

How Hard to Enter the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] In some of our Anglican church services near the beginning of the service, we hear recited the Ten Commandments.

Sometimes it's the summary of the commandments, the two great commandments of loving God and loving our neighbour. And part of the function of those commandments is in one sense to daunt us about the high standards of God, to remind us that we fall short of God's standards, to prompt us to confess our sins and to know again the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

But imagine that if at the start of the service we didn't have one day the Ten Commandments or maybe we had eleven and the eleventh commandment was give everything that you own to the poor.

Well, I imagine that there would be an Anglican riot. Hard to imagine Anglican riots, but there could be one. Pews would be emptied and the Liturgical Commission, whom nobody's ever really heard about but does exist, would be bombarded with letters of complaint that in our Anglican services we were saying, give away everything that you have to the poor.

Imagine if the rubric then said that when the collection plate came around we were to put in not just our tokens of money and our little envelopes of weekly giving, but into that collection plate would go all our cash, our whole wallet, the credit cards, our pin numbers, our share portfolio, the keys to our cars and houses and all the rich jewellery that we owned along with all our valuable possessions including even our books.

[1 : 40] And what? You may have other things that you value highly. Well, there'd be rebellion.

But that's what Jesus demands of the man in Mark's Gospel in chapter 10 today. You may like to look at the passage to check for yourself that it's there and true. Page 822 in the Bibles in the pews.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem ultimately to die. And on this journey we're told that a man ran up and knelt before him showing him great respect and said of him, good teacher, an unusual way of addressing Jesus.

I think not mocking him, not perhaps flattering him, but certainly showing great respect to Jesus. And he asked him the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Here is a genuine seeker, I'm sure. In contrast to the Pharisees whom we saw last week in the earlier part of this chapter who seek to test or trap Jesus with their question.

[2 : 51] Here is someone with a genuine question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Maybe somebody with real doubts plagued by a lack of assurance.

Maybe somebody who's trying to see what Jesus' answer to that question is by contrast with what he himself thinks or has been taught by the rabbis. And Jesus, as is so often the case, answers with a question.

He says to him, why do you call me good? No one is good, no one is good, but God alone. Well, of course, we, the reader of Mark's gospel from its beginning, know that there is divinity in Jesus Christ.

So when he says no one is good, but God alone, we know that actually Jesus is good. In fact, it's not wrong to call him good. But Jesus' question raises the issue of whom does the man think Jesus is?

But also it raises the question of nobody is good, but God alone. A thought I think we ought to be keeping in mind throughout this whole passage.

[3 : 56] For in a sense, it crops up again as we seek to understand why these events and why Jesus says what he says. No one is good, but God alone.

Well, Jesus doesn't wait for an answer to that question. He goes on to say to the man, you know the commandments. He's not asking him, does he know them? He knows that he knows them.

You know the commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Not one of the ten commandments, that one, but part of Old Testament law in effect in general.

And then honour your father and mother. Father, Jesus is reciting to him the fifth to the ninth of the ten commandments. And he says, you know these. How do you respond?

And the man replies in verse 20, teacher, I've kept all these since my youth. Maybe referring back to the time of officially becoming an adult Jew at the age of 12 or 13 or thereabouts.

[5 : 00] I don't think this is an idle boast from this man. He's a genuinely pious and devout person. He's kept all these commandments, we're told.

And the word for keep has got the sense of guarded carefully. I've observed these rigorously in my life. That is, this is a person who genuinely has tried to keep the commandments of God.

A pious and devout man indeed. Just like Paul describes himself in his letter to the Philippians, when he speaks of himself before his conversion as being zealous and blameless before the law.

Somebody who's not perfect, but has rigorously and carefully tried to keep the commandments of God. Well, Jesus takes this now a step further.

And this is where he adds the command, as you can see in verse 21. You lack one thing, go sell what you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.

[6 : 10] Or a few things to note there. Firstly, sell everything and give the money that you raise to the poor. This is greater than simple generosity. He's not saying be generous to the poor.

Sell everything and give it to the poor. Own nothing is in effect what he's saying. But secondly, and relating it back to the question about eternal life, he says then you'll have treasure in heaven.

That is, your quest is for eternal life. Another way of thinking of eternal life is having treasure in heaven. So here is, in effect, Jesus saying, answer to your question.

But it's not just giving away everything to the poor. The last part of the command is follow me, Jesus. And there perhaps is an allusion to the fact that here in Jesus is somebody more than a human, though human he is.

Somebody who's divine. God to follow. How ought we respond to this? It's one thing for us to agree that it's a right command of God to all of God's people, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to defraud, not to bear false witness, to honour parents, etc.

[7 : 29] When we hear those commandments from God, though we fail them, we accept that they are God's commands to each one of us, I imagine. But what about selling everything and giving it to the poor?

Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find that command. Yes, in the Old Testament there are commands to be generous, to be open-handed to those who are in need, especially those without land, which produces their crops and income.

And so those categories of widows and orphans, the aliens and strangers and the Levites and the priests in particular, they are the objects of generosity in the Old Testament. There are laws about not exacting interest from your fellow brother and sister when you loan them something.

Also there are laws about returning of slaves and land at different periods of time so that people do not become rich at the expense of others, certainly in perpetuity. But there is nothing about giving everything to the poor.

So where does Jesus pluck this from? Is he adding a command to what is in the Old Testament? Well, perhaps a clue to understanding this comes in what Jesus has not said in verse 19.

[8 : 43] In verse 19 he quotes the fifth to the ninth of the Ten Commandments. He leaves out the Sabbath, he leaves out not coveting, and he leaves out the first three commandments about having no other God but the God of the Old Testament, and therefore not having idols and taking the Lord's name in vain and so on.

In effect, when Jesus says to him, give everything you have to the poor, sell it, he's in effect for this particular man, going back to the first commandment, you shall have no other gods but me.

And I imagine that if Jesus simply quoted the first commandment, the man would say, well yes, I agree. I've kept all these from my youth. But Jesus knows the heart of this man.

He knows what drives him. His wealth. And so he says to him, sell it all. Give it away to the poor. You see, Jesus identifies the false God, the wrong God, in the heart of this man before him, a rich man as we'll see in verse 22.

It's his wealth. And time and again in the Old Testament, the people of God are told to, put away your false gods, O Israel. The prophets frequently said words to that effect.

[10 : 03] In those cases, they might have been the Canaanite and Baal gods, the statues that they might have incorporated into their worship. For this man, not an idol in a wooden form, perhaps to put on your mantelpiece so much, as his whole possessions and wealth.

See, so often wealth is the most powerful false God that there is. Jesus will go on in a minute to say, how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Perhaps also we need to see another background here, because in the Old Testament, frequently wealth was regarded as blessing for obedience, so that if Israel was obedient to God's word, then they would be blessed with wealth, with possessions, with land, with animals, with crops, their harvests would be bountiful, their barns would be full and so on.

So here perhaps is a rich man, who's rigorous in his piety, who regards his wealth as a blessing from God, and Jesus is saying, no, in fact for you it's not a blessing.

But an idol, a false God. In effect, Jesus is reversing, perhaps, his theology. So far from a prosperity doctrine, it's almost a poverty doctrine, that prosperity is the snare, and that's often the case, you see.

[11 : 26] Our false gods and our idols are often in fact good things that have been raised to an inappropriate place in our life. wealth's like that.

There's nothing wrong or evil necessarily in wealth, but for so many of us, it in fact becomes our idol or our false God. It's the same with other things, whether it's jobs, marriage, family, they're common gods, it seems to me, in our society.

Good things in themselves, but good things, which somehow, for some of us, trap us, and become our gods, rather than blessings from God.

Jesus is reminding this man and us and the disciples of the day that following Jesus and being a Christian is indeed a radical thing.

It's not simply adding a few laws to our life, it's not simply adding Jesus to the mantelpiece of our gods, but Jesus as our soul God, replacing all other gods, radically changing our whole life and behaviour.

[12 : 34] It challenges us about what we're really committed to. Is it wealth or possessions as it was for this man? Or does Jesus take precedence?

Well, this man goes away sad, shocked, grieving, we're told in verse 22, for he had many possessions. He goes away unwilling to give them away for eternal life.

For him, eternal life has too high a price to pay. And he goes away sad. It's intriguing that Jesus, we're told in verse 21, looked at him and loved him, and yet he doesn't do anything further to persuade him to give away all his possessions and follow Jesus.

He doesn't cajole him or rebuke him or seek to barter with him and say, okay, look, maybe not everything, I'm speaking perhaps in too much of an extreme here, why don't you give some of it away, be generous, and come and follow me and be a Christian and have eternal life.

Now, sometimes you see love is hard. Love says hard things sometimes. You know, we're trapped sometimes in our society to think that the loving thing to do is to affirm where people are at and what they're doing.

[13 : 49] But if they're not on the path to eternal life, then loving them tells them you're on the wrong path. And that's what Jesus does here.

He loves him in effect by challenging or even rebuking him about his idolatry of wealth. That's real love that has the best outcome of this man in mind, that is eternal life.

Jesus doesn't call him back. He's made his decision. These issues raise for us what is our value that we place on eternal life?

Do we think that it's cheap and doesn't cost us? Or are we prepared to pay a high price for it? Is eternal life worth giving everything we've got away if Jesus were to command that of us?

Is it worth following Jesus with our life for eternal life? Is it worth losing, as Jesus will say later, even our family for the sake of eternal life?

[14 : 56] Or is that too high a price for us to pay? That's the question Jesus poses. And in effect, whatever we're not prepared to give up, that's our God or our idol.

If we're prepared to give up anything and everything for the sake of following Jesus and receiving eternal life, then truly he is our God as he ought to be.

Jesus says then to the disciples, the man having gone away, he says to them in verse 23, how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

for wealth is such a subtle but powerful God and idol in lives of people. And you and I here today, pretty much all of us in relative terms are wealthy.

That is, the wealthy are not the sort of Kerry Packers and Lindsay Foxes of the world. It's you and I. We're wealthy people in world history terms.

[16 : 02] How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. But Jesus broadens it even further in the next verse. The disciples are perplexed at these words and Jesus said to them, Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God.

Not how hard it is for the wealthy but just in general how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. You see, Jesus is saying here in effect what he said to the man back at the beginning of the interaction, no one is good.

How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God because no one is good. We all fail at some point. The commandments, standards and the bar that God sets.

Entering the kingdom of God is hard for anybody. Especially the wealthy. But not only them. And Jesus uses this famous rather absurd illustration to make his point.

He goes on in verse 25 to say it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. And of course people try and twist this little saying and you can find an unscrupulous guide in Jerusalem who will point out to you a little gate and say here is the needle gate.

[17 : 18] Camels can't get through it very easily. Well, the needle gate they point out didn't exist in Jesus' day. It's a modern thing relatively. Jesus is being literal here.

He's picking the biggest animal and the smallest opening. The disciples understand that for their words show that they understood Jesus meant this literally. Yes, it's absurd. If you're like me, you struggle getting a piece of cotton through the eye of a needle.

I've worked out what would be a good invention. I don't know how you do it but it seems to me that in our computer age it ought to be that you can get a needle with a big opening and so that people like me don't have to take their glasses off and squint and get it up to the eye to get a piece of cotton through.

And then you press a button on your computer and the opening will just go back down to what it is already. I've yet to work out why people haven't invented this although somebody has told me there is such a thing as a sewing machine but I haven't worked that out either.

My computer doesn't seem to do that. It's hard enough to get some cotton through the eye of a needle. It is impossible to get a camel through the eye of a needle.

[18 : 29] That is we actually distort what Jesus is saying when we try and reinvent it to say that there is some way that Jesus is referring to something that's possible because he goes on to say it's impossible. See what he follows up this absurd illustration with in verse 26 the disciples were greatly astounded and said to one another then who can be saved?

And Jesus looked at them and said for mortals it's impossible. That's the very point of camels and needles. It's impossible. You can't do it. Nobody can be saved is in effect the impact of that illustration.

But for the words that follow at the end of Jesus words in verse 27 Jesus is saying that for humanity rich or poor whoever we are no one is good apart from God.

Salvation is impossible for a human being to achieve. eternal life. No matter no matter how rigorous their piety, no matter how obedient they are, no matter how careful to keep the laws and commandments of God, salvation is impossible.

Eternal life is something we can never achieve. The man asked what do I do to receive eternal life? And Jesus could as well have said to him it doesn't matter what you do, how good you are, no one is good enough to achieve eternal life.

[19 : 59] It's impossible apart from God for whom all things are possible. Jesus is in effect saying here that salvation is by grace and mercy, not by our works and achievement.

Oh yes, he doesn't flesh out that theology which the rest of the New Testament does in different ways and places, but that's what Jesus is saying. No matter what we do, how good we are, how morally upright we are, how religiously pious we are, no matter how generous we are, if we were to give everything we had to the poor, we would still not be good enough to be saved, enter the kingdom of God and receive eternal life.

Only with God is that possible. To rely on God's grace and not ourselves is what Jesus is driving at in these words to the man and then subsequently to the disciples.

Well this impossibility seems to rattle Peter and the disciples. He says to Jesus, well we have left everything and followed you. And perhaps Peter is expressing now a doubt about where do I stand here?

And Jesus replies with some assurance, truly I tell you there's no one who's left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news or the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, fields with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life.

[21 : 34] Following Jesus is costly. For the rich man who's now left Jesus, he was commanded to give away all his possessions, a price he was not prepared to pay.

But Jesus is saying, following him, being a disciple of Jesus, being a Christian is a costly exercise. It may involve giving away all you have to the poor. It may involve losing your houses and fields, your income and your living is in effect.

It may involve losing your family, parents, siblings, children. But the promise of return in these verses reminds us that Jesus is never our debtor.

For whatever price we pay, the promise of eternal life is worth it. The end of verse 31, the promise is in the age to come eternal life or salvation or the kingdom of God.

The different terms are used in this passage. In effect, Jesus is answering the rich man's question again. But even more than just in the age to come, pie in the sky when we die, Jesus promises a hundredfold in this age, something that many Christians have misunderstood, who've fallen for a prosperity gospel that says, give away stuff now and God will give you a hundred back.

[22 : 53] You'll be so wealthy in this life. Do we really want a hundred times the number of siblings that we've already got? Better be careful what I say to that.

Jesus surely, though, is talking about the rich return of being part of God's family. family. You see, he says about giving up in verse 29, mothers, fathers, children, siblings, getting back mothers, children, siblings, no fathers, because God is our father.

That is, he's talking about the rich return of Christian fellowship in effect. That yes, for many Christians in our world today, maybe even some here, we know the pain of broken, tense, or even fractured relationships with our blood family because we're Christian and they're not.

And many of us have experienced that at some level or other. But of course, in many parts of the world, it's even more severe than that, where there are Christians who literally their life is under threat from their own parents or children or siblings because they're Christian and the rest of their family is Jewish or Muslim or some other religion.

where their lives are really under threat and the relationships are really and completely broken when somebody becomes a Christian. That's a high price to pay for Christian faith. But Jesus is saying that the returns of Christian fellowship, of having God as our father and within the Christian fellowship real and eternal brothers and sisters in Christ is a great return, something we ought not to belittle and yet so often we do.

[24 : 42] A reminder of our own responsibility to be brothers and sisters for other Christians because we belong in the one eternal family now, a family that will last forever compared to blood relations which may not.

Jesus also adds though, in this age, it's not just the hundredfold return, there's also persecutions near the end of verse 30. He just adds it in as though in this age, yes, a hundredfold of houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields with persecutions.

The cost keeps on being paid in this life. The reward is not full until the age to come. Of course, Jesus is speaking these words on his way to Jerusalem for the precise purpose of dying at the hands of those who persecute him.

Twice already in chapters 8 and 9, he's predicted that very persecution and death. In the very next verses as we'll see next week, he predicts it for the third time. So he's not saying that he's immune from this or that he's expecting more from his disciples than he's prepared to pay himself.

Not at all. He's going to give up his whole life and soon for the sake of others. He summarizes all of this in the last verses of this section.

[26 : 00] Verse 31, many who are first will be last and the last will be first. In some respects, that rich man with all his possessions and religious devotion was high up in society's scale.

One of the first, we might say, you'd expect to enter the kingdom of God. Not so. He goes away sad. But in the verses preceding this section, which I didn't preach on last week, but we read, Jesus has children brought to him and he says, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

In many respects, children are amongst the last of a society. But the contrast between the children and the rich man is clear. He comes self-sufficient and wealthy, thinking that in his own ability, he can enter the kingdom of God.

But empty-handed, trusting in God and grace are those childlike folk who come, that Jesus welcomes and exhorts us to be like as well.

The first, those who have plenty and rely on themselves, they'll be last. But like those children empty-handed, they'll be first.

[27 : 15] For in the end, salvation is not of our own doing, but of God for whom nothing is impossible. So what must we do to have eternal life?

Put away our gods, give them up, whatever they may be. wealth, very likely. Other things perhaps as well. That we put Jesus first and follow him and him alone.

is it worth it? Is it worth it to give away everything that we have? The possessions we value the most highly for the sake of eternal life?

Is it worth it? The cost of fractured family relationships or broken friendships, because we're Christian, they're not. Is it worth it? Is it worth it giving up parts of our life or parts of our pleasure or job or ambition to serve God and follow Jesus wherever he leads us, whatever that is?

Is it worth it? Is the cost too high? I think the return of eternal life is not at all too high.

[28 : 31] The fullness of that return will only come in the age to come. But even now there's samples of that return in the richness, the hundredfold return of Christian fellowship.

And yes, even the cost of persecution is not too high, surely, for the eternal great glories of eternal life. It's worth putting away all our false gods, all our wealth and possession, all our family if need be, for the sake of following Jesus alone, for the sake of eternal life.

Amen. Amen.