

Why There Are More Kids Than Rich Men In The Kingdom

Matthew 19:13-30

Mark Vroegop

13 Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, 14 but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." 15 And he laid his hands on them and went away.

16 And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." 18 He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, 19 Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 20 The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

23 And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" 26 But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." 27 Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" 28 Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and the last first (Matt 19:13-30).

Tim Keller, in his book *The Prodigal God*, identifies that the story often called "the prodigal son" is not only about the son who runs away; it is also about the "elder brother" – the one who didn't run away but whose heart could not have been further from the family. Remember him? He was the one who is upset when his brother repents and refuses to celebrate when the prodigal son comes home. The elder brother is mad because no one throws him a party, and he believes that he deserves a party much more than his prodigal sibling. Keller gives a scathing definition of the "elder brother mentality":

Elder brothers expect their goodness to pay off, and if it doesn't, there is confusion and rage. If you think goodness and decency is the way to merit a good life from God, you will be eaten up by anger, since life never goes as we wish. You will always feel that you are owed more than you are getting. You will always see someone doing better than you in some aspect of life and will ask, "Why this

person and not me? After all I've done!" This resentment is your own fault. It is caused not by the prosperity of the other person, but by your own effort to control life through performance.¹

Keller summarizes this "elder brother mentality" with a very important and oft-repeated statement: "The main thing separating you and God is not your sin, but your damnable good works."² In other words the problem is not just the "bad stuff" that we do; we often feel guilty about those things. The real problem is our so-called good works that we use to justify ourselves, make us feel righteous, make salvation a gift that we've earned, or convince ourselves that we deserve better. Our self-justifying good works are damnable. They are not a part of the problem; they are the main problem.

Matthew 19:13-30 sets up a clear contrast for us regarding faith versus works or dependency versus self-assurance. Jesus deals with children, a rich young man, and then he gives some important warnings about what true discipleship is all about. Today I'd like to show you the radical difference between faith and works and between dependency and self-assurance. I hope to show you why it is likely that there will be more kids than rich men in the kingdom.

The Beauty of Dependent Faith

In verses 13-14, Matthew picks up on a theme that we've heard before. He identifies the value of childlike dependency and warns those who would hinder it. Apparently there were some children who were brought to Jesus so that he could lay his hands on them and bless them. This was a familiar practice linked the practice of "bringing children to the elders for blessing, strengthening, and prayer in the evening following the Day of Atonement."³ Parents would bring their children to a person in spiritual authority and ask for prayer. Even Joseph and Mary did this with Jesus (Luke 2:22-38).

However, the disciples miss the importance of this moment. Verse 13 tells us that they rebuked the people for bringing the children to Jesus. It was likely because they thought Jesus had other important work to do such that he could not or should not (in their view) be bothered with these requests. Jesus uses the situation as a teaching opportunity. He says (v 14) three things:

- "Let the children come to me" – Jesus is very much interested in them
- "do not hinder them" – the original language suggests that they need to stop their continuous hindering of them
- "for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" – Jesus shows them that there is something more going on here than just children and a blessing

¹ Timothy Keller, The Prodigal God – Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith, (New York, New York: Dutton Publishing, 2008), 52-53.

² http://redeemercitycity.com/blog/view.jsp?Blog_param=40

³ R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 727.

Now this should sound remarkably familiar. Jesus had said nearly the same thing in Matthew 18:1-6. In that context the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest in the kingdom, and Jesus used a child as an illustration of what greatness really looks like. In Matthew 18 Jesus says something that I think informs what is happening in Matthew 19: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:3) In other words Jesus is saying here that kingdom living, being his disciple, and entrance into a saving relationship with him is linked to characteristics that are common with children ("become like children").

In an earlier sermon⁴ I explained that Jesus is not using children as an example of humility nor is he using children to show the value of innocence (any parent knows that children are neither innocent or humble!). Rather, he is calling for the one characteristic that is common and natural to all children: **utter dependency**.

That is why Jesus says "for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" in verse 14. In Matthew 18 he said that you cannot get into the kingdom without becoming like a child (v 3), and now (19:14), he says that "the kingdom belongs to such as these." (NIV) In other words, child-like dependency is the central quality of getting into and belonging in the kingdom.

Now you might wonder why this is the case with Jesus's kingdom. Let me explain it briefly and then show it negatively to you in the next section. Essentially the Bible tells me that my main problem in life is me. I'm a sinner. That means that I not only do bad things but it means that everything I do is in some way tainted by my sinfulness. Even the good that I do is still affected by questionable motives, manipulated ends, or self-congratulatory thoughts. There is no one who does anything good (Romans 3:10-13). Therefore, there is no way for me to atone or pay for my sins since anything that I could do would be directly connected to my sinfulness.

The good news of the Bible is that God made a way for me to be forgiven of my sins through applying the death of Jesus to my spiritual account. That is why the cross is such a sacred symbol to Christians. It represents the essence of this gracious transaction where God pours out the punishment for my sin upon Christ and applies Christ's sacrifice to me. Salvation or forgiveness comes only to those who put their faith in Jesus's death, and one of the critical steps in that process is coming to realize and embrace the fact that you cannot self-atone, your good works are not enough to balance the scales, and that essentially the problem is not just what you do; the problem is who you are.

Utter dependency – turning from trusting yourself to Christ – is the essence of salvation, the heart of the kingdom, and the critical difference between those who are in heaven and those who are in hell. Let me state it clearly and bit bluntly: hell will be filled with people who did good works. That is why Tim Keller would say that our problem is our damnable good works.

⁴ <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/defining-greatness/>

Therefore, the solution is not to trust in yourself but to trust in Christ. Complete, utter, child-like dependency is what you need from a spiritual perspective. You cannot do life in any way on your own. Now with that as the solution, let's see how it is contrasted in the life of a rich young ruler.

The Tragedy of Self-Assuring Works

Verse 16 begins with the word "behold" which Matthew often uses to announce an important moment or a vital lesson (see Matt 3:17, 8:24, 9:20, 15:22), and it is tied to the conversation with a man who is often called the rich young ruler.⁵ I don't think it is any coincidence that Matthew places this story next to the previous one. It is very likely that the disciples were pretty excited that this man was engaging Jesus this way since his conversion would have been a big win – at least in their minds.

The conversation with Jesus begins with the young man asking Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" This question reveals immediately the young man's spiritual orientation: he wants to know what **he can do** to have eternal life. His problem is not really his wealth or his age; the real problem is his self-assurance.

Jesus's aim here is to expose his self-reliance. Therefore, he begins by addressing his use of the word "good." Jesus is targeting his misplaced definitions. He so self-assured and self-deceived that he doesn't even know what words really mean. Then Jesus points him back to his own system of righteousness. He says, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." (19:17) Jesus is showing this man that absolute obedience to the law is required for salvation.⁶ Now Jesus is not advocating a works-based religion because only Jesus himself will be able to perfectly keep the law. Rather, He is playing by the rich young ruler's rules to expose the fallacy of his self-assurance.

Amazingly the young man asks Jesus which commandments he means. His arrogance is starting to show. In verse 18 Jesus lists five of the Ten Commandments and the great commandment which calls for loving one's neighbor.⁷ Upon hearing this, the young man responds with a revealing statement: "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" (v 20) Unknown to this man is the fact that Jesus has just found the basis of his righteousness. He tragically believes that he's arrived. He has overestimated his good works which amounts to a double tragedy: 1) He believes he has arrived when he is very far from eternal life and 2) His works only serve to reinforce his self-deception and his lost condition.

⁵ He is wealthy (v 22). He is young (v 20). Luke calls him ruler (Luke 18:18) indicating that he came from the upper class or perhaps the Pharisees.

⁶ For a great article written by Tom Schreiner entitled "Is Perfect Obedience to the Law Mandatory for Salvation?" see <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/10/13/is-perfect-obedience-to-the-law-mandatory-for-salvation/>

⁷ It is interesting to note here that Jesus uses the relational or horizontal commands. It is almost as if he is focusing on the external obedience since he doesn't mention false worship, idolatry, and covetousness.

Finally, Jesus focuses his answer in a way that he knows will expose the young man for who he really is. The young ruler says he wants eternal life through good works, and he believes that he's done everything that is needed. Jesus hits him hard: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (v 20) Jesus calls on this man to forsake his self-assured confidence, do something that would strip him of his pride and follow him.

However, the young man walks away from this offer. Verse 22 says "when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." The word for sorrow here is more than just saying that he was sad. It means internal tension or personal pain. In some cases the word meant to be irritated or angry.

The real problem here is not the extent of his possessions. The real issue is his self-assurance and his self-confidence. His riches are a conduit for praise, pride, and self-sufficiency. Remember he came to Jesus wanting to know what he lacked, and when Jesus told him, he rejected it. He wanted a manageable action. He left sorrowful, dejected, and maybe even angry. Listen to Keller describes the elder-brother problem:

Elder brothers may do good to others, but not out of delight in the deeds themselves or for the love of people or the pleasure of God. They are not really feeding the hungry and clothing the poor, they are feed and clothing themselves. The heart's fundamental self-centeredness is not only kept intact but nurtured by fear-based moralism...underneath the seeming unselfishness is great self-centeredness.⁸

Do you see the connection? He walked away because Jesus's playing by his rules surfaced his self-centeredness wrapped in a cloak of prosperity, success and righteousness. The young man was miserable.

Religious and moral duties are a great burden, often a crushing one. Elder brothers are under great pressure to appear, even to themselves, happy and content. As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through goodness you will never be sure you have been good enough for him.⁹

Self-assuring works are a tragedy. They become the means by which a person spiritually justifies him or herself. It's a tragedy because of the degree of pride, self-deception, and worthlessness of their spiritual actions. Again, the very thing that they are proud of is the very thing keeping them separated from God. The problem is damnable good works.

But this is not only a problem in coming **to** Christ. This can be a problem for those who would follow Christ. And that is why Jesus explains this to his disciples.

⁸ Keller, 62.

⁹ Keller, 62-63.

The Warnings to Heed

The departure of this rich young ruler must have been unsettling or disappointing to the disciples. After all he would have been (from their view) a very excellent prospect to join their ranks. Further, Jesus' treatment of him by using his own religious system probably generated a number of questions or concerns. Matthew records some warnings or lessons in verses 16-30 that are important to heed.

1. Beware of self-sufficiency

In verse 23 Jesus says it is only with great difficulty that a rich person enters the kingdom of heaven. Then he makes it even more extreme saying that it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (v 24) What is going on here?

It is important to remember that Jesus is providing commentary as to what just happened. He is trying to set the framework for the rich young man's departure. And it is also really important to know how people viewed wealth during Jesus's day. You see, most people would have viewed this man's wealth and obvious success as the clear blessing and favor of God. In other words, they would have drawn a straight line between good morals and divine blessing, bad morals and divine judgment. Good things happen to good people, right? And while it is true that all good gifts come from above (James 1:17), it is often the case the people begin to assume that since they receive good gifts, they must be good. There is a big difference between knowing you've been blessed and thinking you **deserve** to be blessed.

The problem is not wealth; it is in thinking that you deserve to be wealthy. The problem is not in receiving the blessing of God; the problem is thinking that you deserve the blessing. And this is tested in two ways: 1) when God blesses you, do you become proud? and 2) when God takes things away, are you filled with despair or anger?

The issue is not limited to money. It is any blessing from God that creates a self-sufficient mindset and heart. The rich young ruler's real problem was not his wealth. Money was merely the conduit that facilitated his self-assured, spiritually proud heart. He thought that like everything else in life, he could earn eternal life.

So be careful that you don't write this story off because you don't feel very wealthy. The question is: what do you trust in as a subtle proof that God is proud of you? Or what is it that if God asked you to give it back to him, you might be mad or even walk away from him.

2. Trust fully in the power of God

Jesus's statement is very alarming to the disciples. They understand that implications here. In their minds if those who seem to be really blessed by God will struggle to be saved, then who **can** be saved? Jesus brings it right back to what he's been driving at since the little children came to him: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (v 26)

Jesus brings them back to heart of the gospel and the greatest hindrance that human beings have to coming to Christ as Savior and Lord: you cannot do this on your own. The work of God's grace begins in your heart when you come to the spiritual realization that you are lost, unable to save yourself, and that you need the help of someone else – namely, Jesus. Therefore, the most hopeful words that you can utter are "God, I need your help!"

By the way, that doesn't stop after you've trusted Christ as your Savior. It is only the beginning of a life of trusting fully in the power of God. The Apostle Paul said it like this: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life that I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..." (Gal 2:20)

So then the question is: What are you relying on? What are you trusting in? What do you hope in? What defines you? What do you think you need?

3. You live by dying

Finally, Peter asks a question about the future. He is wondering how this life of dependency really turns out. I don't think he is asking selfishly; he just really wants to understand how all of this works because it seems so backwards.

He tells them about the real blessing of God. The rich young ruler has nothing compared to what Jesus tells them.

"Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life" (Matt 19:28-30).

Notice a few important details:

- Jesus is making a promise – "Truly I say to you"
- The real reward is in the renewal – "in the new world"
- The ultimate victory belongs to Jesus – "the Son of man...on his glorious throne"
- They will share in his glory – "you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones"

- They will have lost nothing – “everyone who has left houses or brothers...for my name’s sake will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life”

In the end, depending fully on Christ will be seen as the best of all decisions. Jesus’s system is entirely backwards from how we think, and he designed it that way. “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (v 30) Jim Elliott, the missionary who was killed in Ecuador in 1956, famously said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” You live by dying.

We have three warnings for the disciples who saw two very different situations. They hindered the dependent children while Jesus hindered the self-assured rich young ruler. Oh how great a difference there is between dependency and self-assurance.

Do you see why there will be kids than rich men in heaven? The problem isn’t wealth; the problem is thinking that blessings from God come because you are special or more righteous than others. Self-sufficiency is the real problem, and it is the dependency of a child that Jesus wants us to see here.

Jesus calls all of us to put aside our elder brother mentality, a perspective that reeks of spiritual pride and self-justification. He calls us to see that the real problem is not just our sins; it is our damnable good works. The rich young ruler walked away from Jesus because he couldn’t handle the thought of letting go of the very thing that he thought defined him. How could he give away the very thing that told him that God was pleased with him? And what he failed to realize was that the one person who could make him spiritually acceptable to God was standing right in front of him. The rich young ruler’s view of himself blinded him to Jesus.

So the question is whether or not you will be more like a child – full of dependency – or the rich young ruler – full of self-assurance. The question is whether or not you will run to Jesus for help so that you can be saved not only from your obvious sins but also from your damnable good works.

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