

The Church's Reward

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[0 : 0 0] Well, hello. I feel like I need to introduce myself. I'm David Short. I do work on staff at St. John's, although I've been off for a couple of months with concussion. And I'm very grateful to your kindness and prayers and encouragement and for Dan and Jeremy and Erin and the staff picking up the slack. And I apologise in advance. I'm not going to stay around after the sermon and catch up because I've still got lots of symptoms. I was thinking about this just before the service. Having concussion actually is a great thing for a preacher because it means you say things that you're not sure that you really mean.

So if I come across and say something which is unhelpful, just put it down to the concussion, okay? A lot of these symptoms I expected, dizziness, headaches, but there are some other symptoms that have been a bit of a surprise. I have a strange sense of disorientation and a loss of direction. This is a terrible thing for an Australian male. I sometimes get in a car and drive somewhere and discover I end up not only on the wrong route, but at the wrong place on the wrong day in the wrong week. Yeah. And it's given me a lot of sympathy with the disciples in this section in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16 to 20, if you turn to chapter 19, because Jesus keeps doing things and he keeps saying things that are completely disorienting.

Jesus is focused on training them for the kingdom of heaven and establishing his church. And he keeps saying things that for the disciples, they're just, they're off the compass.

They're out of whack. And the basic posture of the disciples through all these four chapters is reeling spiritual disorientation. It's wonderful. You can see it right back in chapter 16 where we began when Jesus speaks about building his church and immediately he turns and explains that he must, simply must be crucified. Remember this? And Peter says, don't be ridiculous.

You're confused. We're not going to, that contradicts all common sense for you to willingly sacrifice your life. And Jesus rebukes him none too gently. He says, you are the mouthpiece of Satan. Get behind me.

[2 : 3 2] And while Peter is reeling from that, he turns to the disciples and he says, look, if you really want to follow me, you have to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me, which is exactly the opposite of what you do when you're starting a religion. And then he takes a child and he puts the child in the midst of them and he says, this is what greatness looks like. And they go, no.

And then he teaches them that the church is a kind of a community where we love each other well enough to be able to tell each other the truth about sin. And then we forgive each other in an unlimited fashion. And last week he applies this radical thing to sexuality, to marriage and to singleness. And today's passage, he applies this radical claim of the kingdom of heaven to money.

And he sends away a very nice, young, potential convert who just happens to be wealthy. And the disciples are reeling and disoriented.

It's interesting, just before our passage in verses 13 to 15, Jesus welcomes the children, lays his hands on them and says, to such belong the kingdom of heaven.

And you can see there in that verse, in verse 14, 13 and 14, the disciples want to send the children away. You're not going to build a big movement on smelly children.

[3 : 54] When Aaron preached this and he came to this passage, I've been listening to the sermons online. They're very edifying. He said, look, as a father of three young children, if I did a tenth of what my children did in public, I'd be arrested.

But in the passage today, Jesus sends away a potential disciple who exactly fits the profile of what the disciples think they need. He's young, he's sincere, he's open, he's seemingly humble, and it doesn't hurt that he's immensely wealthy. I mean, what a difference this guy could make.

All their money troubles as a little group would be over. And it's a famous and a familiar passage, and it divides neatly into two halves, as you can see with the paragraph.

And in the first half, what Jesus does is he teaches us again the basic principle of discipleship, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. And we have a living example of what this looks like.

And it's one of the saddest stories in Matthew's gospel, as this young man refuses. And then in the second half, from verse 23 onwards, Jesus applies this principle to those who are already disciples.

[5 : 16] Okay? So I've got two points. The principle of discipleship, point two, the application. Are you with me so far? Am I making any sense? Am I saying strange things?

Oh, good. Maybe I should try harder. So let's look at the principle of discipleship, verses 16 to 22. So verse 16, young man comes up to Jesus and says, Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

Now, what do you do when someone who's young, wealthy, attractive, did I mention he's wealthy, comes up to you and asks something like this? I wouldn't it be great if more of these young, sincere, upright people who are wealthy would be concerned about eternal life and doing good?

Surely you'd think this is to be encouraged. If you've been a Christian for a couple of years, you might say something like this. Well, Christianity is not about your doing.

It's about what God has done for you. Jesus has come to give you life to the full. Just believe in Christ and you'll receive eternal life. That's pretty good, isn't it? Or you might take him to John 6 and say, This is the work of God that you believe in the only son and so have eternal life.

[6 : 31] It's not what Jesus does. Look at verse 17. I've always been puzzled by this. Jesus said to him, Why do you ask me about what is good?

There is only one who is good. Why does Jesus say this? Why doesn't Jesus answer this young man in the way that he should or that I would?

And there is a hint in the fact that the man calls him teacher because there's nobody in Matthew's gospel who calls Jesus teacher except the people who are doubtful about him. The only disciple who ever calls Jesus teacher is Judas Iscariot as he's betraying him in the garden.

And this first phrase by the young man is outwardly polite, but he's uncommitted. He holds Jesus at a distance and he says, Look, I've come for advice.

I don't want any radical spiritual surgery. I don't want a new heart. And Jesus points this young man to what he's missing. And the thing that he's missing is he's missing God.

[7 : 37] So two times Jesus picks up this word good. He's drawing this young man to see that the young man has a completely shallow and superficial view of what goodness really is.

He says, You think that the good is what you do or what you are or what you're going to find. But there is only one who is good. And there is a goodness Jesus is starting to point out that is infinitely superior to any kind of goodness that we have in this world.

Better than life itself, the surpassing goodness of God alone. See, this man is very impressive if you're looking horizontally.

If you compare him with other people, you compare him, put him in this congregation. He's probably in the top 2% of moral upright standing citizens. But he's not yet met God.

We read this and we're so busy comparing ourselves with each other. But when we compare ourselves to God, there's just this overwhelming sense of, Lord, have mercy, have mercy, have mercy. And that's what he should have done at this point.

[8 : 45] The young man thinks that he's climbed the mountain pretty well. He just needs a leg up to the last level. And Jesus comes along and says, You're on the wrong mountain. That's why I think he points him to the commandments in verse 17.

Jesus lists off the commandments. We've read them today. Commandments 5 to 9 about how we treat our neighbours, the observable behaviour.

And the young man stands there going, Tick, tick, tick. Yep, I've done all that. What else am I lacking? And I think that response demonstrates not just a bit of impatience, but the fact that he's not met God.

I mean, you take the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. Have you fulfilled that? I don't think any of us have fulfilled that command. That's why when we read it this morning, we said, Lord, have mercy.

Incline our hearts to keep it. Have mercy on us and write it in our hearts, we pray. The young man has no sense of the infinite distance between the goodness of God and his own goodness. He's a lovely young guy.

[9 : 47] He's a straight shooter. He's the dream son in the family, a fantastic neighbour. He rakes your leaves for you and is happy to do it. Sorry, that was a personal story.

I'll talk about that later. The point is, it's highly possible to live a moral and religious life and to have some knowledge of God in the background, but never really to encounter the living God.

And the way you can tell whether you've really encountered the living God, that you've met him personally, is it makes changes in your private life, or it's not real.

If you ask, what does it mean to meet the living God, to experience his goodness, it is a personal, private, and practical experience. And this is the principle that Jesus is about to reveal to this young man.

And it's here, in verse 21, things get very uncomfortable. And the conversation takes a dangerously personal, private, and practical turn. Look at verse 21. Jesus says, if you would be perfect, the word simply means qualified for eternal life, go, sell what you possess, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me.

[11 : 02] And when the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, grieved, for he had great possessions. Now, we have to be careful here, don't we?

It's just too easy for us to say to ourselves, well, Jesus only said this once. There's no command in scripture for all disciples to give away our possessions.

Thank goodness I'm safe. It's kind of the opposite of what's going on here. The fundamental call in scripture, the fundamental call of God, is to love God above every God and every good.

And for every single one of us here in church, there are different goods and different gods. It can be a life of comfort, or it can be a life of career, or it can be a caring marriage.

For this man, it is great possessions, and the word literally means properties. And he turns away from the call of Jesus because his properties are worth more to him than Jesus Christ.

[12 : 05] And I'll bet you if we could grab him today, he would say, I made a big mistake. Of course, worshipping money has nothing to do with the size of your bank account.

It's not just a temptation for the rich. It's a temptation to think that money can bring happiness and independence. It comes to all of us. But this is a specific call to this guy.

And what on earth could motivate a person to sell all their property and give to the poor and follow Jesus? And the simple answer is there's nothing on earth. There's nothing on earth that can compare.

And here is the thing. Jesus is not calling this guy just to make some big sacrifice to demonstrate that he can enter the kingdom of heaven. He does not just say sell and give.

He says sell, give, treasure in heaven. Come, follow me. So that the renunciation is not the whole story. In fact, it's the least important part of the story in a way.

[13 : 06] Jesus is not commanding this great sale of his properties for its own sake. But as the way for this young man to take hold of something that is infinitely, impossibly deeper and richer and more permanent and more wonderful, more than all the goods or gods this world has to offer, treasure in heaven.

And this is the principle of discipleship. This is it. That entry into the kingdom of heaven is not about doing some great good work. It's not some mystical experience or some long esoteric pilgrimage.

It's about personally deciding in your heart that Jesus Christ is the greatest treasure. It's seeing in Jesus all the goodness of God and staking your life upon it.

And the only way that we can take hold of the great treasure in Jesus Christ is to let go of the other treasures that we grasp onto so tightly. You can't invest completely in Jesus without demoting or downgrading some of the other things in our lives.

So let me ask you, brothers and sisters, what is it that you've denied yourself to follow Jesus? It has to be something. If there's nothing, you're not following Jesus.

[14 : 21] It's so simple. I mean, it's so terribly practical and so extreme. And the best way I know to resist Jesus at this point is to pretend that we can hold on to both.

Oh, well, I'll worship Jesus, but I'll hold on to the other thing as well. But Jesus clearly calls on us to renounce and to give up something that wraps itself closely around our hearts.

And it may not be you. It may not be property or money. In the context of this passage in the earlier part of the chapter, it may be marriage itself or sexual identity. It could be a certain experience or wanting to have influence.

It could just be happiness. But in the end, there is nothing that can give us life apart from God himself. And when you think about it, Jesus is not really calling on this young man to sacrifice anything, is he?

He's offering him the only way to get rid of that thing that's poisoning his soul and controlling his heart for what is truly good, for what is truly eternal, freedom and treasure.

[15 : 24] This is the principle of discipleship. A readiness to give all to receive the pearl of great price. A complete surrender to the sheer goodness of God in Jesus Christ.

There it is. That's the principle. Well, secondly, and more briefly, Jesus now turns and applies this to his disciples, verses 23 to 30.

Now, it doesn't come across in our polite English version, but as this young man walks away, the disciples think Jesus has completely lost his mind.

Verse 25, the little phrase, greatly astonished, just means he's lost touch with reality. He's not just disoriented and confused, but the disciples are completely flummoxed about this.

Because, I mean, the disciples believe what most of us believe here today, and that is that being wealthy is really, really, really good. It's really good.

[16 : 24] You know, it gives us freedom and control and happiness. And you can give away a small percentage to the work of God and still secretly want more, more, more, more money. Or to put it in religious terms, to have money is to have the blessing of God.

God is good all the time. Look at my bank account. Jesus calls this young guy to choose between his money and the real God. And the disciples think that is absolutely madness.

And that's because Jesus does not see wealth as necessarily a good thing. I know this is contradicting our worldview, but he doesn't teach poverty as a virtue.

I mean, he's commanded this young man to sell his properties and give it to the poor. And even in Matthew's gospel, there are wealthy disciples, including Joseph of Arimathea, who gives Jesus his own tomb. But it's a mistake to think that money is morally neutral.

It is not. It is a danger to all our souls. And so he leads them gently through this. So step one in verse 23, he says, look, a rich person can only enter the kingdom of heaven with difficulty.

[17 : 35] Then step two, he uses an illustration that's almost funny. The camel through the eye of the needle. You know, camel is the biggest animal in Palestine.

The needle is the smallest thing that you can get it through. You know, even with a blender, you can't do it. You can't. Sorry. Put that down to concussion.

And the disciples are so outraged, they say, well, who can be saved? And verse 26, Jesus says, with man, it's impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

Phew. Salvation has nothing to do with my moral or religious qualifications. Salvation does not come from the size of your sacrifice or mine. It's God's doing.

And what's important in this salvation experience is that we cannot out good God. Only God can give us his good, his glory, his life.

[18 : 39] And it's not only possible, it's promised. And who's talking? It's Jesus who's come to save us from our sins. Such a hopeful verse, isn't it?

God can take someone who is poisoned and imprisoned by wealth and make them a completely new person. But here's the point, and I think we need to stick on this a little minute. That money and riches pose such a danger to us, especially to us in the wealthy West.

They can pervert our desires so that we imagine we don't really need to trust God. They can injure our hearts. They can subtly shift our affection and our trust and our love away from him to something that's much more controllable.

It can make me think things and do things I'd be ashamed to confess to you. And we've all seen brothers and sisters, even in this congregation in Christ, live with great zeal and great joy for Christ.

And gradually get taken up with money. And their spiritual lives begin to shrivel and they lose their joy in Christ because they're putting their joy in money, not in Christ.

[19 : 49] And I think in a congregation like ours where we are all rich, we need to pray for each other, particularly through this kingdom of heaven point of view.

Because money can be a terrible burden and a danger to us. And Peter then wonderfully speaks up for every single one of us in verse 27.

He says, see, we've left everything and followed you. What then will we have? It's the evangelical question. He says, Jesus, we've made sacrifices for you.

I've denied myself when I've remembered to do it. I mean, I'm still applying the lessons from the forgiveness sermon two weeks ago that I worked on. Lord, have you noticed my faithfulness?

I've deliberately gone without certain things for you. I can list them if you like. I didn't turn away like this young man did. But I still have this sneaking suspicion that somehow I'm missing out.

[20 : 54] There's an absolutely wonderful article in the current edition of Crux magazine, which is from Regent College by Wesley Hill. Wesley is an Anglican theologian from the States who same sex attracted.

And he's thought deeply about this issue of self-denial. Listen to what he says here. He says, Jesus will not allow the disciples to fixate on what they're giving up. As if they were defined by its negative moment of renunciation.

He looked down at verse 28. Just listen to these words from Jesus. Truly I say to you, Jesus said to Peter, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who followed me will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel.

Somehow Jesus will share his rule and authority with the 12. And now he turns to the rest of us and he says, 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 inherit eternal life.

Many who are first will be the last and the last first. Wesley Hill goes on, he says this, loss is never the final word in Jesus' economy.

[22 : 14] One yields up the comfort of hearth and home, or in my case, marriage and childbearing, to follow Jesus. And in the process, one gains a new community, the family called the church.

It's great. Jesus is completely realistic about the nature of sacrifice and reward. People leave homes and houses, families and parents.

An award-winning couple doctors in a wealthy practice in Australia. They take their three young children and they sail to Ethiopia, where they work for decades, establishing the first fistula hospital in the world for the sake of Christ.

My great, great, great aunt, trained as a teacher, sailed to East Africa, to Kenya. She learnt Swahili. She taught the gospel, began churches, trained leaders, was in prison during World War II in a German camp.

When she turned 65, she sailed back for Australia and retired for the sake of Jesus Christ. It's so encouraging to see in the congregation. People who are using their retirement, not going through the bucket list, but using your retirement for Christ.

[23 : 36] It's interesting in this list, Jesus doesn't mention husband or wife. I just think I should say that. Of course. But he does mention children. Obviously not young children.

Because it's one thing to put our possessions at his disposal. But to put Jesus over our children... You know, we think nothing of moving our children for the sake of our career.

But for the sake of Christ's mission, forget about it. We find it hard enough to trust Jesus day by day. We find it hard to trust him for our children. Because we know what's really good for them.

But, you know, even here the principle of discipleship holds. We trust and pray and live toward our children, knowing that God is not only good, he's good enough for them too. I think this is a massive rebuke to our stingy view of God.

We so naturally think we're better placed to decide what is good, what is really compassionate. Can you really... Can I really trust God this week? Can I trust him with my money or with my ambition, with my time, with my future, with my past, with my marriage, with my sexuality?

[24 : 46] I think that's why Jesus finishes this section with the idea of plenty, plenty. No matter what you do or what I do, we can't put God in our debt. Whatever you give up for him or give back to him, he gave it to you in the first place.

And the promise here is that if you give it up for him, he gives it back 100-fold. You don't lose it. Just think about this. 100-fold is a bit overwhelming.

I think about a house. So I have friends who own five or six houses. I don't know how they keep it all straight, frankly. Imagine having 100 houses. That's anxiety-producing for me, let alone 100 fathers and mothers.

But it's a picture of the overflow of eternal life and the richness we have in each other in the body of Christ. But it doesn't matter what your temptation is. Whatever comes between you and God, release it.

Lose it. And what you'll receive from him will make that thing look like less than nothing. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.