

Upside-Down Thinking

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Paul. Good morning, everyone. I'd repeat the welcome that Paul gave you. We're delighted to have you with us today as we worship and as we learn. We're continuing our series looking at Luke's Gospel, Luke's Gospel which was written to give an accurate account of the life of the Lord Jesus.

We're coming today to a slight change in Luke's Gospel, slight but distinct, I think. For the last eight chapters or so, if we've gone through Luke, we've had material that is almost all unique to Luke. It was only in Luke's Gospel.

For the next few chapters, we're rejoining Matthew and Mark who have similar content to Luke and we'll have things in all three Gospels. Now what does that mean in practice?

What it means in practice is when you read Luke, Luke loves telling stories or recounting the stories of Jesus. So for the last month or two, a lot of what we've been looking at on Sunday mornings has been stories that Jesus told. Wonderful stories they are too.

The Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus and so on. Many, many stories. For the next section in Luke's Gospel, tracking Matthew and Mark, it will be much more encounters of Jesus with people.

[1 : 14] So it's not telling stories about people as much of what the last few chapters has been about. It is what Jesus said to people and how we help them. So we're talking today about real children and a real young man.

It's not just stories that Jesus told. Wonderful though they are. So we're reading in Luke chapter 18 and we're going to start reading at verse 15. Luke chapter 18 and reading from verse 15.

And it says, A certain ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, You still lack one thing.

[2 : 45] Sell everything you have and give to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy.

Jesus looked at him and said, How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, 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.

Those who are at this asked, Who then can be saved? Jesus replied, What is impossible with man is possible with God. Peter said to him, We have left all we had to follow you.

Truly I tell you, Jesus said to them, No one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come, eternal life.

I'm sure God will help us as we seek to understand what he's saying to us this morning. Sometimes it's helpful to look at things from a different angle, to get a different perspective, which might give us fresh insights.

[4 : 01] I like this map. It's an upside down map of the world. It's also kind of rotated a bit around 180 degrees east to west. When you look at a map like this, you notice things that you might miss on a normal map of the world.

Isn't Russia enormous? It's the yellow bit down near the bottom. It's Canada huge, the pink bit on the bottom left. And doesn't the United Kingdom look totally insignificant when it's two-thirds of the way down the right-hand side rather than in the centre near the top?

You look at it differently and you get a different view, you get a different perspective on life. I think here in this passage we're looking at, Jesus is turning things upside down to give his disciples and others a different view of life.

He's saying, you have views that are in line with the things of this world. You think that rich people are important. You think that children are relatively insignificant.

Well, I'm turning it on his head. And in God's world, which he calls the kingdom of God, in God's world, things are different. And the people who God values are those who depend on him and who aren't relying on themselves for their future.

[5 : 17] And so we have these two incidents with the Lord Jesus. And I think if we can just summarise what we're going to say this morning, that these incidents teach us that the importance, the importance that Jesus attaches to simple faith and to sacrificial followers.

Simple faith and sacrificial followers. Let's go through them and see if you feel that's a reasonable summary of what the Lord Jesus is teaching.

So to begin with, we have some people who are bringing babies or young children to Jesus for him to lay their hands, him to lay his hands on them. I don't think there's healing involved here.

Sometimes Jesus touched people to heal them. They were being brought so that Jesus could bless them. And as a symbol of the blessing that he was giving to them, he was putting his hand probably on their head.

Quite a common thing to do in that day, which still perhaps happens to some extent today. And the disciples are really quite upset and annoyed at this.

[6 : 20] They're saying, well, don't let these children distract Jesus. Jesus is on a really important mission. He's giving some really vital teaching that we need to learn and others need to hear.

And here these people are. They're bringing these kids along and they're distracting Jesus' attention and they really shouldn't be doing that. Jesus says, no, these children are important.

These children are so important that the kingdom of God, God's world belongs to people like these. Now, in Jesus' day, children would have an even lower status than they do today.

If you were a child, you'd be treated almost as a possession of your parents. You would expect to be seen and not heard, to listen and learn, to be respectful, and would have been treated as someone who was relatively insignificant.

When you got to about 12 or 13, you became an adult in that culture and you took on an extra significance. But children, as such, weren't valued and were seen as being relatively unimportant.

[7 : 27] And Jesus says, no, children matter. Children have a real value and we should recognize that value and treasure them.

So a very important lesson for the disciples here, that they would be looking at saying, Jesus should be spending his time on adults and people who can listen and understand and have dialogue with them.

And Jesus says, no, the time I spend with children is really important and really valuable because the kingdom of God belongs to people such as those.

Very obvious and simple lesson for us. We have lots of children around our church. More coming and plenty here already. Do we really value and treasure them?

Or do we see them as a bit of a nuisance, as those who run around that we don't really have very much to do with? Time spent with children is time well invested.

[8 : 27] And as a church, we should be treasuring, valuing, and nurturing the children who are among us. Supporting Peter and the team in the work they do, and if we can't do it actively in our prayers, and taking a real interest in the children when we come across them in the church.

Jesus treasures children, and we should as well. That's not the main lesson that Jesus is bringing us here. Because he says, truly, I say, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.

So it's not the value of a child that he's particularly highlighting here, although he does that. He's saying the children perhaps have value and certainly should be looked at and respected because of the simple faith, because of the trust that they have.

Now, children, we know, can be really naughty. They can do things that we don't want. They can be selfish. They can be quite unkind to one another, and so on.

So Jesus isn't saying here, children are wonderful, and there's never anything wrong with them. He's not suggesting they're in any way innocent, if you like. But he is saying, I think, that children

have that simple trust that we need to look at and we need to take for ourselves.

[9 : 52] You see, if in a child with his parents, in pictures, they have a child holding someone's hand. And if you see a parent and child walking along the street, you can see the trust that the child has in the parent and their dependence on them.

Children don't think they can do everything for themselves. They don't think they can be self-sufficient and they don't need anyone else. They know that they need others and they know that they need to put their trust in them.

And so Jesus says, for us to enter the kingdom of God, we need to become like children in knowing that we need something that we can't provide for ourselves, and then in trusting God, trusting the Lord Jesus to give that to us.

And that's something that is basically described in this passage as receiving the kingdom, as being saved, as having eternal life. They really all in this context mean much the same thing.

That we need God, we need the Lord Jesus, because we can't by ourselves get to heaven. We can't by ourselves do enough good things to help me all the bad things we've done.

[11 : 05] We need to recognize that only through the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross, which we'll be remembering later on, only through that and by simple trust in him, can we be forgiven?

Can we have eternal life? Can we be part of the kingdom of God? And if we ever begin to think we can do it by our own efforts, we've totally missed the point of the teaching of the Lord Jesus, of the whole of the Bible, of the truth that God says to us, which is that we are helpless sinners.

We've done wrong. We can't put ourselves right before God. But God has provided a way, and we need to accept that way. You don't need a theological degree to be a Christian.

Theological degrees are great. Don't think I put him down in any kind of way. Theological degrees are great, but to become a Christian, to be saved, to have eternal life, all you need to understand is that you're a sinner before God, that you deserve to be punished, that Jesus took that punishment, and by trusting in him, you can be saved, you can have eternal life.

We need to have the trust of a child. We need to have a simple faith. And as we come on to the second story, it's precisely what this young man, this ruler, lacked.

[12 : 25] He lacked a simple faith because he thought that he could do things that would put him right with God. So we have this man. He's described in Luke as being a certain ruler.

He's described later on as being very rich. Matthew tells us he was young. He was someone who had some status in society. We don't know precisely what kind of ruler he was.

I think it's probably more likely he was a civil ruler rather than a religious one. They would probably have said if he was a ruler of the synagogue or something like that. So he probably was a senior official or perhaps even a member of the royal household.

We don't know, but he was someone who was in that country important. He was also someone who was rich. He had, for whatever reason, acquired lots of money.

And on top of that, he wasn't just important and rich. He also appears to have been a morally upright and good person. So he wasn't some kind of crap civil servant or dodgy politician.

[13 : 28] He was someone who had lived a life trying to please God and trying to do his best, but still he's not sure that he's got eternal life. He looks at everything he's done and he says, maybe there's something missing.

Maybe there's some big gesture I could make. Jesus, what do I have to do that I'm not already doing to receive eternal life? Now, I suspect a lot of the people when that man came to Jesus thought, well, why does he have to do anything more?

He's rich. In that society, being rich was seen as being very much a sign of God's favor that you'd done something to deserve it. He was moral. He could go through it the Lord questioned him.

He could go through the five commandments that the Lord brings out and he could say, yes, I've kept all of them since I was young. And people would be looking at him and thinking, here is exactly the kind of person the kingdom of God belongs to.

Exactly the kind of person who should earn God's favor because he's good and God has blessed him. But Jesus looks on his heart and he sees something different.

[14 : 39] So he begins by slightly rebuking him and saying, well, why do you call me good? No one's good except God. Now, perhaps in saying that, the Lord Jesus was trying to draw it of this man whether he believed that Jesus really was God.

Might have been what the Lord was trying to do. The Lord then says, well, how do you read the commandments? What are the important commandments? And he says, the Lord Jesus said, here are five.

You shall not commit a doubt. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. Now, as you know, there are 10 commandments and lists in Exodus 20.

The Lord Jesus has chosen five. He's chosen the five that particularly relate to our relationships with others. Not the ones especially relate to our relationship with God or in our thoughts, the one about coveting at the end, but our relationship with other people.

Which I guess is one that people could look at and they could say, well, we've seen evidence that this man is good. He doesn't do these things we're told not to. And so the man says, well, I've kept all these.

[15:43] I'm fine. Since I was a boy, since I was a young man, I have been keeping all these commands. Jesus then says, good, well done, but what you need to do now is to give up all your money and give it to the poor.

He says, beyond the kind of religious keeping of God's ordinances and trying to keep on the right track by yourself, you need to really demonstrate that God means more to you than anything else. And in particular, since you're a rich person, does God mean more to you than your money? And when it came to the bit, the young man had to think and say, no, God doesn't mean more to me than my money.

I'm willing to do big gestures. I'm willing to try and live a good life, but I'm not willing to give up my lifestyle and the money that I have. Ultimately for him, treasure on earth was more important than treasure in heaven.

It was more important to him that he should continue to be able to live a good lifestyle in this world than that he should have the assurance of eternal life.

[17:02] Now, Lord Jesus isn't saying to him, do all this and that will earn you eternal life. That is not the point of what he's saying, but he is challenging him and saying, what is more important to you, is this world more important or is God and serving him more important?

Challenge for us there, I think, as well this morning. What really matters to me? If push comes to shove, what are the important things in my life?

Is it maintaining my lifestyle? Is it keeping a reasonable standard of living and being able to live in the style that I've maybe become accustomed to?

Is it my friends or my family? Is that what is most important to me? Is it progression in my job or whatever else I'm doing? Is that the thing that really drives me and is most important in my life? Or actually, am I willing to give up all these things so that I can serve God and I can do what he calls me to do? The requirement of sacrifice comes to this rich man and he can't meet it.

[18:13] He says, no, that's a step too far. I'm not able to make that sacrifice. I want to hang on to what I've got. And the challenge of requirement of sacrifice comes to us this morning as well.

So the man goes away sad and the Lord Jesus uses what he said as being an example and a lesson for others.

And he talks about the rarity of sacrifice, how difficult it is to make that kind of sacrifice. He uses a very striking illustration. A camel would have been the biggest creature that people would have been familiar with in Israel in Jesus' day.

It was the biggest animal they would see around. The eye of the needle was probably the smallest hole that they could easily think about. So Jesus said, take the biggest animal you can think of, a camel, think of the smallest hole you can think of, the eye of a needle.

Can the camel get through the eye of the needle? No. It is that difficult, said Jesus, for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

[19:26] Now this really throws the disciples because they look at this rich man and they think he's the kind of person who should be getting into the kingdom of God. He's wealthy, he's had God's blessing, he's a good man, surely he can get in and if he can't, who can?

So they're not sitting thinking as we might sometimes, well it's difficult for the rich to get to heaven but the poor perhaps is a bit easier. No, they're thinking it is impossible if this is the case for anyone to get into heaven.

And Jesus says, you're right. You're right if you think in human terms but you're not right if you think in God's terms. What man can't do what is impossible with men is possible with God.

And we come back again to where we were with the children of recognizing there are some things that we can't do and in particular we can't save ourselves, we can't win God's favor by trying to outweigh our bad things with our good things that just won't work.

God demands a perfect standard but if we simply trust in God then he is able to bring us that forgiveness he is able to give us eternal life.

[20 : 44] And Jesus is saying again here you can't do it by yourself. However rich or however poor you may be however good you may think you are you can't do it by yourself.

It's impossible with men but it's possible with God and if you simply trust in God then you have eternal life.

Doesn't take away the requirement for sacrifice having accepted the Lord Jesus having put our trust in him he calls us to follow him and to make sacrifices but the first step is that simple step of faith of trusting in the Lord Jesus.

us. And then finally he talks about the rewards of sacrifice. I can almost sense sort of almost desperation in Peter's words in verse 28.

He says we've left all we had to follow you. And I wonder if he's thinking well we've done all this we've sacrificed so much is that going to make any difference or are you going to say that we're like the rich ruler as well?

[21 : 49] And Jesus says no it's different. If you truly make sacrifices for me having first trusted in me if you truly make sacrifices for me then there are rewards.

And anyone who's left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children will receive much more many times as much in this world and in these to come eternal life.

I suspect most of us aren't called to leave home wife brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom. But some people aren't some people have been in the past.

My grandparents were missionaries in India for many years and being missionaries in those days meant that to get anywhere you had a journey was probably several weeks up to a month on a boat to India and back again.

So they'd left behind parents and if their parents fell ill or needed urgent attention they couldn't get to them quickly. When they came back on furlough and their eldest three sons they left behind to be educated and they wouldn't see them for several years.

[23 : 00] I don't think we should look at that as being in some way heartless or uncaring. I'm sure there were many nights of tears and of heartache for those who'd been left behind. But it was a sacrifice worth making.

They felt that the words of Jesus needed to be taken seriously and they needed to be willing to leave everything for him. Now Jesus in a literal sense we're not going to be called to make that kind of sacrifice today.

Even if you go and work in a far away country you can get back to the UK very quickly if you need to. But I think we need to challenge ourselves what kind of sacrifices should I be making for Jesus. What is he calling me to do that will demonstrate that he is more important to me than any of the things of this world. And Jesus says if you do that if you're willing to count the cost and to make the sacrifices then you will be rewarded.

Not entirely clear what Jesus means when he says they will receive many times as much in this age and to some extent it will be the fellowship of other Christians and the support that we can give to one another.

[24 : 18] To some extent it will be the peace and joy of knowing that we are serving Christ and that we are doing what pleases him and our eternal future is secure. But he says he won't be in debt to us he will give us what we need in this world and then we will go and be with him in eternal life afterwards.

Jesus calls us to make sacrifices and I think we need each to challenge ourselves if we know him, if we are trusting in him. What kind of sacrifice should I be making?

And as we sit in front of a table with bread and with the cups on it we can think something of the sacrifice the Lord Jesus made for us and how he left behind all the riches, how he in a very real sense gave up all the riches that he had and took a life of poverty, how he humbled himself and died on the cross for us and took our sins on himself there.

As we look at his sacrifice then that should be the prompt for us to think what can I give to him and what can I sacrifice for the Lord's sake?

What is it that he's calling me to do? He doesn't call everyone to give up your money. That's quite clear. There are lots of rich people in the Bible who are not called to give up their money. But what is it that Jesus is calling me to do?

[25 : 44] So a bit of an upside down world isn't it? An upside down world where children suddenly have a huge importance before Jesus and a rich ruler, a respectable person goes away sad because he can't do what's needed to get acceptance into God's kingdom.

Lest this morning all of us think about do I have that simple faith that Jesus requires, the faith of a child simply trusting? And if I do, am I willing to be a sacrificial follower and to go wherever Jesus tells me to go and to do whatever he calls me to do?

Pray that God will help us to understand his word and to be obedient to it. Let's pray together. As we pray, let's just quietly reflect on what we've been thinking about, reflect on whether we have that simple trust in the Lord Jesus that brings eternal life and whether we are willing to make the sacrifices that he might call us to.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the sacrifice that you made for us. We thank you that you gave up everything to come and live in this world, to live a simple life in humble, poor circumstances and even to give that up and to die our death on the cross.

We pray that you will help all of us to come to that point of faith, of recognising there's nothing that we can do to save ourselves. We simply need to trust in you and then to be willing to give everything to you, to be your followers, to be sacrificial in the way we live.

[27 : 26] We thank you for your presence. We commit ourselves to you now as we move into this time of communion and as we particularly remember your death for us. We give you our thanks Lord Jesus in your name.

Amen.