

The disadvantage of wealth

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from Matthew chapter 19, from verses 13 to 30. Matthew 19, and we start at 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.

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.

[1 : 05] Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All these I have kept. What do I still lack?

Jesus said to him, If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess, and give to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.

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 a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.

Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved?

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 followed you.

[2 : 14] 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. Good morning, everyone. It would be a great help to me if you could pick up the church Bibles and turn back to that reading we had a few moments ago from Matthew chapter 19. It's on page 994.

And you should find some space on the back of the service sheets for some notes, if you'd like to take notes. Sorry we haven't got an outline, but I hope the structure will become clear as we go along. And if you weren't here last week, you may not realise we've just started a series in Matthew 19 and 20.

Last week we looked at verses 13 to 15 at the beginning of our reading. And as you'll see this week, we're looking at verses 16 to 30. Shall I pray as we look at these verses together? Think of those words of Peter to the Lord Jesus in John chapter 6.

[3 : 37] Lord, where else have we to go? You alone have the words of eternal life. And we thank you so much, our Father, that what Jesus says is life-giving. And we pray this morning that we would listen to him and that by your spirit we would respond with repentance and faith.

And we ask it for his namesake. Amen. Well, the story is told of an auction that took place after the death of a wealthy man.

The man had been an art collector and his estate included priceless paintings from the great masters, Monet, Rembrandt, Picasso, and so on. The auction was attended by all the top art

dealers and countless multi-millionaires on the lookout for artwork to decorate their mansions. There was a sense of anticipation as the auctioneer entered the room. But to everyone's surprise, he started proceedings by presenting a poorly drawn portrait of a young boy. The portrait was actually of the art collector's only son who'd been killed in the war. And it had been his most treasured possession, a daily reminder to him of the beloved son he'd lost.

[4 : 48] The art dealers and millionaires were somewhat put out, urging the auctioneer to get on with the sale of the real treasures for which they'd come. But the auctioneer insisted that this portrait must be sold first.

There was silence in the room. No one was interested in bidding. Until a dishevelled old man at the back of the room slowly raised his hand. You see, this man had been a lowly but loyal servant of the deceased man for many years.

And in his curiosity had turned up to see who'd buy the priceless works his master had possessed. When no one else wanted to buy this portrait, he nervously put his hand up and offered ten pounds for it.

It was all he could afford, but he knew how much the painting had meant to his master and he couldn't bear for it to remain unsold. No one contested the bid and so the portrait was given to him. And then to everyone's surprise, the auctioneer stood up and announced that the auction was over. There was nothing left to sell. The millionaires were confused and angry. They'd travelled across the world because they knew this man's estate contained great riches.

[5 : 53] And they asked the auctioneer, what about all the masterpieces this man had possessed? Weren't they supposed to be on offer today? The auctioneer smiled and explained. Yes, he said, but the deceased man's will was very plain.

It stipulated clearly that he who gets the son gets everything. He who gets the son gets everything. And so the lowly servant who'd bid ten pounds for the portrait of his master's son walked out of that room with riches beyond his wildest dreams while the multimillionaires left empty-handed.

And all because they'd failed to understand the value of the son. It's a lovely story. And the outcome is somewhat like that in our passage this morning, is it not?

Because our passage begins with a wealthy man coming to Jesus in search of eternal treasures but leaving empty-handed. While the impoverished disciples who had given up everything for their master are promised riches beyond their wildest dreams.

Look down with me at verse 29 near the end of the passage. Jesus tells his disciples that 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.

[7 : 17] Jesus' followers will inherit not just a vast estate and priceless paintings but something even greater eternal life. And all because they have the son.

They've become poor for his name's sake notice. And the punchline or the key points Jesus wants us to grasp from this episode comes at the very end in verse 30.

Have a look down with me again. Jesus continues but many who are first will be last and the last first. Many who are first will be last and the last first.

We know it's the main point for us to take away because Jesus repeats it at the end of his conversation with the disciples. Just look on now to verse 16 of chapter 20. Jesus elaborates on what he's been saying by telling a parable at the beginning of chapter 20 and he concludes with the same punchline in verse 16.

The last will be first and the first last. In fact this idea seems to be the great theme that runs through this mini section of Matthew.

[8 : 20] The melodic line that holds it together. For example we'll get a similar idea in verse 27 of chapter 20 where Jesus says whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

And to underline the point Jesus illustrates it for us by the use of a couple of striking contrasts. In chapter 20 the contrast is between two disciples James and John who thought they could earn their way into being Jesus' right hand men and two blind men who simply receive their sight from Jesus. But here in chapter 19 the contrast is between the little children that we looked at last week who simply come to Jesus in humility with nothing of their own to offer him and this rich young man who thought he could earn his salvation.

And the shock is that while Jesus says in verse 14 that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these children to those who imitate their humble dependents in verse 23 we discover that the rich

man for all his worldly success was unable to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The first will be last and the last first. Just see how the contrast illustrates the main point. As with those millionaires and the lowly servant in our story at the beginning Jesus says that one day there will be a great role reversal where apparent nobodies in this world will be raised up and the top dogs brought low.

[9 : 50] What Jesus says is shocking actually because it's totally the opposite of the way we naturally think and the way our world functions. But this morning's passage helps us understand why it must be that way and it gives us two reasons.

First of all because eternal life can't be earned by our deeds. That's our first heading. Eternal life can't be earned by our deeds. I guess this young man who approached Jesus was used to earning whatever he wanted.

We know from verse 22 and Jesus' words in verse 23 that he was rich and just as he had presumably earned his possessions through his wealth he thought he could earn his ticket to heaven through his good deeds.

Let's pick up the story at the beginning. Verse 16 And behold a man came up to Jesus saying Teacher what good deeds must I do to have eternal life?

And Jesus 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. Now the heart of this man's misunderstanding is revealed in his very first words because his question exposes two grave misconceptions.

[11 : 08] For one thing he thought it was possible for people to be good. What good deed must I do? He asked. But Jesus knew better. Why do you ask me about what is good?

There is only one who is good. Do you see the point he's making? Only one person God himself is good. The implication being that no one else is good.

So to think that we can accumulate enough good deeds to enter the kingdom as this man does is to completely misunderstand the human condition. To set a bar for ourselves that we can never keep. To set ourselves up for failure. Rousseau the French enlightenment philosopher famously said that man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.

But the reality is of course the opposite. Man is born in chains a slave to his own sinful nature as demonstrated by our inability to be good and our natural bent towards selfishness and that which we know to be wrong.

[12 : 13] And we need to be set free by the Lord Jesus. None of us are truly good. Not before a holy God. So that's the man's first mistake.

And because of this mistake the man thought it was therefore possible to earn his way into the kingdom. That's the other thing he'd misunderstood. Notice his question again. What good deed must I do to have eternal life he asks.

This man assumed that people get to heaven by what they do. And of course this man was no different from what most people are like today. I guess many of our colleagues and neighbours just assume that those who are good by the standards of the world who do good deeds giving to charity being tolerant being nice to old ladies those people will go to the new creation to what we call heaven when they die.

And most religions are of course founded on this principle whether it's churchgoers thinking their church attendance and obedience to the ten commandments perhaps will be enough for them or the devout Muslim going on pilgrimage to Mecca and praying five times a day.

But Matthew 19 and 20 make it crystal clear that any such thinking is completely wrong because we can't get to heaven by what we do. Eternal life can't be earned by our deeds.

[13 : 42] And I think Jesus' response to the rich young man is an attempt to get him to see that to show him how impossible it is for us to meet heaven's entry requirements ourselves. Let's pick up the encounter at the end of verse 17.

If you would enter life says Jesus keep the commandments. The man 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 honour your father and mother and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

The young man said to him all these I have kept what do I still lack?

Jesus said to him if you would be perfect go sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me.

When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions. Now I don't think Jesus can be saying here that people actually enter his kingdom through keeping his commandments or being perfect or selling everything and giving to the poor.

[14 : 51] That would be to totally contradict the point he's just been making with the little children and everything else that we see in this part of Matthew. Rather Jesus seems to be answering the man's question on its own terms.

He's saying to the man that if he really does want to try to get to heaven by his deeds then here's what it will require. He'll need to obey all the commandments and give everything to the poor. Something of course he couldn't possibly do. Jesus makes the point explicit in verse 26 if you just look on a few verses. Jesus. The disciples have just asked him who then can be saved and Jesus says simply with man this is impossible.

Impossible. Man cannot save himself. Eternal life can't be earned by our deeds. The bar is just too high and our hearts too sinful.

Now one of the interesting things here is that initially in verses 18 and 19 Jesus only quotes the second half of the ten commandments in his response to the man.

[15 : 55] Those commandments which deal with loving your neighbor as yourself. Did you notice that? And the man thinks he can tick all those boxes at least externally.

But then in verse 21 Jesus puts his finger on what he knew was the man's real stumbling block. He was unwilling to put Jesus first.

For all his apparent religious interest and moral uprightness his possessions and wealth came ahead of following Jesus. And so he goes away in verse 22 unwilling to give them up.

So even if this man had actually kept the second half of the commandments something that of course couldn't possibly be the case if we understand their true meaning. Even then though when it came to the first half which deal with loving God with all our heart and having no gods before him he'd still failed miserably.

Because there's only one who is good and we human beings can't possibly earn our way into his kingdom. You may remember the Oscar winning film Saving Private Ryan which tells the story of a group of American soldiers sent on a dangerous mission to the Normandy beaches in the second world war to rescue a single soldier called Private James Ryan.

[17 : 15] Several of the soldiers on the mission are killed in the process and the film includes a haunting scene where one of the men as he dies says to Private Ryan earn this earn it.

He wanted Private Ryan to live a life that would somehow merit the sacrifices that had enabled him to be saved. And it becomes a burden around Private Ryan's neck.

At the end of the film we see him back in Normandy as an old man observing the memorials of those who died to rescue him all those years earlier. And he turns to his wife and asks her to confirm that he had been a good man.

That he had merited the sacrifice of those fallen soldiers. And that's exactly how many people think it works with God. That God asks us to earn it by imposing burdensome rules that we need to keep to merit being saved.

But wonderfully wonderfully because it's liberating God doesn't ask us to earn the rescue he's made possible for us through the Lord Jesus. Eternal life can't be and isn't earned.

[18 : 24] And we must ask ourselves whether we've understood this that eternal life can't be won by our deeds that we simply can't meet God's standards. I think this is both very hard for us to get our head round and very humbling for us to admit.

It's hard because especially in a place like Dulwich we're so used to earning our own way to results being performance based. Ben helped us to think about that at the beginning of our service.

And it's very humbling because none of us wants to admit that we're not good enough for God. That we can't save ourselves. And in God's economy you see this is the reason why many who are first will be last.

Because those who are self-made and think they're good in God's eyes who think they can earn their way into the kingdom and who perhaps parade their goodness to the world will end up like this young man missing out on the kingdom.

Because as we saw last week it's only those who humble themselves like little children those who are content to be last and who know they have no claim to God's favour. It's only those people who will enter the kingdom of heaven.

[19 : 40] Actually even for those of us who know this very well in theory I wonder if we still secretly think that our deeds can somehow curry favour with God. And the problem is of course that as soon as we become self-righteous and think we actually deserve something from God we cease to be like little children who admit our total dependence on him and his mercy.

We can easily think that we somehow deserve God's grace more than others and so we need to remember afresh that eternal life can't be earned by our deeds. But wonderfully that's only half the story because secondly here's the other thing I want us to notice from this passage secondly eternal life can be received by following Jesus.

Eternal life can be received by following Jesus. In verses 23 and 24 Jesus spells out for his disciples the big lesson he wants to teach them from this encounter what we've just been considering that it's impossible for human beings to save themselves.

That's the point I think of the camel and the eye of the needle. Man can no more save himself whoever he is than a huge camel could go through the tiny eye of a needle.

But this claim provokes great alarm amongst Jesus' disciples who at this point seem to be nearly as clueless and confused as the rich man. We'll see that again in the next chapter with the incident with James and John.

[21 : 12] Just look down with me at verse 25 of chapter 19. When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished saying who then can be saved?

Or look on to verse 27. Then Peter said in reply see we have left everything and followed you what then will we have? The disciples had done the thing the rich man had been unwilling to do.

They had left everything to follow Jesus. But what would become of them if even this rich man couldn't enter the kingdom? If Jesus was saying that it's impossible for man to save himself?

You see not only did this rich man seem morally upright and concerned about spiritual things the chances are that the disciples saw his riches as a sign that he was someone who was blessed and favoured by God.

So no wonder Peter and the others are thinking is this all worth it? Have we given up everything for no avail? If even this rich man can't enter the kingdom well then we might as well pack our bags and go home.

[22 : 19] But Jesus reassures them because while eternal life can't be earned by our deeds eternal life can be received by following Jesus. Now why do I say that?

Well the gospel writers don't always make their main points explicit because they're writing narratives rather than giving simple propositions or arguments such as those that we get in the New Testament letters for example.

So if we want to work out what the gospel writers are teaching us we need to pay attention to the context of a particular passage. And Matthew 19 and 20 are a good example of that.

We've already seen how the little children are a model of how we do enter the kingdom and are set up as a contrast with the rich man. I think there's something else we're supposed to notice in this section which we'll explore in more detail in a few weeks time.

Because our passage in Matthew 19 begins with the question what good deed must I do to have eternal life? But just look on with me now to chapter 20 and verse 32 right at the end of this section which forms a little unit in the gospel.

[23 : 28] And notice Jesus' question this time. Chapter 20 verse 32. And stopping Jesus called them the blind men that is and said what do you want me to do for you?

Not what good deed must I do? But what do you want me to do for you? Do you see the contrast? Can we see the point Jesus is making? What Matthew is wanting us to understand from this part of the gospel? Eternal life can't be earned by our deeds by what we do.

Instead it must be received on the basis of what Jesus does for us. Just as those helpless blind men simply receive their sight from Jesus. The only way to enter the kingdom is to let Jesus do for us at the cross what we could never do for ourselves.

It's why a prediction of the cross comes right in the middle of this unit. And it also explains why there's so much talk in these chapters about receiving or at the end of our passage about inheriting eternal life.

[24 : 39] Because those things are the opposite of earning and doing aren't they? An inheritance isn't earned it's received it's given to you and it's like that with eternal life.

Let's return to chapter 19 and let me read from verse 28 where we see how Jesus responds to the disciples concerns. Verse 28 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 namesake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. The rich man wanted to earn eternal life and Jesus said it was impossible but in verse 29 we see that those who follow Jesus will inherit eternal life.

They will receive a hundredfold the blessings they may have had to forfeit in this life. In fact as we see in verse 28 they will one day reign with Jesus.

So Jesus reassures us that it is gloriously worth following him because eternal life will be received by those who do so. It's worth sticking with Jesus because he will come out top in the end.

[26 : 11] We may not be first now but we will have the last laugh as it were when Jesus establishes his kingdom. In fact it's always sensible isn't it to back the winner.

Jeremy Corbyn has recently rewarded many of those who supported him in his Labour leadership campaign by giving them important positions in the shadow cabinet. And in a far more significant and secure way those who follow Jesus can be assured that one day when he rules they will share office with him and they will receive great blessings in his kingdom.

Jesus' followers will get a share of his estate his eternal kingdom because remember he who gets the son gets everything. And that explains why the last will be first.

Jesus' followers will often be last in this world. Verse 29 implies that often the decision to follow Jesus will lead to rejection from one's family and mean material disadvantages in this world.

Sure that won't always be the case of course but it will perhaps be rare for Christians to be highly esteemed in this life. And in fact for all of Jesus' followers sacrifices will sometimes be necessary if we're to be faithful.

[27 : 32] But it is worth it because eternal life can be received by following Jesus. And that might just be the encouragement that some of us need at the moment. Perhaps we're wondering as the disciples were if it's all really worth it.

Maybe we felt the pain of family ridicule or professional disadvantage because we follow Jesus. well we can take heart because it is gloriously worth it.

A hundredfold what we give up in this world. Last night Patasha and I received an email from some good friends of ours who are Crosslinked mission partners in South Africa telling us that yesterday lunchtime they were victims of an armed robbery.

Several men broke into their house and forced them to hand over all their valuables. I guess they won't get them back. But they can be quite certain that the sacrifices they have made in leaving behind family and friends to serve the gospel overseas and the things they lost yesterday will be far outweighed by the rewards they will one day receive from the Lord Jesus.

It's wonderfully reassuring. But for others of us this may perhaps also be a great challenge because the rich young man teaches us that it's possible to be concerned about spiritual things to want to have eternal life to encounter Jesus to be a morally upright person who knows the commandments to be successful in this world and yet to miss out on that which matters most.

[29 : 03] And all because in his case he wasn't willing to put following Jesus ahead of his possessions. It may just be that some of us are aware of things that we put ahead of Jesus it could be wealth and comfort like it was for this rich man and incidentally you don't need to be wealthy for possessions to be an idol or it could just as easily be the desire to be well thought of in the eyes of the world or to be successful in a professional capacity or to adopt a lifestyle or relationship that is ungodly.

and the thought of letting go of such things may be very painful but God is no man's debtor and he promises us something far better.

Nothing is worth holding on to in this world if it means forfeiting eternity. It's only those who follow Jesus who receive eternal life. John Hooper the Bishop of Gloucester was burned at the stake under Bloody Mary in 1555.

Shortly before his execution his close friend Sir Anthony Kingston pleaded with him in tears to renounce his Protestant faith that he might be spared. But Hooper movingly replied to his friend True it is that death is bitter and life is sweet but alas consider that the death to come is more bitter and the life to come is more sweet.

The life to come is more sweet. For all those who follow Jesus even despite the cost a wonderful future awaits. Eternal life can be received by following Jesus because he who gets the son gets everything.

[30 : 50] Let's pray. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my namesake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life but many who are first will be last and the last first.

Father we confess that I guess for almost all of us here we have probably actually had to leave very little in order to follow the Lord Jesus and we acknowledge that we so easily cling to the things of this world.

We pray that you would help us to remember this truth that those who give up things for the Lord Jesus will inherit something far greater and we pray therefore that you would help us not to be like that rich young man pray that we'd be willing to put the Lord Jesus first and we thank you that although we fail at that time and again but because eternal life is received not earned we can still inherit it because of what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

Please help us this morning and this week to remember that and to continue to follow Jesus whatever the cost and we ask it for his namesake. Amen.