

March 5, 2023

CONTRASTS AND THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ENTERING THE KINGDOM

Luke 18:9-19:10

(4 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)

As we've followed through Luke's gospel one of the things that we've brought up repeatedly in order to understand each text is that Luke wrote the gospel as an "orderly account" (1:3) of the life and teachings of Jesus. He takes Jesus' life and teaching and organizes each section of his gospel in such a way that he groups it around certain themes or issues he wants us to see. We're going to see that again this morning as we look at Luke 18:9-19:10. One thing you can see is how Luke has organized this text by started and ending with tax collectors. In 18:9-14 we find a tax collector in the temple asking for God's mercy. Then, our text ends in 19:1-10 with another tax collector named Zacchaeus, whom we're told was a "chief tax collector and was rich" (19:2) who comes to find life in Christ. These stories seem to bracket this section. Then, right in the middle of the text (in 18:18-30) we find another wealthy man who is said to be "extremely rich" (18:23), and so Luke has tied these episodes in Jesus' life and his teaching together by weaving this thread of characters who have something in common. But that's not the only way that Luke ties together the section of text we're going to look at this morning.

He also ties the text together by utilizing contrasts. This is something we've seen throughout Luke's gospel. He has shown us the centurion exercising greater faith than all in Israel (7:1-10), the Samaritan showing mercy instead of the religious elites in Israel (10:25-37), the older brother remaining distant from his father while the prodigal son is restored (15:11-32), and the rich man facing torment in the age to come while Lazarus was in a place of paradise (12:16-21). And we could list many others, but suffice is to say that Luke utilizes contrasts to help his readers see what he is emphasizing, much like a jewelry salesman putting his diamonds against a black cloth backdrop. And he does that in this text as well because you not only see two tax collectors justified but a Pharisee condemned, children and a blind man welcomed while a wealthy and admired man is turned away.

So, why does Luke tie all these episodes and teachings of Jesus together in this way? It seems it's because he wants to show us in this section what is required to enter the kingdom of God. Throughout this section, Luke shows us what kind of people we must be and what kind of things are of required of us to enter the kingdom of God. But when I say that, it's not lost on me that this is now how we talk. This morning we've recommended a number of people for membership whose testimonies we'll hear this evening, and I doubt that any of them have planned to begin their testimonies by saying, "Here's how I entered the kingdom of God." Jesus does speak this way, however. Note, for example, how he says in 18:16-17, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs *the kingdom of God*. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not *enter it*." So, what does this mean?

Well, entering the kingdom of God is simply another way of speaking of being saved, which is vernacular we more readily use, isn't it? Let me show this to you in the section on the rich young

ruler. First, he comes to Jesus asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (18:18). So, that’s the topic—inheriting eternal life. And that’s language we’re comfortable with because we understand that repenting and believing the gospel not only means we’re saved from our sins and God’s wrath but have received eternal life and will dwell with our Lord forever. Okay, well let’s proceed. Eventually the rich young ruler walks away from Jesus which leads Jesus to say, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (18:24). Now, Jesus isn’t changing topics. He’s simply using the phrase “enter the kingdom of God” as a parallel for inheriting eternal life. They’re two ways of saying the same thing. Then, those who heard this remark by Jesus asked him, “Then who can be saved?” (18:26). Now, they’re not switching to another topic either. They’re using another image (being saved) in place of entering the kingdom, but they mean the same thing by it. Therefore, entering the kingdom, being saved, and inheriting eternal life are all ways of saying the same thing. Each phrase simply emphasizes a different facet of the same reality.

And that’s what this section in Luke’s gospel is about—the requirements for entering the kingdom, inheriting eternal life, or being saved. Now, I understand that if most of us are believers, this text is going to describe something that has happened with us as we came to faith. In other words, we’re not in a position of getting ready to trust in Christ for the first time. But it’s good for us to understand these realities because: 1) we must never move from these things (e.g., we don’t repent to be saved and then stop repenting once we’re converted), 2) it helps us to know what things to pray for in others whom we’re evangelizing, 3) if we don’t explicitly teach things that we believe everyone already knows, then these things will eventually be forgotten altogether, and 4) some of you here don’t know Christ, and this is helpful in showing you where your heart needs to be to follow him. So, what then are the requirements for someone to be saved? I’ll name five. First, we must know that we need mercy.

We must know we need mercy

Jesus begins by telling a parable, and—just like the parable we saw at the beginning of chapter 18—Luke tells us the purpose of the parable right up front. He tells us that Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (18:9). That is, Jesus tells the parable to expose those who were self-righteous and looked down on others. So, as the parable goes, two men—a Pharisee and a tax collector—went to the temple to pray, which would have been common. Prayers were made at the temple twice a day at the hour of burnt offering. And the two men represent two ends of the spectrum as to who would be respected in Jewish culture. Pharisees would have been exalted as those who seem to be the religiously elite. And tax collectors were seen as evil, having betrayed the Jewish cause, joined with Rome, and were profiting off Rome’s evil tax system at the expense of their neighbors. However, as we’d expect from Luke, the situation ends differently than someone in that culture might anticipate.

We’re told that the Pharisee prayed, while “standing by himself” (18:11), which was probably to distance himself from those whom he thought were lower than him. He prayed, “God, I thank

you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I get" (18:11-12).

Now, we might think that when he begins the prayer that it doesn't seem terrible. After all, isn't it good and right to recognize that it is God's grace alone that keeps us from ruining our lives with sin? Couldn't we look at a man hauled off to prison and thank God for his grace, which alone keeps us from being in that place? Sure, but that's not what the Pharisee is doing. Notice that he doesn't root his thankfulness in God's grace but his own actions. He lists all that he does, seeing himself as righteous before God because of what he himself has done. He's self-righteous.

Meanwhile, the tax collector was "standing far off," no doubt, feeling he wasn't worthy, and prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (18:13). And Jesus tells us that it was the tax collector who went home justified, and not the Pharisee because "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted (18:14).

Entering the kingdom (or being saved), then, requires that we know that we need mercy. We must recognize that we're not in a position to merit God's favor because of anything we've done (or not done). We're all in the position of the tax collector. And there's always this temptation to look to ourselves and try to measure up to God's righteousness, but this will end up leading us to despair (as we realize that we can't be good enough) or to self-righteousness (as we foolishly think we're good enough). The reality is that none of us measures up and we're dependent on Christ's finished work for us alone. This, then, brings us to our second point as Luke shows us that we must know that we are needy.

We must know we are needy

Luke shows us this by setting up another contrast. First, people start bringing small children, and even infants, to Jesus so that he might touch them. And when the disciples see it, they rebuke these parents. After all, children weren't seen as valuable but as needy distractions. Therefore, the disciples think they're protecting Jesus, guarding his time. But Jesus tells them to let the children come to him, adding, "For to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (18:16-17).

Before we zero in on what Jesus is saying here, let's consider the contrast with the next story in 18:18-30. A ruler comes to Jesus and asks him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (18:18). It's a good question, but before answering it Jesus first responds, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (18:19). Now, our first inclination might be to think that Jesus is stopping the ruler from identifying him as good, noting that only God is good and he's not God. But I don't think that's what is going on. Jesus could easily confess himself to be a sinner if that were the point he's making. But it's not.

Instead, Jesus is making the ruler think about the implications of what he's saying. The ruler recognizes something in Jesus that makes him note that Jesus is good. And Jesus is telling him to bring the point on home. Why call him good if only God is good? That is, the ruler should

recognize that Jesus is indeed God. He is God the Son. He should see that God alone is good, but this man is clearly good, and therefore he is the promised Son of God, come to save his people. And so the ruler should seek to love Jesus with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. But that's simply not his desire, as we'll see.

Jesus continues by saying, "You know the commandments" (18:20), and then he lists some of them. And instead of recognizing that he's not kept these perfectly the ruler answers, "All these I have kept from my youth" (18:21). In this way, he's very much like the Pharisee we just saw. But instead of debating this, Jesus simply points out one exhortation that can expose the man's lack of righteousness. He tells the man, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me" (18:22).

But instead of obeying, we're told that he became sad because he was extremely rich. Now, this isn't suggesting that all who follow Christ and are rich have to get rid of everything. Our text will end with another rich man who comes short of this but is clearly seen as a follower of Christ. But Jesus issues this command to this particular man because he wanted to expose that though he saw himself as righteous he actually wasn't obeying the greatest commandment—to love God above all else. Instead, he was looking at the God-man himself and unwilling to part with his money to follow him because he loved money more than God. Money represented safety and kept him from having to depend on another—even God.

This leads Jesus to say that it is easier for the camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And the reason why is because of the point this section makes—to come to Christ, we must see that we're needy. That's the point Jesus was making about the children. They are needy. He wasn't saying that children alone can come to Christ. He's saying that the very element in children that made them despicable in that culture—their neediness—was the element all need to come to him. If we don't think we're needy, we will not come to Christ and find life.

Now, this declaration about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom leads the disciples to ask Jesus who then can be saved. This is because they assumed that if someone was rich, that person was blessed of God. So, if *they* can't be saved, how can these who are less blessed of God be saved? But Jesus answers, "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (18:26), reminding us that all who come to Christ do so because of the miraculous work of God. He does for us what is impossible for us to do for ourselves.

And, finally, this whole discussion leads Peter to point out to Jesus that they have done what he requires. They've left all and followed him. But Jesus makes clear that this is no basis for arrogance because in the end, they've given up far less than they'll gain, as Jesus adds, "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" (18:29-30).

By including wife or children on the list, Jesus isn't suggesting that we obey him by leaving our wives and abandoning our children. Most likely the idea is that some might "surrender the joy of marriage or of having children"¹ in order to pursue planting a church in a dangerous area or the like. We might even think of Jim Elliott, who left his wife and children behind when he first encountered the Auca Indians so as not to expose them to danger, and ended up losing his life in the process.

But the overall point we see here is that we must not be self-reliant, but must—like children—recognize that we are needy if we're to enter the kingdom. The Lord does not receive those who come to him, thinking that we don't need him. We must recognize that we are utterly hopeless apart from him and in great need of his grace. And this leads us to our third point—we must have desperate faith.

We must have desperate faith

I say *desperate* faith to emphasize that we come to Christ in faith knowing that we are hopeless without him. And we see this illustrated in the story of a blind man in 18:35-43. As Jesus draws near to Jericho, there is a blind man sitting by the roadside begging. As a blind man, this is his lot in life. He can't make a living for himself, and so he is bound to beg. Well, he hears noise, asks what is going on, and is told that Jesus is passing by. So, he cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (18:38). Now, what's so impressive about this is that he's confessing Jesus to be the Messiah. That's why he's saying, "Son of David." And in Luke's gospel, no one has confessed this publicly (though Peter did privately). Yet, like the children before, he is told to be silent. Again, they don't think he's valuable enough to take Jesus' time.

But the man will have none of it. He is desperate and knows that Jesus is his only hope (which is remarkable since it was well understood that only God could do something like reverse blindness). So, he cries out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (18:39). So Jesus stops, asking the man what he wants. After all, he might just want some money. But he asks Jesus, "Lord, let me recover my sight" (18:41). And Jesus heals him so that the man recovers his sight, glorifies God, and begins following Jesus. We see the man's desperate faith, knowing Jesus is his only hope, and it's a picture of what we need as well.

So, I think you can see a developing theme so far. We must not think highly of ourselves, but must know we need mercy, must see that we are needy, and must have faith that sees Jesus as our only hope. But there's more. Next, we see that we must have repentant hearts.

We must have repentant hearts

In the final story, Luke brings us one more time to an unlikely recipient of salvation—another tax collector. This one's name is Zacchaeus. He wants to see Jesus as he's passing along, but he's

¹ Tom Schreiner, *Luke*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 1006.

short and can't see over the crowds. But he won't let anything hinder him from seeing Jesus, so he climbs up in a sycamore tree because—well, the Lord he wanted to see. And so Jesus sees him and tells him to come down because he wants to go to Zacchaeus's house. This of course, angers the Pharisees because Jesus is dining with a tax collector. But Zacchaeus shows himself to be a *repentant* tax collector.

As Jesus is in his home, he voices his repentance, saying, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (19:8). And Jesus announces, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:10). Zacchaeus represents a repentant heart. He wants to turn away from his rebellion against the Lord and obey Jesus.

Following Jesus (being saved) requires us to be willing to walk away from our rebellion against Jesus and obey him. But there is one more thing we can say because there's one portion of this text we've skipped over. Right in the middle, Jesus announces what is coming for him, and here we're reminded that we must follow Jesus in his path to glory.

We must follow Jesus in his path to glory

Now, that might sound good—following Jesus on a path to glory—but we'll see that the path is one of suffering. Jesus says in 18:31-33, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. 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." And we're told that the disciples didn't understand all of this because it was hidden from them.

But one day they would understand it when they experienced the same path. Yes, Jesus was raised on that Easter Sunday morning, and, yes, we will be raised one day as well. But before he was raised, he suffered. And he has said that his followers will suffer as well as we follow him. His early followers soon understood this and were faithful unto death again and again.

This is the last thing we can say about what is required of us to inherit eternal life. We must see our need for mercy, see that we are needy, have desperate faith, and repent. But we must then follow Jesus on his path to glory, persevering in repentance and faith no matter what this life brings. But we should be strengthened as we remember that his suffering and death was for us. He took this particular path to glory because he was laying down his life for us to pay the penalty for our sins. And therefore, we take up our cross and follow him. May we remember his redeeming work for us and testify to our faith in him as we come to the table now. Amen.