about the same thing. The future, the world, the age to come, the future kingdom. Life beyond death, or, as N.T. Wright put it, life after life after death.

The assumption of this passage is that some, but not all, will enter the kingdom of heaven.

How can each of us ensure that we don't miss out? Well, in context, in this section of Matthew, Jesus is teaching on a range of different topics, and everything Jesus says is surprising.

So, last week, Jesus, we saw it, Jesus taught about marriage and the disciples said, well, if that's the case, it's better not to marry. Here, Jesus teaches about children, he teaches about wealth, he teaches about children and the disciples and Jesus are on completely different wavelengths.

He teaches about wealth and the disciples are greatly astonished by Jesus' words. He teaches about his own suffering and the disciples start arguing amongst themselves about who's the greatest.

[8 : 37] Everything Jesus teaches on, the disciples are just not getting it. He keeps confounding their expectations. So it is with Jesus' teaching about who will enter the kingdom of heaven.

I think it's important for us that familiarity with the gospel, for those who are familiar with Matthew, with the New Testament, with this passage, that familiarity doesn't lead us to complacency. If we don't find this section of God's word challenging, maybe we're not listening properly.

So let's have a listen. Who will enter the kingdom of heaven? The passage breaks down into three sections. Verse 13 to 15, a positive example. Verse 16 to 22, a negative example.

And then verse 23 to 30, the lesson for the disciples. So first, the positive example, children in verse 13, chapter 19, verse 13 to 15. Verse 13. Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray.

The disciples rebuked the people. Now, who brought the little children? Perhaps it was parents or grandparents, the text doesn't say, only that they were brought to Jesus.

[9 : 48] They don't even come to Jesus on their own strength, but they're brought. And they come so that Jesus might pray for them, that Jesus might make intercession, petition on their behalf, that Jesus might plead their case before the throne of heaven.

It's good that we intercede for one another, pray for each other. How much more that Jesus himself intercedes for us.

So the children are brought for this purpose, but the disciples are put out by this. They rebuke those who are bringing the children to them, to Jesus.

You know, Jesus, he's an important guy. He's busy. He's got a lot, there's a lot going on for Jesus. You know, he's under constant pressure.

Crowds of people are seeking Jesus all the time. There are sick people in need of healing. There are those afflicted with evil spirits in need of deliverance. There are crowds to teach and instruct.

[10:56] There are opponents and enemies to evade or to answer. There's a lot going on for Jesus. He's got more important things to do than tend to infants.

In the disciples' minds, there's a scale of importance, a scale of significance. And Jesus is, you know, he's right up there and little children, well, they're somewhere towards the bottom.

Take them away. Don't waste Jesus' time. But Jesus doesn't share that opinion. Verse 14, but Jesus said, let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

And he laid his hands on them and went away. Now, two things to observe here. First, notice that Jesus took the time to care for those particular children, the ones who were brought to him.

He wasn't irritated. He wasn't irritated. He wasn't too busy. Those particular children mattered to him. He placed his hands on them.

[12:19] He prayed a blessing over them. He cared for those ones, those little ones. Preparing this talk, it was hard for me not to feel a bit rebuked for how I often treat my children, how many times my children come to me and I will say, go away, I'm too busy.

But Jesus didn't say that. Second thing to notice is Jesus used those children as an object lesson for his disciples.

He said to his disciples, to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. Now, what is it about children that makes them an example of those who receive the kingdom of heaven?

God's kingdom. Is it their innocence when we think about children? That's one of the categories we often think in. Children are innocent. Are they?

The Bible doesn't think so. The Bible teaches that we're sinful from birth. Admittedly, children sin with less guile and less deviousness than adults, most of them anyway, but they're not innocent.

[13:42] And more than that, if the quality of children that's needed to enter the kingdom of heaven is innocence, well, that's all well and good, but what comfort is that to me?

Because I'm certainly not innocent. I'm going to return to that thought after we consider the negative example, the rich young man. We've had the positive example here, children, we'll come back to them.

Let's consider the rich young man, although we're only told he's rich and we're only told he's young in verse 22. First he's just a man. Verse 16, And behold, a man came up to Jesus, saying, Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

This man coming to Jesus is earnest, little children were brought to Jesus, this man comes on his own initiative, he seeks Jesus out. He asks what seems to be a good question, he cares about eternity, he's asking about eternal life, he recognises Jesus as a teacher with the wisdom and authority to answer his question, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

Verse 17, And Jesus said to him, Why do you ask me about what is good? There's only one who's good.

[15:17] If you would enter life, keep the commandments. Now there are two parts of Jesus' reply, the two halves of this verse, first Jesus questions the man's assumptions.

Why do you ask me about what is good? There's only one who's good, Jesus says. That second sentence there, there is only one who is good, may deliberately echo one of the most famous verses from the law, the Shema, Deuteronomy 6 verse 4, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

There is one God, the Lord is one, there is one who is good, Jesus says. So Jesus challenges this man, what kind of scale of goodness are you operating with?

When you ask me, what good thing must I do that I may have eternal life? What's your scale of goodness? What's your standard of goodness?

I had a conversation with a university student this week, someone who's kind of searching out Christianity and not yet a believer but he's investigating and considering Jesus and this student pointed out that he's done a bit of travelling, he pointed out that in his experience of travel and meeting lots of different people around the world, he found that 90 or even 99% of people are good, he said.

[16 : 51] No, decent people, they're not going to mug you, they're not going to rob you, if you ask for help, they'll give it. When Jacinta was one, as a little escape artist she slipped out of her house and ran down the street towards a major road and some uni students stopped her at the end of the street and picked her up and looked after her till we came.

They didn't leave her to walk into traffic, they didn't abduct her. Decent people. I think of my son Connor's soccer coach, Nick, he's a PE teacher and yet after he's been teaching probably ratty high school kids all day, he'll then come and run soccer training for you.

He ran it this week on Wednesday even though it was raining a bit. He knew the boys would want to get out for a run so he said, let's do it. He's patient with them, he's fair, he's kind, he values every child in the team irrespective of their ability at playing, he sees that everyone has a go, he gives up his time, he expects!

nothing in return, decent person. I mean, not everyone who crashes into your car when it's parked on the side of the road is going to drive off without leaving a note.

Some people are honest, lots of people are honest. Not everyone who finds your lost wallet is going to steal the cash and then try to use your credit card. What is our standard of, I mean, aren't lots of people good?

[18 : 44] But when Jesus says there's only one who is good, he's challenging our perception. He's challenging our scale.

What's our yardstick? What's our standard of goodness? Is it being a decent person? Or is it actually God himself?

The character of God, the holiness of God, the purity and perfection of God? God, what is our measure of goodness? If the proper standard of goodness is the holiness of God, well then I fall very far short indeed.

Don't you? I mean to recognise that, just conduct that thought experiment that John Dixon suggested years ago in his book *A Sneaking Suspicion*, maybe he got it from somewhere else. Imagine a movie screening of your life showing everything you ever said, everything you ever thought, everything you ever did.

[19 : 53] It's all there and big screen. Would you be comfortable with people watching it? Or would you want editing rights? When the man asked Jesus, what good thing must I do?

He was lowering the bar. what just one good thing and when the man addressed Jesus as teacher who did he think Jesus was why did he ask Jesus this question why do you ask me about what's good Jesus says to him who is Jesus is Jesus just a teacher a guru who can point you in the right direction who is Jesus so first Jesus challenges the man's assumptions secondly Jesus gives a direct answer in the second half of that verse verse 17 if you would enter life keep the commandments Jesus says you want to do what's good to have a life keep the commandments it's a straight answer it's not particularly surprising an answer in fact it's what the law itself taught in the old testament the Torah the law of Moses as as Paul would later point out in Galatians Leviticus 18 verse 5 keep my statutes and my rules if a person does them I don't know if I've got the right reference there maybe keep my statutes and my rules if a person does them he shall live by them I'm the Lord keep the keep the commandments if you do them you'll live God says in the law if you want to enter life by doing good Jesus says well keep God's commandments that's what the law says it's a straight answer it's also a potentially frustrating one I mean it feels pretty broad doesn't it I mean this this man's come to Jesus saying what good thing must I do and the answer is I'll just keep the commandments right okay but what he goes on which ones which ones Lord which commandments he ignores you notice the man when he asked that question which ones he ignores the first part of Jesus answer about why do you you know what there's only one that's good and why do you ask me and so on he ignores the first part of Jesus answer he focuses on the second part can you be a bit more specific Jesus I mean according to the rabbis there are 613 commandments in the Torah which ones precisely and which are the most important ones which can you narrow it down a bit what do I need to do well Jesus obliges him verse 18 and Jesus said you shall not murder you shall not commit adultery you shall not steal you shall not bear false witness honour your father and mother and you shall love your neighbour as yourself again what Jesus says here is not particularly surprising he starts with five commandments from the decalogue from the ten commandments and rounds it out with with Leviticus 19 verse 18 you shall love your neighbour as yourself I don't think Jesus is necessarily trying to be exhaustive here he's being representative he emphasizes commands instructions in the law that that are concerned our

horizontal responsibilities as humans to one another there's more to say about our responsibilities to God but Jesus has left that out for the time being and he said well you want to know which commandments let's start here let's start with these ones here are some of them now of course if this man had been around to hear Jesus sermon on the mount he may have realised just how searching even these commandments were do not murder well Jesus had taught that do not murder that command means don't even be angry with someone else do not commit adultery well Jesus had taught that that command means don't even look covetously at someone else love your neighbour well Jesus had taught that command is so all-encompassing that it extends even to enemies rightly understood even this truncated list of commands ought to have given the man pause but he pressed on verse 20 the young man said to him all these I have kept what do I still lack all these I have kept really

I guess he hadn't heard the sermon on the mount or if he had heard he wasn't really paying attention all these I have kept Jesus is trying to press through this man's assumption that he can do enough to have eternal life verse 17 he's challenged his standard of good the man simply ignored Jesus' words verse 18 and 19 he gave a list of commands that should have been daunting the man brushes it off all these I have kept yet still the man's not confident still he has no assurance of salvation so he asks what do I still lack well once more Jesus sought to overturn completely this man's approach to the question verse 21 Jesus said to him if you would be perfect if you would be perfect go sell what you possess and give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven and come follow me this verse is probably in these words of Jesus are probably one of Jesus least heeded commands in the Bible sell what you possess and give to the poor

I mean the young man ignored it and he set a good pattern because you know we've been ignoring it ever since sell what you possess everything give to the poor I think we're perhaps a bit too quick to find justifications for not taking it literally I think we can find justifications for not taking it hyper literally there are examples in the Gospels and Acts and the rest of the New Testament of Christians having possessions in the end of John's Gospel the disciples go out fishing on a boat where did they get the boat from in 2 Timothy 4 verse 13 Paul asked Timothy to bring his cloak and his scroll his scrolls oh so Paul had a library it's a comfort for me but we can be you know rather than avoid it though let's try and listen to it what is Jesus saying what's going on here again Jesus points out that the man is aiming too low he lifts the bar if you would be perfect he says it's not enough to be a decent person it's not enough to be moral by human standards that is not good enough for the kingdom of heaven the kingdom of heaven is not the home for decent people it is the home for perfect people people how can we be perfect how can we be fit for God's kingdom how can we belong there clearly that's beyond us this man needed a completely different approach to life

[28 : 10] Jesus says leave your old life sell what you possess give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven treasure in heaven there I don't think he's suggesting I think it's just synonymous with the other expressions about eternal life and inheriting the kingdom of God the kingdom of heaven and entering God's kingdom Jesus isn't describing here a two tier system where you know some people in heaven have treasure and other people don't and some people in the kingdom of heaven have like live in waterfront mansions and other people in the kingdom of heaven are living in shacks no he's saying you'll have true you'll have true riches get rid of your wealth you'll have true wealth come follow me the selling of possessions and giving to the poor on the one hand it's another opportunity for the man to evaluate his self-professed obedience to God's commands Jesus had said you shall love your neighbour as yourself the man had said oh well I've done that I do that well do you do that whom are you loving with your wealth let me just test that a little bit whom are you loving with your wealth you're loving your neighbour as yourself with your wealth let me test that

Jesus says but I think there's another purpose to Jesus' instruction here this man divesting of his possessions wasn't for its own sake but for a purpose it was in order to follow Jesus come follow me Jesus says follow me see in a different way Jesus is again confronting this man with what is his heart problem and that is his own self-reliance and self-sufficiency this man's money problem mirrored his moral problem he's a man who is used to being able to provide for himself he sees himself as sufficient to meet his own needs he owns enough for this life his money problem he could do enough for the next life his moral problem he saw himself as needing to be sufficient to meet all his own needs and yet he asked what do I still lack well Jesus answers you with your moral

rectitude and your great wealth what do you still lack

Jesus says what you lack is me give up the self-reliance give up the self-sufficiency give up having enough and doing enough and being enough follow me follow me how does it benefit you if you gain the whole world and yet forfeit your life if you're shipwrecked out at sea you don't grab hold of a chest full of gold you grab a life raft!

give up that which cannot save you that you might take hold of the only one who can come follow me but verse 22 when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful he had great possessions and after he had left Jesus drew his disciples together and taught them the negative lesson from the rich man as he had taught the positive lesson from the children verse 23 Jesus said 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's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven Jesus says verse 23 wealth is an impediment wealth is an impediment to entering God's kingdom but then he takes that even a step further and says it's like it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle now I'm you know I don't know much about sewing but I don't think a camel's fitting through the eye of a needle

I know there's a some people have suggested that the eye of a needle might have been a gate in Jerusalem that was for pedestrian traffic and so you couldn't really get a camel through except for like a really tight squeeze or something but I don't think there's any kind of as far as I'm aware there's no actual evidence that there was a gate called the eye of a needle Jesus is just talking literally here right a camel the biggest animal that people would typically see that he's addressing the largest animal that they would be regularly familiar with was a camel and the smallest of openings the eye of a needle I mean the disciples get what Jesus is saying when they say in verse 25 when the disciples heard this they're greatly astonished saying who then can be saved the disciples don't conclude notice that people you know there's a few things they don't conclude they don't conclude that people generally are okay it's just the rich who are in trouble you know those won't we're okay but if you're rich I'll watch out they don't conclude that they conclude if the rich can't be saved then no one can be saved if it's impossible for them it's impossible for all impossible for those who have every opportunity in life afforded by their wealth what hope do the rest of us have perhaps they even viewed riches and wealth as a sign of God's blessing those who enjoyed that blessing from God if they can't be saved who can be well Jesus accepts their conclusion verse 26 but Jesus looked at them and said with man this is impossible but with God all things are possible

[34 : 29] Jesus accepts their conclusion yes it is impossible for people to be saved with man it's impossible for anyone to be saved with man but it's not impossible for God all things are possible for God Jesus explains to his disciples what the rich man could not and would not understand if you want to enter the kingdom if you want to be saved if you want eternal life if you want an eternal future that is something that God must do for you it is not something that you can do for yourself that's the difference between the little children and the rich man you know we the thing about the children is not that they're innocent but that they're dependent they're weak they're helpless they contribute nothing they're brought to Jesus so that he could pray for them the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as little children because it belongs to those who bring nothing of their own we've lost over the last words of verse 15 which is two words in

Greek but what have we got here verse 15 he laid his hands on them and went away or as NRV translates it I think a little bit more helpful he laid his hands on them and he went on from there now what are those words doing they're not they're not there to you know say oh he made a pretty quick exit you know to get away from those pestering children you know okay yeah I'll bless a few but quick let's get out of here no what are what are those words doing that he went on from there it's to remind us that Jesus is on a journey Jesus was heading somewhere he was heading to Jerusalem he'd already been teaching his disciples he was heading to Jerusalem where as Jesus had already taught he must suffer many things and be killed and rise again having prayed for the children that they might receive the kingdom he went on from there so that by completing his journey he himself might secure the answer to his own prayer those who are saved by Jesus are those who come to him not for instruction but for intercession not to ask what good we must do but to ask what good he has done for us verse 27

Peter said in reply see we've left everything and followed you what then will we have I mean Peter's trying to make sense of this does Peter get it partly gets it a bit maybe in part he's turning leaving

everything into another good work that he's done I don't know but he has the disciples have left everything they've followed Jesus Jesus answers him graciously Jesus answers not judging but reassuring not evaluating or have you followed me enough no not evaluating but comforting verse 28 Jesus said to him truly I say to you in the new world when the son of man will sit on his glorious throne you who followed me will also sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel the new world translates an expression that means the regeneration God making everything new when God makes everything new Jesus says to his disciples you will sit on thrones you! And he goes on to say verse 29 and everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my sake whatever it is you've left whatever it is that you've had to say goodbye to whatever it is it has cost you Jesus says you'll receive a hundred fold and will inherit eternal! The hundred fold I think! In the! which is not saying you lose one house God is going to give you you'll suddenly own a portfolio of a hundred properties God will provide for you he'll take care of you he'll look after your physical needs Jesus has it covered I think it's pointing to the church actually if you leave your family well you have a much bigger family spread throughout the whole world and a hundred thousand homes that will welcome you in and look after you he'll care for you here and you'll receive eternal life Jesus has it covered for this life and for the next it doesn't depend on your wealth it doesn't depend on your moral effort it just depends on him verse 30 but many who are first will be last and the last first the first the rich man last the last little children first in this passage [40 : 22] Jesus gives us two ways to life I'm playing on word there for those who are familiar with two ways to live but I'm two ways to life two pathways to life to eternal life to the kingdom there is there is two alternatives do everything Jesus says keep the commandments do everything and you'll live do everything or leave everything and follow me do everything or leave everything follow yourself or follow Jesus depend on yourself or depend on him leave everything is both harder and easier than do everything it's harder in some respects because leave everything involves a complete self renunciation salvation as Jesus had earlier taught whoever saves his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it it involves saying

I have nothing I bring nothing I contribute nothing Jesus I depend on you complete self renunciation but it's also far far easier isn't it because who can do everything no one can do everything we'll always be asking the rich man's question what do I lack we'll always be lacking we'll never achieve perfection it's harder complete self renunciation leave everything but it's easier come to me Jesus says come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest he has done enough he is enough we don't need to rely on ourselves we just need to rely on him that's how we enter the kingdom of heaven leave everything trusting in ourselves leave that behind and follow him will you join with me in prayer lord jesus we we give you our thanks that you walked the road to jerusalem to secure the answer to your own intercession for us and your own prayers for us we thank you that you have done everything so that all we must do is leave ourselves behind and follow you thank you that you make us perfect that you have dealt with our sins that you open the gates of heaven for us that we might enter and so lord jesus we trust in you and we follow you help us to continue to rely on you all our days amen