

Part 65: The Cost and Riches of Following Jesus

Jonathan White | Luke 18:15-30

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I wonder how many of you have engaged with folks who hold pro-abortion views. In college ministry, I've had a few of these conversations over the years and heard every argument under the sun. A common reason proponents give for abortion is that of viability. Can the baby survive on it's own outside the womb? In other words, is it a viable, independent being?

Just a year ago, my youngest son couldn't have kept himself alive for a full day without outside help. What about children with downs syndrome? Or elderly people who need help getting around for basic daily tasks? Do these individuals have no worth because they depend on others to live?

I hope all of us would shout a resounding NO to this question!

In our text today, Jesus shows that it is the most unviable and the most helpless people who find life.

And this has been a recurring theme if you've been with us for the last couple of weeks. Two weeks ago, Jonny preached on the first few verses of Luke 18 and how our sense of self-sufficiency is revealed in our prayerlessness. To depend on and trust God is to pray and not lose heart!

Last week, Tyler preached on the passage right before ours where we saw two very different ways to approach God, in blind self-sufficiency or in obvious acknowledgement of sin. We saw how the Gospel is for those who need it and we all need it!

Our main point today might sound redundant, but our thesis is this:

To enter God's kingdom is to acknowledge your need, renounce everything, and receive infinitely more than you could imagine.

We'll see this in three points: **1. The Way into the Kingdom (15-17), 2. The Cost of the Kingdom (18-26), 3. The Riches of the Kingdom (27-30)**

Let's read verses 15-17 one more time as we consider our first point!

1. The Way into the Kingdom (15-17)

If you're wondering how these verses fit with the rest of what was read earlier, I want to draw our attention to why Luke organizes the text this way. He presents us with a stark contrast between helpless children in verses 15-17, and a rich ruler in verses 18-24.

The first group has no status, no prominence, no power... the second is known for his wealth and position. The contrast is intended to highlight the very point we're looking at first.

Children in this day and age were generally considered useless and burdensome until they could contribute to their family or society. Here is yet another picture of a culture that only ascribes value and worth to someone who has something to offer.

Two different words are used in our passage for who is being brought to Jesus – infants and children, and not a word in scripture is accidental. Because Luke starts off saying that infants are being brought to Jesus, consider the ramifications of that.

Can you think of anything more helpless than an infant? For those of you in the room with children, I'm sure you all remember the first few nights at home with your firstborn child... where every snuffle seems like a sign of impending death and every peep made from the bassinet draws you like lightning to their side.

And it makes sense, because infants are utterly dependent on their parents. They contribute nothing but cuteness to the world. They don't help pay the bills, they actually increase the size of them. But we know that value doesn't come from one's ability to contribute. Value is inherent to all of God's image bearers.

So people are bringing these helpless image bearers to Jesus that he might touch them. I want to draw our attention to the word touch. Touch in its proper place can convey care, familiarity, gentleness, affection, protection, and in Jesus' case – healing.

Why does Luke employ the language of touch here? He doesn't actually even say that these infants and children are sick and in need of healing. So why bring up the physical contact at all?

Think about what it means that Jesus, the infinite, eternal creator and sustainer of the universe can and would even bother touching the untouchable and unimportant.

Jesus has existed, equal with the Father and the Spirit for all eternity, creating the universe and everything in it. He is the cosmic ruler of the universe, whose throne is forever and yet...

He condescended to become a man. He stooped so low as to take on human flesh to live among us.

Early church father Gregory of Nazianzus said of the incarnation: "what has not been assumed, has not been healed." In other words, if Jesus didn't become human, he could not fully save humanity and restore us to God.

And he could have come as a conqueror, which is what the Jews expected. He had every right to arrive in thunderous glory, kicking butts and taking names. He could have marched from town to town, commanding allegiance or death. But instead he was born in humility, as a helpless human baby. He went on to experience the whole gamut of human temptation without ever sinning. His incarnation would culminate in the same way as every other human since the fall of man – in his death. But his death being the greatest injustice the world has ever seen.

In our passage, people bringing infants and children to Jesus so that he might touch them is so profound! It is absolutely necessary that Jesus stooped from divine glory to touch and heal, wash and cleanse, and die to save us. Here in Luke, God in flesh calls helpless children to him, that he might convey his love, care, and healing power through touch. And he came not to touch wealthy, powerful people and start a movement of influential followers... but to touch infants and children, completely without resource.

And what are the disciples up to while these children are being brought to Jesus? Barring them access! How dare these tiny people approach the king of the universe with their tiny problems!

But look at Jesus' response to the disciples again in **verses 16-17**.

Now, it would be a mistake to read Jesus' words and say, "all children get into God's kingdom." We know that no one gets eternal life apart from repentance and faith in Jesus. So what exactly is Jesus saying here?

The way into the kingdom is simple. Admit you have nothing to offer. Come to Jesus. The only way to come to him is to repent and believe.

As parents, we are constantly asking our kids to apologize to one another or to us when they have sinned. We typically say something like, "What do you need to say to mommy?" And our child says with nearly zero sincerity, "I'm sorry mommy." Which we follow up with, "What specifically are you sorry for?"

My youngest regularly apologizes for the wrong thing. After whacking his mom with a blunt object, we coax an apology out of him... but when we ask what he's sorry for, he often says things like, "I'm sorry for not listening to you." He thinks if he just goes through the motions and gets the words out, we can all move on and he can get back to hitting people with blunt objects.

Sometimes we treat repentance like this. We approach God to say, "sorry for what I did" only to go back to the same sins with no remorse. We think we can check the repentance box and get on with our lives. But repentance is a much weightier thing. When sharing the gospel on campus, I most often use the words turn and trust as clarifiers for repentance and faith.

Repentance is a posture of heart that says, "I agree with God about my guilt and want nothing to do with that anymore". But it's not enough to quit doing a list of things. Non-Christians can turn from specific sins, stop bad habits, and start good ones. Youtube videos and podcasts abound from godless people telling you how to do so.

But true repentance only happens when God's blazing holiness and perfection shines light on the overwhelming problem of sin in our hearts. And when he shows us how helplessly lost we are, we turn FROM our sin and TO him, our only hope of righteousness. Coming to Jesus like the children in this passage means you know you have nothing to offer him whatsoever and that apart from his mercy, you're doomed.

Humble reliance is the only way in. To come to Jesus any other way is to be denied entry into the kingdom.

Which leads us to our second point:

2. The Cost of the Kingdom (18-25)

The story of the rich ruler is well known in some Christian circles, but probably for the wrong reasons.

Both in the church and in broader society, there is a trend where poverty and minimalism are generally looked upon with favor and wealth is despised. Some of you will remember in 2011 when Occupy Wallstreet popped up. This was the movement that despised the so called 1%, the wealthy elite... the theory then is that the rest of us average folks are the 99%.

The funny thing about this idea is that globally speaking, the poorest person in this room is part of the 1%. To have clean water, food, clothing, and shelter right now means you are extremely wealthy by most of the world's standards. But the story of the rich ruler is not about the merits of poverty, or even necessarily that wealth is a bad thing.

Read with me **verses 18-20**, which really frame the rest of the story.

If you're like me when I initially read this passage, you might be asking yourself why Jesus would say what he says. Jesus is good and Jesus is God. This is the clear and consistent testimony of the Bible. To the ruler, Jesus is merely a "good teacher". This is not uncommon to hear even in our culture today.

Jesus' question of, "why do you call me good?" gets to the very heart of "goodness" itself. What does it mean to be good? Can a person even be good? In his infinite wisdom, Jesus then turns to the law. "You know the commandments," he says and proceeds to walk through five of the ten commandments given to Israel. Paul tells us in Romans 3:20 that this law, the law that Jesus holds up like a mirror to the ruler, gives us knowledge of sin.

For the ruler to see Jesus rightly, he would have to first see God's standard as impossible to reach, and therefore God himself as impossible to reach by his good works. Seeing God as he is would mean seeing himself as sinful, unable to defend his case before a perfectly holy and just God. By all accounts, it looks like the ruler is a pretty good guy. He hasn't committed adultery, murdered anyone, stolen anything, wrongly accused anyone in court, and he has honored his parents since childhood.

Many of us are familiar with how Jesus raises the bar on what sin is in Matthew 5 as he correlates hatred in the heart and murder, lust in the heart and adultery. Jesus reveals that even if we keep the letter of the law by not sleeping with someone other than our spouse, we break it with the lustful intent of our hearts.

He reveals that even if we don't break the commandment not to murder, the hatred and anger we harbor in our hearts condemns us. Jesus doesn't ask the ruler to justify himself by the law but to see how the law has always been about the heart. And the heart is full of sin, no matter how perfect we appear on the outside.

Which is why Jesus doesn't waste time arguing with the ruler about his self-justification. He doesn't have to... watch what happens in **verse 22-25**. Here, Jesus cuts straight to his heart. Even if, by some stretch of the imagination, the ruler could keep every other point of the law... he would fail here, because the biggest idol in his life was his money, his wealth.

If you don't consider yourself wealthy and have already decided this passage and this sermon aren't for you, please stick with me. Just like with the law, the point is the ruler's heart, not just how big his bank account is. What exactly is it about wealth that keeps him from entering the kingdom, from

finding eternal life? Money in-and-of-itself is not evil. But our heart toward money reveals a lot about us.

Think about how easy it is, even if you have very little money, to treat it as your savior. Have you ever thought to yourself, “my life would be so much easier if I had a better paying job”? Or “if I got that raise, then I’d be able to live the way I really want to live.” College students, have you ever thought, “when I start my career, I’ll finally have enough money to travel and buy the things I want. Then I’ll really be happy.” For the kids in the room, have you ever thought, “I wish I had more money so I could buy more cool stuff like my friend has? If only I had that deck of pokemon cards or a bike as cool as hers.”

We’re constantly asking our money to save us from the life we are discontent with and save us into a more fulfilling existence. If you’re in the room and have lots of money, have you ever struggled to feel your need for God because you have worked hard, earned a great deal, and can basically buy what you want or need without thinking twice?

I have a close friend who grew up in Taiwan, and he would tell you this is probably the greatest obstacle to true Christianity in Taiwan. People’s wealth has given them the perception that they lack nothing. What could they possibly need from God that they haven’t already earned for themselves?

And herein lies the greatest obstacle for the rich ruler. He became very sad because he now knew that even if he could keep every point of the law, he couldn’t give up this one thing. One thing would keep him from entering the kingdom of God. Because he loved his money more than Jesus. We don’t get all the details but maybe he could only see what was immediately in front of him, the lifestyle he had grown accustomed to, and it was too much to bear the thought of giving it up.

And this is the point of our second point. The cost of following Jesus is whatever you love most in life. For the ruler, Jesus calls him to renounce his wealth to follow him. And maybe that’s what Jesus is calling you to today. But maybe he’s calling you to stop seeking a spouse above him. Maybe he’s calling you to stop prioritizing your career over him or the adventurous Instagram-worthy life over him.

One of the best ways to discern what idols we have in our hearts is to ask the question, what is your vision of the good life? Idols are all about disordered affections. Money, sex, family, career - none of these are inherently bad things. But idolatry is taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing.

The weight of this passage is enormous. Doesn’t it sound utterly impossible? That’s because it is!

The rich ruler could no sooner give up his wealth to enter the kingdom of God than a camel could go through the eye of a needle! You and I can no sooner give up whatever grips our hearts than a freight train could fit into my water bottle.

The crowd and the disciples in our passage are left undone at this point as they respond rightly to Jesus. Look at **verse 26**.

Entering the kingdom of God and finding eternal life is synonymous with salvation! Originally in thinking through how to preach this text, I thought I should define the kingdom of God for us. But I

love how beautifully the definition shows up for us in this passage, specifically in the crowd's question.

To be saved from our sin is to enter God's kingdom, and to be brought graciously under his rule and reign and to receive eternal life. No one waltzes into the kingdom like a dignitary visiting the king of another country. The king of this kingdom is unparalleled in his perfection, his holiness, his justice, and his power.

And the crowd's question is spot on – salvation is impossible! If the wealthy, well-known ruler can't earn eternal life for himself, then what hope do we have? The bad news is, the cost of the kingdom is too great for any of us. But we'll see some incredibly good news in our last point, where we'll look at:

3. The Riches of the Kingdom (27-30)

Read with me again from **verses 27-30**.

This last section of our text is where both the helplessness of the children and the self-reliance of the ruler find their answer. How can a helpless child find the way into the kingdom? How can a money-loving, powerful figure humble himself and renounce his wealth to follow Jesus?

By the impossible- made possible power of conversion! Conversion is an ugly word in our culture. It has all kinds of baggage attached to it that makes people cringe. I want to be clear that we're not talking about conversion to some sort of Judeo-Christian cultural norm where you have to wear khakis to belong. Nor are we talking MERELY about some sort of decision to trade one set of values and standards for another.

In John 3, another Jewish ruler, Nicodemus, sneaks out at night to find Jesus and hear more of his teaching. This is where Jesus famously teaches that to be saved is to be born again. We don't have time this morning, but read John 3 this week to see an astonishing theology of regeneration and conversion and specifically how it happens! According to Jesus in this passage, conversion is something that happens to you.

Think about what it means to be born- you had literally nothing to do with it. It happened to you. You had no will because you didn't exist. You weren't some sort of alien, spirit baby floating around before choosing to inhabit your mother's human womb. You came about by the will of your parents.

The point is, you didn't know how it happened, it just happened. One day, you didn't exist outside of the womb, the next day, you did. In the same way, no one comes to saving repentance and faith in Christ apart from the Holy Spirit drawing us and opening our eyes to the truth! And this is really good news!

The truth is, we *could* not and *would* not come to Jesus because we loved our sin too much. We were as happy as a pig in the mud to make peace with our sin and live in it. Until we weren't. The spirit had to give us the appetite for Christ.

This fits with what Luke is doing in our passage this morning. Notice how many times passive verbs are used – People are “bringing” the infants to Jesus, Jesus says the kingdom of God is “received”,

even the disciples who have given up everything to follow him don't earn eternal life, it's "received" in verse 30. Even the rich ruler asks how to "inherit" eternal life.

You don't control your inheritance. Some of you might wish you could, so your dirtbag siblings don't get any of it. But your inheritance, by definition, is something you are born or adopted into, given by your parents.

Our entry into the kingdom begins with the Father choosing us from eternity past, the Holy Spirit initiating by drawing us to himself, and the Son coming to live perfectly, die sacrificially, and raise from the dead to free us from sin and death. The salvation that is impossible for us has not only been made possible by the triune God, but is from start to finish, from A to Z, *his* plan and *his* work on our behalf.

Our response is something we don't do on our own, but being given eyes to see and ears to hear, we can't help but respond by coming to Jesus empty handed in repentance and faith. Our friend the rich ruler couldn't see past the cost to see what he would receive in walking away from his wealth.

But following Jesus is not all cost, no gain. What you lose temporarily is blown out of the water by what you gain eternally! To be saved is to see your former life as poverty, and your new life as incomparable wealth!

Jesus says his followers will receive "many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life!" How can he say they will receive many times more in this time when he will send his disciples out to suffer and die in his name?

Paul answers this question in **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**.

With our eyes set on heaven, all of our suffering on earth falls into its proper place. This life might be hard, but it's momentary. We might be financially poor, but we have eternal riches beyond anything we could ever imagine in the salvation Jesus offers!

How does the reality of our eternal riches change the way we view our lives today? Jesus says we receive many times more, not just in eternal life, but in this time also.

I want to walk through a list of areas Christians are rich right now – and this is not some sort of empty exercise in merely "being thankful". These are true riches we can hang our hat on, no matter our circumstances.

Church, we are:

Rich in grace. We were guilty, but we've been forgiven. We deserved death, but Jesus gave us life. Paul tells us in 2 corinthians 8 that Jesus became poor for our sake so that by his poverty we might become rich. This is nothing but unfair, undeserved, grace!

We are rich in righteousness. Because Jesus became sin for us, though he knew no sin, we became his righteousness! Now when God looks at us, he sees his son!

We are rich in access to God! We get to always pray and not lose heart, approaching the God of the universe boldly, because we don't come with the filth of our own sin, we come clothed and covered in Jesus' good works!

We are rich in sanctification. The Spirit is day by day conforming us more to the image of his son, helping us to put off sin and put on Christ.

We are rich in knowledge. The simplest person among us who has been captivated by the gospel has had God's mercy made alive to them by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. God's word contains everything we need for life and godliness – today, tomorrow, and always.

We are rich in relationships. You might feel lonely in here this morning and I don't want to discredit your experience. Maybe it's hard to see, but to be a Christian is to be saved from the isolation of our sin, reconciled to God AND one another. We're saved INTO the covenant family of the church. The church isn't an optional add-on for the Christian life. The new testament knows no such thing as a Christian who is not a part of the multi-generational, multi-ethnic body of Christ. No matter how great OR how crummy your biological family is - we get a new family in the church, spiritual brothers and sisters, moms and dads, aunts and uncles, grandparents... We preach the gospel to one another, bear each others burdens, share each others joys, read scripture together, pray together, eat meals in each other's homes, play with each other's kids, and disciple one another. We are rich in relationships.

We are rich in purpose and meaning. Nothing is more on the mind of most young people in this room. What is my purpose? What gives most meaning to my life? In being captured by the gospel, we're made ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us in the world! To labor for riches to buy stuff that will waste away is exhausting and meaningless. But regardless of your occupation, to labor in evangelism, to disciple one another, to strive to know and love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength provides wonderful purpose and meaning to life.

We are rich in hope. Think about the disciples who would go on to endure persecution and death at the hands of unjust men for the sake of Christ. If our hope is in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied! But if we have our eyes fixed on our savior who suffered and died, but was RAISED from the dead, purchasing not only our forgiveness but our eternal inheritance... we are rich in the hope of a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Finally, we are rich in life! In John 17, just before his betrayal and arrest, Jesus says in his high priestly prayer, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Where we were destined for a Christ-less eternity, experiencing God's wrath forever, Jesus' followers are guaranteed eternal life that starts now in knowing him and goes on forever in the age to come.

As we wrap up this morning, I want to ask you to consider a couple of questions.

First, if you're a non-Christian with us this morning, are you conscious of your response to Jesus? Would you consider whether you approach Jesus like a child or whether you come to him with your list of good works that you think might get you into the kingdom?

Jesus makes it clear there is no life for anyone who comes to him in any other way but child-like humility. Come to him in repentance and faith and RECEIVE eternal life- he won't cast you out! If this resonates with you, come catch me or one of our pastors afterward. We would love to talk to you!

If you're a Christian here this morning, you know that repentance and faith are ongoing for us too. We of all people ought to know our daily need for God's grace in Christ. What might Jesus say is the one thing you still lack? Is there something this morning that calls for your allegiance other than Jesus? What's the pet sin you can't seem to beat that needs to be brought to light in the gospel and that you need help from another believer with?

If you're a Christian, remember that even the good things we have belong to Christ. This morning, obedience probably looks like giving something up, wealth or otherwise, to follow him in faith. In one of my favorite hymns, the writer pens these words: "If thou should'st call me to resign, what most I prize it ne'er was mine, I only yield thee what was thine, thy will be done."

What is impossible for you to give up is made possible with God's grace toward us in Christ! Church, let's call each other again to repentance and faith this week.

Finally, at risk of sounding redundant every time I get to preach, I would be remiss to not mention missions. In the final two verses of our passage today, Jesus makes a promise to his disciples who have left house and home that what they receive in return is infinitely more than what they gave up. No one leaves their old life behind in God's kingdom without receiving many times more in return.

Imagine exchanging even 10 of your vapor-like years on earth in order to take the gospel where it is currently not. Imagine your own joy in being the messenger who takes the gospel for the first time to a people group that's never heard it and will die to a Christless, impoverished life and eternity if someone doesn't go tell them. Go and follow Jesus - you will receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.