

How good is good enough - The one who had everything to lose

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[0 : 00] So, Luke's Gospel, as you know, is one of the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, and I'm going to begin on page 58, just where it says, the little children and Jesus.

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked him. 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. 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've kept since I was a boy, he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, You still lack one thing.

[1 : 15] Sell everything you have and give it 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, is it 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 the age to come eternal life.

Jesus took the twelve aside and told them, We're going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles.

[2 : 27] They will mock him, insult him, and spit on him. They will flock him and kill him. On the third day, he will rise again. Rupert, over to you. Thank you, Simon.

I think you'll find it a help if you just keep that passage open. I think it was pages 58 to 59, and we'll be looking at it together over these next few minutes.

Well, you don't need me to tell you that one question is dominating the news at the moment, isn't it? In or out? Are you an innie or an outie?

Do you side with Boris or with Dave? On the 23rd of June, and just imagine how sick we'll all be of the coverage by then, we'll be asked to make a decision which will shape our country's future for the next generation.

An in-out referendum on membership of the European Union. And I guess the significance of the question is obvious from the coverage and controversy that it's generating.

[3 : 27] There's no doubt that this will be a defining question for our nation. But according to the Bible, a book which has, of course, influenced much of our political heritage, it's not the most important question that we face.

Because while the question, should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union, may have implications that will reverberate for generations to come, the question posed to Jesus by the man in the passage we just read, had implications that in his mind would reverberate for eternity.

Just have a look down with me at his question in verse 18. Verse 18. A certain ruler asked Jesus, Now I appreciate that for some here, the very premise behind the man's question is one that we may be sceptical about.

After all, this man believed in eternal life. And not everyone does. You might want to ask more about that in the question time later. But let me just say for now, with Easter approaching, that my own confidence about life beyond the grave comes from the events of that first Easter Sunday. And my own conviction that there is compelling evidence that Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead in history. But whatever we may think about this man's assumptions, there's no doubting the importance of his question.

[4 : 55] What must I do to inherit eternal life? How do I get to heaven, in other words? It's a question which actually runs through all of Luke chapter 18, just have a look at the previous verse, verse 17, where Jesus says, Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

So the question before us this evening is not should the United Kingdom be in or out of the EU, but who's in and out of the kingdom of God?

Who gets to enjoy eternal life? And of course it's one of the great philosophical and theological questions, isn't it? One that separates different world religions and has been debated for centuries. How does one gain eternal life? Is it through being very religious, going on pilgrimage, praying, getting confirmed? Or perhaps by being very righteous, giving to charity, obeying the Ten Commandments, looking after the environment?

Or as many assume, is it simply the case that everyone goes to heaven? Or that we just can't know, and so it's futile to speculate? Well, this man in Luke's Gospel wanted answers, and he thought Jesus could offer them.

[6 : 19] We don't know much about the man, though he's described as a ruler in verse 18, and very wealthy in verse 23. Nor do we know what had caused him to approach Jesus. Perhaps he'd heard of Jesus' reputation, or witnessed his miracles, or listened to his remarkable teaching about how we should do to others as we'd have them do to us, and love our enemies, and so on.

Or maybe he'd seen the quality of Jesus' life. That's a perfect combination that we read about in the Gospels, of courage and compassion, and wanted to imitate it.

But what we do know is he was concerned for his soul, his eternal well-being. I don't know about you, but I think that's actually quite unusual these days.

In our fast-paced modern world, people rarely have time to think about the big questions of life. It's one of the reasons that evenings like this can be so helpful. They give us a gentle, relaxed opportunity just to stop and think for a few moments.

But while this man's concern was commendable, his question betrayed some confused thinking. Just to ponder it for a moment, he asked Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[7 : 36] And yet the whole point of inheriting something is that you don't have to do anything. You simply receive an inheritance when someone dies. And that's the first of two perhaps surprising things that Jesus teaches about eternal life, which I want us to notice together this evening.

Eternal life can't be earned. Eternal life can't be earned, says Jesus. And just notice how Jesus makes this point.

It's a slightly strange way to answer the man's question. Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

You see, the man addresses Jesus as good teacher. And Jesus seems to be making the point that if he were just a mere teacher, a mere human, he couldn't be good because only God is good. And if only God is good, well then it follows that we're not. No one is good, Jesus says, except God alone.

[8 : 47] And the point is clear, isn't it? If we're not truly good, well then attempting to earn our way to eternal life by what we do is a fruitless exercise destined to fail.

Jesus is wanting to challenge the whole basis of the man's question. You see, none of us can meet God's perfect standards. Nothing that we do will be good enough.

Now I think this is very surprising because for the most part, we assume, don't we, that if God were to divide humanity into two, into those who will enter his kingdom and those who will not, then he'd do so according to what people did.

So the racists and the rapists, the fraudsters and the philanderers would be on one side and most of the rest of us probably on the other. But Jesus doesn't see it like that.

For him, the big distinction isn't between the religious and non-religious or the moral and immoral. because he says that none of us can be good enough for God.

[9 : 57] Now don't mishear me. It's not that we shouldn't try to do good nor that we never do anything which is praiseworthy. It's just that according to Jesus, God's standards of goodness are ones we can never meet.

Since we're at a golf club this evening, how about a golfing illustration? You know those pro-am golf events that you get where amateur golfers, usually celebrities, get to play alongside professional golfers at PGA Tour events.

Now to qualify to play in such an event you need to be a top golfer, a level that I guess would be out of reach for all of us here. But for the amateurs who do get to play, there's another way, isn't there? They're not good enough, they don't get to play by rights, but they're invited to experience the prestige of a PGA Tour event. And that's a little bit like how it is when it comes to the kingdom of God.

By rights, none of us meet the required standards. Our failure to live a perfect life makes us ineligible. To continue the golfing metaphor, we may be better than some in society, but none of us are good enough to make the cut.

[11 : 08] If we're going to get in, it's going to have to be, it's not going to be by our own efforts. As Simon said earlier, we've entitled these talks, Is Good Good Enough?

Good Enough for God? And theoretically, the answer, in a sense, is yes. Only good people can enter God's kingdom by right. The trouble is, though, that Jesus himself says that none of us are truly good.

Entering the kingdom through our own efforts is impossible. Eternal life can't be earned. Now, I guess this man found that as surprising and perhaps as shocking as we might.

And so in verse 20, Jesus tries to convince him that he's not good, or at least not good enough for God. Just have a look down with me, verse 20. Jesus answered, picking it up, I'll hop with you at verse 19.

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.

[12 : 18] Jesus is quoting from the second half of the Ten Commandments here. And the Bible tells us that those commandments function a bit like a mirror. They show us what we're really like. To use a Bible word, they expose our sin.

They show us how far short we fall of God's perfect goodness. God's perfect. And the Bible tells us that those commandments are not going to be especially when we remember how Jesus himself interprets those commandments.

So take adultery, the first commandment Jesus mentions. You may remember Jesus tells us that anyone who's even had a lustful thought has committed adultery in his heart.

Or think about murder. Jesus tells us that an angry thought has at heart the same root desire as murder. You shall not steal. Well, we may not have robbed a bank, but how many of us have stolen in other ways?

Perhaps, I don't know, stealing time from our employer by sending personal emails at work or stealing money by over-claiming on expenses or maybe we steal by breaking copyright laws.

[13 : 23] False testimony. Which of us hasn't told a half-truth or exaggerated a story to make ourselves look good or to put someone else down or to get out of a hole? And we could go on couldn't we?

Now on their own these things may seem fairly small. They may not be on a par with some of the horrific things that we read about in the newspapers. But remember God is perfectly good and just as the smallest blemish spoils a perfectly white dress or a tiny pebble can make ripples across a whole pond so are moments of impurity or anger or being economical with the truth make us unacceptable before a holy God according to Jesus.

God's standards are much higher than we might perhaps expect. And yet the man in the story still needed convincing. In verse 21 he protests all these I have kept since I was a boy and perhaps he had obeyed the letter of the law on these commandments.

But like a master barrister Jesus moves in for the kill in verse 22. Have a look. When Jesus verse 22 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.

Now this is a much misunderstood verse because I don't think Jesus can be saying here that we get to heaven by selling everything and giving to the poor although there's no doubt that how we treat others says a lot about us.

[15:04] Now as we'll see that would be to totally contradict everything Jesus says in this chapter. What's actually going on I think is Jesus is showing this man that he simply can't keep the commandments in their entirety.

One of the interesting things here is that in verse 20 Jesus only quotes the second half of the ten commandments those commandments which deal with loving your neighbour as yourself and the man thinks he can tick all those boxes at least externally but then in verse 22 Jesus puts his finger on what he knew was the man's real stumbling block.

He was unwilling to put God first. For all his apparent religious interest and moral uprightness his possessions and wealth came ahead of following Jesus.

so even if this man had actually kept the second half of the commandments when it came to the first half which deal with loving God with all our heart and having no gods before him he'd failed.

The Bible is clear that because he made us and gives us the talents and opportunities that we enjoy not to mention life itself God is in charge he ought to call the shots in our lives but like this man we too easily put other things ahead of God don't we?

[16:29] So Jesus carefully demonstrates that eternal life can't be earned none of us are good enough and that explains the disciples reaction in verse 26 did you notice just have a look again verse 26 seemingly shocked by what Jesus has said those who heard this asked who then can be saved if this earnest and law abiding man wasn't good enough who could be and Jesus' reply shows that they understood the point that it's impossible with man as Jesus puts it it's impossible Jesus famously says as a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle eternal life can't be earned we've just had the Oscars and you may remember the Oscar winning film Saving Private Ryan which tells the story of a group of American soldiers sent to Normandy to the Normandy beaches to rescue Private James Ryan several of the soldiers are killed 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 been made to save him and it became a burden around Private Ryan's neck and that's exactly how many people think it is with God that God asked 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 our way into his kingdom eternal life can't be and isn't earned rather it's received as a free gift and that brings us on to the other thing that I want us to notice this evening before we finish eternal life can't be earned but secondly eternal life can be received eternal life can be received just notice how verse 27 finishes because Jesus gives us a glimmer of hope verse 27 Jesus replied what is impossible with man entering the kingdom by our own efforts is possible with God and the episodes either side of the rich ruler show us how it can be possible you see Luke is a very clever writer who arranges his material very deliberately so just look back with me if you would to verses 15 to 17 first of all what comes just before the episode with this rich ruler verse 15 we're told that 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 truly I tell you anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it now again these are verses that I think are often misunderstood

Jesus says we must be like little children if we're to enter the kingdom and sometimes people have thought that that means we need somehow to be naive like children and to believe unbelievable things but I don't think Jesus is saying that nowhere in the Bible is faith presented as being anything other than reasonable and rational nor do I think Jesus can be saying that we need to be innocent like little children we've just seen that far from being innocent we're all guilty before a holy God and little children aren't innocent anyway if you don't believe me then just to put round to our house sometime for tea and watch our one year old and the way that he with a very knowing grin on his face quite deliberately throws food on the floor when we tell him not to now children are by nature far from innocent now the meaning of Jesus' words becomes plain when we notice the contrast that

Luke's trying to make between children and the rich ruler

Jesus says we're to receive the kingdom like a little child the contrast is between the rich man who wanted to earn his way into the kingdom to do something and little children who of course don't earn anything but simply receive from their parents we're all familiar with the distinction between wages which are earned and gifts which are received and wonderfully because we could never earn it eternal life is a gift to be received not a reward to be earned I don't know if you've been following the primaries for the American presidential election but if you have you'll know that there's been something of a row over Donald Trump and his fortune Trump claims to have earned it and so to be a shrewd businessman who could be trusted financially his opponents claim that he simply inherited most of it from what I can tell there's probably some truth in both statements but when it comes to the greatest fortune on offer eternal life it must be inherited to use the rich man's own word in verse 18 and an inheritance of course only comes to someone after a death and the surprise in Luke 18 is that it's

Jesus' death which makes it possible for us to inherit eternal life that explains why this conversation between Jesus and the rich man is followed at the end of our passage by verses 31 to 33 just have a look at the end of our passage this time Jesus has just said that what's impossible with man is possible with God and he then reassures his disciples by explaining how that can be how it can be possible for you and me who don't reach God's standards who don't make the cut to enter the kingdom of God verse 31 Jesus took the twelve aside and told them we are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written by the prophets about the son of man will be fulfilled he will be handed over to the gentiles they will mock him insult him and spit on him they will flog him and kill him on the third day he will rise again one of the extraordinary things about Jesus' life is the way his death was always at the forefront of his mind he intentionally went to Jerusalem knowing he'd be put to death there because he knew his death was necessary for sinful people to enter his kingdom just as those soldiers sacrificed their lives to rescue private Ryan so the Bible says Jesus sacrificed his life to rescue us that's the good news we'll be remembering this at Easter in a couple of weeks of course we said earlier that Luke arranges his material very carefully and there's another striking contrast we're supposed to notice in chapter 18 remember the man's question in verse 18 what must I do to inherit eternal life we'll just compare that over the page with verse 41 part of the passage we'll be looking at on

[23 : 38] Sunday at the end of this week of talks when we'd love you to come along again verse 41

Jesus says to a blind beggar what do you want me to do for you do you see the contrast entering the kingdom of God is not a matter of what I do but what Jesus must do for us and the great thing Jesus does for us of course is he dies in our place on a cross thinking again about American presidents you'll know that an American president is allowed to issue presidential pardons apparently Bill Clinton pardoned 140 criminals in his final hours in office it's a staggering number but in his final hours Jesus secured a far greater pardon for far more people because when Jesus died on the cross he took upon himself the punishment we deserve for failing to live with God in charge and so made it possible for us to be pardoned he died in our place it's the great news of the Christian faith the reason it is possible for us to enter God's kingdom so Jesus says that eternal life can't be earned but it can be received as a free gift on the basis of what Jesus has done and as we close can I gently ask each of us whether we've ever done anything with Jesus his offer in 1833 an American man called George Wilson was sentenced to death for a series of robberies President Andrew Jackson issued him with a presidential pardon but Wilson refused the pardon as this was so unusual the case went before the US Supreme Court which ruled that a pardon is a deed to the validity of which delivery is essential and delivery is not complete without acceptance and because Wilson refused to accept the pardon he was executed according to the Bible we also are guilty and if a pardon really is on offer from the president of the universe then we'd be foolish wouldn't we just to ignore it so we'd love to encourage you to think further about these matters now there are a number of ways that you could do that after pudding we'll be having a few minutes for questions do ask whatever you like no need to be polite or do take your copy of

Luke's gospel away with you as a gift from us and have a read of it and we'd love you to come back to our morning service at Grace Church at 10.30 on Sunday morning at Rosendale School when we'll be looking at the next part of Luke 18 but we particularly want to recommend this evening something called Christianity Explored is a very simple informal DVD series which gives you the opportunity to examine the Christian faith for yourself and then to ask questions afterwards in a little

group and many people found it hugely helpful down the years I think we're planning to start a new Christianity Explored course on the 20th of March Sunday the 20th and we'd love you to think about coming along to that Jesus says a presidential pardon is on offer and I reckon that this Easter would be a good time to explore that for ourselves I'm going to hand back to Simon ca everyone