

Entering the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] That's good to see you this morning. Our sermon text is Luke chapter 18 verses 15 through 34. That's page 824 in the Pew Bible. Go ahead and turn there with me.

Luke chapter 18 verses 15 through 34. Let me read this text for us.

And a ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder.

Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. And he said, All these I have kept for my youth. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, One thing you still lack.

[1 : 35] Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. And when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Jesus, seeing that he becomes sad, said, How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. For 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.

Those who heard it said, Then who can be saved? But he said, What is impossible with man is possible with God. And Peter said, See, we have left our homes and followed you.

And he said to them, Truly, I say to you, There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come, eternal life.

And taking the twelve, he said to them, See, we're going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.

[2 : 48] For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him. And on the third day, he will rise.

But they understood none of these things. The saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. Let's pray. Oh, Father, how often the things in your word seem hidden to us. We pray now in these moments this morning that you would send your Spirit that we might have the illumination we need, not just in mind but in heart, to really understand and grasp and receive what you are speaking to us, your church, this morning.

Oh, Father, help us to understand more and more of who you are through Christ, your Son, by your Holy Spirit. We pray. Amen. Amen. So this passage from Luke 18 is about entering the kingdom of God.

In verses 17 and 24 and 25, in verse 29, we see that phrase mentioned again and again. And in fact, the idea of inheriting eternal life in verses 18 and 30 and of being saved in verse 26 are more or less synonyms for the same thing, entering the kingdom of God.

[4 : 17] But what did that mean for Jesus and His audience of first century Jews? Well, unlike a lot of spirituality today, the biblical picture of redemption is not about escaping this material world.

Rather, it's about healing and restoring the material world. For the Bible, when God's kingdom, that is when His sovereign, saving reign arrives in fullness, it would mean the joining of heaven and earth, the end of evil, corruption, decay, and death, and the unleashing of life and joy indescribable. God would at last dwell with His people and creation would be healed. That's what the kingdom of God, eternal life, meant to Jesus and His listeners.

And on top of that, what Jesus has been teaching throughout Luke's gospel is that this life of the age to come, though it would come fully and finally one day, Jesus was teaching that it had already begun.

It had already been launched in the present in His own person and ministry. God's kingdom, God's saving power had arrived and was on the move.

[5 : 43] So for us, the question of entering the kingdom of God that Luke 18 puts before us isn't some sort of pie-in-the-sky idea. No, it actually touches down to what we're all really longing for, which is a world made right one day.

And we humans made right within it, right with one another, and most of all, most of all, made right with God, our Creator.

So this passage has a lot to say about entering the kingdom of God. And I think we can sum it up like this. Jesus tells us that entering the kingdom of God is easier than you think.

And it's harder than you think. It's more costly than you think. And it's more worth it than you think. So first, entering the kingdom of God is easier than you think.

We see this in verses 15 through 17. People are bringing their children. Luke says they're even bringing their infants to Jesus so that He can lay His hands on them and bless them. That's what it means by touch them.

[6 : 53] It was a sort of ancient Jewish practice to sort of gently lay your hands on a younger generation and speak a blessing over them, to speak a word of favor and blessing. Now, children in the ancient world were not viewed with all the sentimentality that we have for children today, right?

Children are innocent and pure, and if only we could just get them away from the corrupting influences of civilization, life would be perfectly fine. No one believed that in the ancient world.

In fact, the disciples think that children are a bit of a waste of time for Jesus and for His kingdom movement. After all, aren't they on their way, Jesus and His disciples, to Jerusalem?

In the minds of the disciples, the kingdom of God is near. Tensions are rising on top of that with the religious and civil authorities.

This conflict is brewing as Jesus and His kingdom movement approach the capital. These are momentous days. God's business is at hand. This is no time to be wasting on children.

[8 : 05] They're a distraction at best, a burden at worst. But Jesus interrupts the disciples, and He calls the parents and their children back.

And He shows a kind of favor and openness to children that's almost unparalleled in the ancient world. You won't find it in any other religious leaders or movements of the day.

And Jesus says, the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. And then in verse 17, Jesus utters this authoritative pronouncement, truly I say to you, if you don't receive the kingdom of God like a child, you won't enter it at all.

You see, entering the kingdom isn't something only for the qualified and for the experienced, for the grown-up, for the important.

Even a child can enter the kingdom. It belongs to such as these, Jesus says. It's easier than you think at first.

[9 : 22] But if even a child can enter the kingdom of God, Jesus goes one step further in verse 17 to say, only the childlike can enter. And here's where things get interesting.

Now again, we tend to sentimentalize children, don't we? So when we hear Jesus say, you have to receive the kingdom of God like a child, we tend to think of some virtue that's inherent in children that Jesus is commending.

Children are so humble. Children are so innocent. Children are so trusting. But I think Jesus' point is much more penetrating than that.

Jesus is not commending childlikeness because of some supposed virtue that a child has, but because of what children don't have.

In other words, children are weak and vulnerable and completely dependent. They can't survive on their own.

[10 : 36] They are utterly helpless. Even infants, Luke says. And that means those who enter the kingdom must likewise receive the kingdom as those who are weak, vulnerable, needy, and dependent as those who have nothing to bring.

Imagine a king gathering an army to retake his rightful throne. Imagine one strong warrior after another coming before the king touting their strength and experience hoping that they might get the honor of fighting with their king.

And then as this procession comes through the hall, imagine a child, even an infant being brought in. Now what might this child have to offer to the king on his way to war?

Nothing. Nothing but need. The child will have to be fed, protected, and probably carried for most of the journey.

Children don't bring anything to the table. They're weak and vulnerable and needy and dependent. And Jesus says that's how you have to receive the kingdom of God if you're going to enter it at all as one who is weak and needy and dependent.

[12:11] And that means at a deeper level entering the kingdom of God is harder than you think. This is our second point and we find it in verses 18 through 25.

enter into the story a certain ruler. Now Luke doesn't say whether he's a religious ruler like the ruler of a synagogue or whether he's a local political official but we see as the story unfolds that this ruler kind of has everything.

Wealth, position, and according to Matthew's gospel youth, a rich young ruler isn't that what we dream of to be young and wealthy and important.

And on top of all that he's seemingly good. I've kept the commandments from my youth.

So he's not just young and wealthy and powerful but he's morally upright. He has integrity. This is definitely the guy that you want dating your daughter, right? He's the one.

[13:27] But then again, what does it mean to be good?

That's Jesus' first gentle challenge to this rich young ruler. Why do you call me good? Is anyone good but God alone?

So easily the ruler has used this word good, hasn't he? What, Jesus asks, is your standard of good? Yes, goodness may be attainable on a horizontal axis, comparing yourself to others, measuring yourself against the external requirements of the commands, but what happens when you put goodness on its proper vertical axis, when you realize that goodness must be considered ultimately in relation to God?

good. Then, as Jesus says in verse 22, we see that something is lacking. Jesus tells this rich young ruler that he must part with the primary source of his privilege and status and security.

That is, in other words, he must part with his money. Sell everything, give it to the poor, then you'll have treasure in heaven and you can come follow me.

[15:00] You see, Jesus perceived the heart of this rich young ruler and what Jesus could see is that his functional Savior, his functional Lord, the one thing he couldn't do without, the one thing he couldn't part with was his wealth.

So, Jesus puts his finger right there. Now, of course, Jesus doesn't tell every disciple to sell off all of their belongings, but for this rich young ruler, entering the kingdom wasn't possible any other way. You see, though externally he had kept the commands, no sex outside of marriage, no killing, no stealing, no lying against your neighbor, honoring your parents, though externally he had kept the commands internally, he was guilty of breaking the first and the greatest commandment.

You shall have no other gods before me. His money was his God. That is, it was his source, his ground of security and identity and hope and purpose.

It was the thing that made himself sufficient. and hearing that he must part with his money in order to enter the kingdom, he becomes very sad.

[16:33] Very sad, Luke says, because he is very wealthy. But note, friends, sadness does not equal real repentance.

repentance. So you see, it's harder than you think to become like a child, to become weak and vulnerable and dependent and enter the kingdom of God.

It means having no other gods, no other idols above the one true God, to have no self-grounded source of your own sufficiency. It means opening your hands from everything else that might be your identity and your trust.

In fact, Jesus doesn't just say it's difficult. He says for humans, it's impossible.

It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. I was thinking about actually bringing a needle from home and holding it up.

[17:43] If I had done that, you probably wouldn't even be able to see the eye of the needle from where you're sitting, would you? You might not even see the needle. But you wouldn't miss the camel, no matter where it was in the room, right?

Maybe you'd smell it before you saw it, but you wouldn't miss it. Now imagine that camel squeezing through the needle's eye. It would be impossible.

Now of course Jesus' words apply to more than just the idol of material wealth. Anything can take that place in our hearts, can it?

That source of self-sufficiency and trust and security, that thing we use to battle back our need. But wealth can be particularly deceptive, can't it?

Wealth fools us into thinking that we are self-sufficient apart from God. It promises security, we'll be okay. We've got enough in the bank account.

[18 : 51] It promises status, people start to actually listen to you. It promises influence, people might actually do what you say.

Okay. how many of us honestly would have actually obeyed Jesus and sold everything if we were in this rich young man's shoes?

Imagine if that were the requirement Jesus laid upon you. And so the crowd say, who can be saved?

in the first century wealth was popularly viewed as a sign of God's favor. So they're essentially asking if the successful can't be saved, who can?

If the people who have it together can't be saved, who can? And notice what Jesus says in verse 27. He doesn't say, well, the really spiritual and committed after much practice and years of teaching are able to become childlike, forego their idols, and turn to God.

[20 : 02] You can do it. It just takes some practice and some time. That's not what Jesus says. Nor does Jesus say, well, once you really hit bottom, then you'll be able to become childlike.

that's not what Jesus says. He says, with man, it's impossible. In your own strength, in your own spirituality, you can't get rid of your idols.

It's impossible. It's not just harder than you think. It's infinitely harder than you think. But what is impossible with man is possible with God.

God and God alone can do what we cannot do. If left to ourselves, we would never be able to enter the kingdom of God. But that's not where God leaves us.

And yet, this work of God, this work of God's possibility in the face of our human impossibility, is not something that God just can do with a mere snap of his fingers.

[21 : 23] It doesn't work that way. Entering the kingdom of God is more costly than you think. And that brings us to our third point, which we see in verses 31 through 34 at the end of our passage.

In verse 31, Jesus takes the twelve apostles aside and tells them what's going to happen when they go and get up to Jerusalem. Remember, this whole section of Luke's gospel from chapter 9 through chapter 19 recounts Jesus' final journey to the capital, to Jerusalem, that throbbing center of Jewish life and religion, the place where King David sat a thousand years before, ruling as God's anointed king, the place where the temple stood and where God's presence dwelled, the place where it was popularly thought the Messiah would show up in glory and overthrow idolatry and evil, renew the people of God and heal creation, but Jesus is teaching us here that it's more costly than you think. Jesus refers to himself as the son of man, which is a messianic title from the Old Testament book of Daniel, and he says that he will be delivered over to the Gentiles, the Romans, and they'll mock him and they'll make fun of him and they'll shame him and they'll spit on him and they'll flog him and they'll kill him.

And on the third day, he will rise. And the apostles, they don't get it.

You see, the work of the Messiah, the inauguration, the start, the founding, the beginning of the kingdom of God, the throwing opening, the throwing open of the doors, and what it will take for us to enter the kingdom of God, it's more costly than they could imagine too.

[23 : 16] They wanted a simple triumph. But Jesus says the only way to get there is through his own humiliation and defeat through the cross.

You see, friends, it takes nothing less than the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God to enable us to enter the kingdom. him. Just as ancient Israel, do you remember the stories in the Old Testament?

Just as ancient Israel was delivered over to the Gentile nations because of their sin and sent into exile, so Jesus says right here that he, as Israel's Messiah, would have to be delivered over the Gentiles.

But not for his own sin, rather for the sin of his people. people. As the king, he represents his people and he stands in our place taking the punishment our sins deserve and exhausting the wrath our sins deserve and going into the exile that we deserve.

And that means to cleanse us, to give us new hearts so that we might become like children and enter the kingdom. It takes more than just good teaching and more than just good examples. It

takes the complete self-emptying of God the Son.

[24 : 40] You know, the other place in Luke's gospel where this idea of human impossibility and God's possibility comes up, do you remember? I think it's in the very beginning with Mary.

How will these things be? What's impossible with humans is possible with God. How does our redemption begin, friends?

The Lord of the universe becoming a child in the incarnation, living a life of complete trust in his heavenly father and at the end of his ministry becoming more weak and vulnerable and helpless than we can ever imagine, all for our sins.

And then he had to break the bonds of death and rise again. Not just go through death to sort of some other sphere but go down into death and back into life again, taking our sin with him into the grave but rising again to give us new life.

And friends, now because the king has accomplished the work of redemption, he's ascended to the father. He's poured out the spirit and right now he calls us through the proclamation of the gospel to trust in him.

[26 : 03] Now we can become like children. No longer do we need the false security or the status or the supposed influence of money or any other idol we might erect.

The price has been paid and our sins are forgiven. And genuine repentance and faith are being poured out as a gift. by the spirit through the preaching of the word.

What was hidden is now revealed. What was impossible with man is now possible with God. And now we can open up our hands to the things we thought we couldn't live without.

We can be spiritually helpless, weak, and vulnerable because our Lord Jesus has gone before us. He's gone down into weakness and been raised in glory.

And he promises us that entering the kingdom, no matter what we may lose now because of him, is more worth it than we could ever think.

[27 : 10] And that's the fourth and last point of our passage. Let's circle back around to verses 28 through 30. In verse 28, hearing Jesus say that God can do what man cannot do, Peter says, see, we've left our homes and followed you.

It's hard to know what Peter actually means in saying this. The commentators go all over the place. Who knows? Peter's probably just saying the first thing that came out of his mouth. Oh, I said that. And this prompts Jesus to say a second time, truly I say to you, another authoritative pronouncement from the words of our Lord, just like back in verse 17.

But this time, it's not a requirement, it's a promise. Truly I say to you, there's no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

Is entering the kingdom of God worth it? Is it worth potentially losing everything to come follow Jesus, to be weak, to be vulnerable, to be dependent? Jesus says it's more worth it than you think. But this isn't to say there won't be real losses. Jesus lists a whole range of relational losses related to the home here.

[28 : 44] Wife, brothers, parents, children. Now Jesus is not encouraging his disciples to abandon their family responsibilities.

What he means is that there's going to be real rejection for those who follow him, that there will be real loss for those who follow him. Some will have family members disown them for becoming a follower of Christ.

Others will have friends who grow distant over time. Some, in obedience to Jesus' command to only marry, a fellow believer will have to delay getting married or forgo it altogether.

So the losses are real. But Jesus goes on to say in verse 30, that whatever sacrifices we make for the kingdom, they won't compare to what we gain.

And it's a two-fold promise, isn't it? First, Jesus says, you'll receive many times more in this time, in this age. Now in what sense will those who have lost their home and lost their family gain many times more in this age?

[30 : 04] Jesus isn't saying that we're all guaranteed spouses and children. He's certainly not promising oodles of material wealth. No, he's pointing here to the new family.

He's pointing here to the hospitality and the generosity of our new family in the church. Though your road may be hard, you won't be alone, Jesus says.

And of course, the church won't do this perfectly. But imagine, what if we as a church all opened up our hands, not just on our money, but also on our time?

What if we opened up our homes and our schedules for one another? Would there not be more than enough to meet the needs of one another materially and relationally?

I mean, imagine a church where married couples and single people mutually loved and served and spent time with one another. Or where old and young.

[31 : 15] Or where, well, you pick the dichotomy you want. Where we loved and served and spent time with one another.

Where loneliness was regularly, not perfectly, but regularly met with the warmth and friendship of a new family of the church.

Would that not be a tremendous sign of God's kingdom? Of God bringing down the barriers that divide us, not just from Him, but from one another in creating one new humanity in Christ.

Would it not be a great sign that His restorative reign was indeed making all things new? Just through this simple act, of inviting someone in and inviting someone along.

But it's not just for this age. In the age to come, Jesus says, eternal life. You know, the tragedy of the rich young ruler is that his earthly wealth was temporary.

[32 : 32] None of it was going to last. None of the status, none of the insecurity, none of the influence, all of it would be stolen by death.

Do any of the things that we forgo or sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom deliver lasting and eternal joy? Not a single one. Spouses will die.

Children will move away. Houses, no matter how much time I spend fixing it, will decay. But what does Christ offer in exchange?

What does He promise us in exchange for these temporary and fleeting things? Now, we have to be careful here because the words eternal life might not communicate to us today what they're meant to communicate in the Bible.

When the Bible speaks of eternal life, yes, it means heaven and living with God forever. It means that, but it means so much more.

[33 : 42] It's talking about the resurrection of the body. It's talking about a new creation where all the good pleasures of this life are healed and restored.

And this means that there is nothing that you forgo in this life for the sake of the kingdom that will not be restored to you. There are even greater joys ahead, greater pleasures, greater delight.

Eternal life. But the emphasis on the life is what's ahead of you. And that means even if you lose everything now, you've not really lost anything.

Christ has swallowed up death in victory, and He promises you eternal life. Entering the kingdom, no matter what it costs, is much more worth it than you and I think.

I wonder, friend, what is God asking you to give up, to lose, or to leave behind this morning?

There's going to come a day when you will see that it was no real sacrifice at all compared to what's in store.

[35 : 10] Eye has not seen nor ear heard what God has prepared for those He loves. Just imagine, if God the Father was willing to give His own Son for us when we were sinners, what must He have in store for us when the Lord Jesus returns in glory?

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? This is what it means to enter the kingdom of God.

God, we come with nothing and He gives us everything. It's impossible for us, but it is more than possible with God.

Let's pray. Oh Lord Jesus, as we come to Your table now, we pray that You would continue to cast every idol from its throne in our hearts as we commune with You at Your table.

Lord, help us to see the great promise of Your Word that in the age to come there is eternal life and in this age so much more than we have lost through the loving fellowship of Your church.

[36 : 20] Lord, help us to live that and be that for one another, we pray. Amen.