

Who Can Come?

Luke: Certainty of the Truth

Luke 18:9-30

Pastor Josh Black

November 26, 2017

Who will be on the guest list?

This week most of you gathered together for a Thanksgiving meal (or maybe two or three meals). Who was invited to your feast? What types of people were on the guest list? Most likely you had family or close friends. Or maybe you invited someone who simply had nowhere else to go. Regardless, there was probably something that characterized the people on your list.

One day God will host a great feast in the kingdom of heaven. It will be the greatest banquet that's ever been. Revelation calls it the marriage supper of the Lamb. Do you want to be there? If so, we should ask a question. Who can come? Who will be on the list? Who can enter the kingdom of God? Who can inherit eternal life? Or in the words of the disciples in verse 26, "Who can be saved?"

Our passage this morning describes the type of people who will be at that great feast. It describes the type of people who can come and enter the kingdom of God. And I want to spend time considering these characteristics this morning.

Luke 18:9-30¹

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." ¹⁵Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

¹⁸And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" ²¹And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "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." ²³But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. ²⁴Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵For 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." ²⁶Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." ²⁸And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." ²⁹And he said to them, "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, ³⁰who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Who can come? Who can enter the kingdom of God? That's my main question this morning. And our text gives three characteristics of those who enter the kingdom. These three characteristics come from the three parts of the passage: the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the story of the children coming to Jesus, and the story of the rich ruler.

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR (18:9-14)

Let's begin with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. It teaches us that those who enter the kingdom of God aren't confident in their own righteousness.

In verse 9, we learn that Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt." This is a good translation, but I like the NIV a little better. It says Jesus "told this parable to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." The phrase "confident of their own righteousness" really gets at the heart of the Pharisee's attitude. You could also say the Pharisees had convinced themselves that they were righteous.² This attitude of confidence permeates the Pharisee in the parable. And although *he's* convinced he's righteous, he also wants to convince God. And so he prays, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. I'm not a crook, I'm not unjust, or an adulterer. I'm not even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give away ten percent of everything I have."

This is a weird prayer. It's actually more like a parade than a prayer.³ Did any of you watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade? The Pharisee's prayer is like his own little one-man Thanksgiving parade. He's giving thanks to God. But he's giving thanks that he's not like other men. He compares himself with other men and thinks he's better than them. So, he parades his righteousness before God. Look at me, God! Here's my float that shows I'm not dishonest. Here's my song about how pure I am. Here's my dance that shows my generosity. I'm convinced I'm righteous, and now I'm sure you'll be convinced as well!

The contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector is stark. The tax collector has no confidence in himself before God. He knows he has robbed people of their money and taken it for himself. He knows he's unjust. He knows he's not generous. So what did he do? He stood far off. He wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven. But he beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

What does it mean when it says, "he beat his breast?" In our day, we think of proud people who beat their chest like a gorilla. That's not the picture here. In the ancient world, the heart was regarded as the seat of sin. So when he beats his breast, it's a sign that he's sorry for his sin.⁴ He's not confident; he's contrite. The Pharisee was beating his chest like a NFL player who just scored a touchdown. The tax collector was beating his breast. One is an act of pride. The other an act of humility.

² Danker, Frederick William. "πειθω" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition, Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

³ Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke*. The pillar New Testament commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2015.

⁴ Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The new international Greek testament commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1978.

We live in a day where self-esteem is highly esteemed. Self-help books and motivational speakers want to help us build our confidence. Earlier this week, I googled “How to build confidence?” And there is a long list of things you can do to boost your self-confidence. Groom yourself, dress nicely, photoshop your self-image, think positive, kill negative thoughts, be kind, be prepared, stand tall, increase your competence, smile, exercise, empower yourself with knowledge. I could go on, but I’m getting sick! Actually, a lot of these things are good things. And maybe they can help with confidence in the work place or confidence in the way you look. But none of these things will help with confidence before God. In fact, there’s nothing that we can do to have confidence before God. There’s no amount of good behavior that will make us right before God. Our only hope of right standing before God is found in God’s mercy.

That’s why Jesus says the tax collector went down to his house justified rather than the Pharisee. Only the tax collector realized he had no reason to be confident before God. And therefore, he fell on God’s mercy. The Pharisee had confidence in himself, not in God. He was trying to justify himself, but God knew his heart (16:15). He was proud. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled. And the humble will be exalted. The tax collector wasn’t trying to justify himself. He was justified by God. It was God that made him righteous. It was God’s mercy that gave him a right standing before God. We will never be saved by our own righteousness or our good works. We can only be saved by the righteousness of God found in Jesus Christ. We can only be saved by his work. Jesus is the only man who lived a perfect life. And he was the perfect, spotless sacrifice for our sin. He died for our imperfection. The only way to be right before God is to trust in Jesus. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is to fall on his mercy.

My guess is that most of you here today struggle with confidence in one way or another. You either have too much confidence or too little. If you compare yourself to others, this is exactly what will happen. You’ll look at others and think you’re better than them. Or you’ll look at others and think you’re worthless. But both of these are wrong. So how do you change your perspective? You have to stop looking to others and look to Jesus. When you look at Jesus you’ll realize that you have no reason to have confidence in yourself. But you’ll also see that you should have confidence in him.

So if you’re struggling with too much confidence in yourself, you need to hear that you have no reason to have confidence in yourself. At least not before God. But if you’re struggling with too little confidence, you need to remember that in Christ you can have complete confidence. If you trust in Christ, you have a right standing before God. You’re forgiven. You’re saved. You have eternal life. You can come to the dinner table. You can enter the kingdom of God. Don’t put your confidence in your own righteousness. Put your confidence in Christ’s righteousness. That’s the first thing we learn about entering the kingdom of God.

CHILDREN COME TO JESUS (18:15-17)

Let’s now look at the story of children coming to Jesus. This teaches us that those who enter the kingdom of God are utterly dependent on God.

Verse 17 is the key verse in this section. “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” We need a child-like attitude to enter the kingdom of God. But what does it mean to receive the kingdom like a child? Does it mean that we need to be immature to enter the kingdom? Does it mean we need to be playful? Or is it referring to innocence? Is Jesus basically appealing to moral purity as the basis for eternal life? I don’t think so. I don’t personally know of any children who are morally pure. And I’ve been running a rather large case study

in my home for the last eighteen years. To understand what Jesus means by becoming like a child, we have to understand the context he was in. In Jesus' day childhood was not celebrated like it is in our day. Children were the lowest part of society. They had little worth until they were old enough to contribute to society.⁵ That's probably why the disciples were rebuking those bringing children to him. So when Jesus says you have to become like a child, he's saying you have to realize you bring nothing to the table. You have nothing to contribute to your salvation. Until you realize that, you can't come into the kingdom of God.

It's interesting to note that the text says people were bringing infants to Jesus. What's true of infants? Infants are helpless. They're completely dependent on their parents for life. They're dependent on them for food, for protection, for nurture, for attention, for affection. And a child won't develop well if they don't have these things. But there's nothing a child can do to provide these things for himself. Infants have nothing to contribute to their own physical and emotional development. And we have nothing to offer when it comes to the kingdom of God. We're helpless. We're completely dependent on God. If we want to enter the kingdom of God, we have to realize this.

At First Free we practice child dedication. Child dedication is a way for parents to acknowledge that they need help raising their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. They need God's help and the help of the church. Can you imagine if we required children to get up here on the platform by themselves? "Get out of your car seat, roll down the aisle, and get yourself dedicated. If you want to be blessed, then you need to put a little effort into it. If you want to be helped you need to help yourself!" That would be crazy. Children are dependent on their parents to bring them to be dedicated. And we're all dependent on God to be saved.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus touches a number of people to bless them and heal them. He touches the leper because he wants to heal him (5:13). He touches the widow of Nain's dead son to bring him back to life (7:14). He touches Malchus' ear after it was cut off (22:51). Who does Jesus touch? He touches the unclean, the foreigners, women, and children.⁶ He touches those who are low so that he might raise them up.

The emphasis in this section is on grace, rather than merit. Jesus doesn't bless children because of their virtues, but for their deficits. Their only merit is their unworthiness, just like the tax collector.⁷ The same is true for us. If we want to enter the kingdom of God, we have to realize we are infants before God. We are completely dependent upon him and need his saving touch. That's the second thing that is true of those who enter the kingdom of God.

THE RICH RULER (18:18-30)

Let's now look at the third lesson in the story of the rich ruler. Those who enter the kingdom of God count Jesus greater than worldly wealth.

In the first parable we saw a great contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector. There's a similar contrast between the infants in the second section and the rich ruler in the third. The infants bring nothing to the table. The rich ruler brings everything to the table. He's moral. He's wealthy.

⁵ Edwards

⁶ Edwards

⁷ Edwards

He's influential. Most likely he's a member of the Sanhedrin. That's why he's called a ruler.⁸ From the world's standards he has everything. And he needs nothing. But this man's worldly assets prove to be his heavenly liability. Ironically, the greatest heavenly asset is to have nothing. That's God's economy of salvation.⁹

What must I do?

The rich man begins by asking Jesus a question. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Hopefully by now you see this is the wrong question. Remember, we're helpless. We're completely dependent. Entering the kingdom of God isn't about what we do. It's about what God has done in Christ. But the rich man doesn't have categories for this kind of thinking.

He most likely earned his great wealth and power. So when he realizes he doesn't have eternal life—that something is lacking in his large portfolio—he approaches that problem the way he's approached every challenge in his life. He asks what he must do. Jesus starts by reminding this man that nobody is good except the one true God (19). Then he goes on to tell him what he must do. But it's important to say that Jesus doesn't tell this man what he must do so he can earn salvation. He's trying to expose his heart. Jesus essentially asks him if he's obeyed the Ten Commandments (20). And the man replies, "All these I have kept from my youth" (21). Not only does this man have money and power. He is also a very moral man. That's very different from many of the rich and powerful we hear about today, like Donald Trump for example. But neither power nor morality will get you into the kingdom of God.

So Jesus quickly gets to the heart of the matter. Jesus says there's one thing you lack (22). That's an interesting way to put it. Jesus says to the man who has everything, you lack something. Look again at verse 22. "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." What is the one thing this man lacks? Is it selling all that he has? Is it giving to the poor? Is it treasure in heaven? Is it following Jesus?

Your One and Only

The one thing this man lacks is Jesus. But there's something standing in between the rich ruler and Jesus: his wealth. In order to follow Jesus, we have to get rid of all of the stuff in our hearts that gets in the way. His problem isn't his wealth. The problem isn't a lack of generosity. His problem is he trusts in his wealth. You can't depend on wealth and depend on Jesus. You can't serve two masters. You can't serve God and money (16:13). Jesus is the one thing he lacks. And Jesus is the only thing he needs. Both of these statements are critical if we want to understand how to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is the one thing he's lacking. And Jesus is the only thing he needs. He doesn't need all the other stuff. He shouldn't depend on it. All he needs is Jesus.

If he understood the treasure he could have in Jesus it would be easy to surrender his stuff and depend on Jesus. The great missionary Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." But the rich ruler doesn't see this. So we're told that he became very sad (23). Like the Pharisee in the parable, the rich man came to Jesus very confident. But now he's sad. Jesus has broken his confidence. And Jesus has revealed that he doesn't worship the one true God. Instead, his wealth is his god.

⁸ Edwards.

⁹ Much of this section is informed by "[The Economy of Salvation](#)," a sermon I preached on Mark 10:13-34, February 8, 2015.

Jesus uses this to teach his disciples a lesson in verses 24-25. “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For 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.” This is a remarkable statement. For an ancient Israelite the camel was the largest known common animal, and the eye of a needle was the smallest known hole.¹⁰ So, when Jesus says it’s difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom, he means it’s really difficult. In fact, when Jesus’ disciples ask him in verse 26, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus replies, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (27). He’s saying it’s impossible for a rich man to be saved, but he’s also saying there’s hope. All things are possible with God.

Why is it so difficult for rich people to enter the kingdom of God? I don’t think the answer is all that difficult. If you have all your material needs met, it’s hard to see Jesus as the one and only thing you need. It’s hard to become like helpless, dependent children. Do you see that Jesus is your one and only?

I don’t know if you know this, but we’re all very wealthy. Maybe wealthier than the rich ruler. Most of us here are in the top one percentile of the wealthiest people on earth. If you make at least \$34,000 per year, you’re in this top tier. So it’s not only difficult for guys like the rich ruler to enter the kingdom, it’s difficult for each of us. It’s next to impossible to realize that Jesus is the one and only thing we need. Maybe that’s why we give so little of our money away! When we’re so rich, it’s hard to see we’re like helpless infants.

In fact, if left to ourselves, it’s impossible for us to become like children. We’ve seen that we can’t do anything to save ourselves. Now we see that we can’t even muster up the right attitude toward Jesus. But the good news is it’s not impossible with God. All things are possible with God. That’s the point of this whole text. We need to come to see that we need God. And more specifically we need Jesus. We need to have our confidence in ourselves broken. And we need to have our confidence in God strengthened. The rich man was confident he could do something to please God. And he went away sad. The disciples were confident it was impossible to do anything to please God. That’s the right attitude. We must come to rely on the power of God, not on our own resources.

But we also have to come to see that what we have in Christ is actually greater than anything we might have in this world. In verse 28, Peter says, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” And Jesus said to them, “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.”

This was the same lesson Jesus was trying to teach the rich man. Jesus wasn’t trying to take from the rich man. He wanted to give him more than he ever imagined. The same is true for us. Sure, we need to be willing to leave family to follow Jesus. But Jesus wants to give us true community, a true family in the church, in this life. Sure, we need to be willing to surrender our stuff in this life. But Jesus wants to give us forgiveness, eternal life, and treasure in heaven.

Do you see that Jesus is the greatest treasure there is? He’s worth more than all worldly wealth. If you see that, it only makes sense that you’d be willing to give your money away.

¹⁰ Blomberg, Craig. *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*. New studies in biblical theology. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

Conclusion

Who can come? That's the question we started with. Who can come into the kingdom of God? Who can inherit eternal life? Who can be saved?

You don't need a resume of great accomplishments. In fact, it's fine if you've accomplished nothing. The main thing is you need to realize that nothing you do and nothing you have will ever get you a spot at the table. It's only what God has done in Christ. Abandon your confidence in your righteousness. Depend on Christ alone. And count the riches you have in Christ as greater than all this world has to offer. When you realize that you need him, then you're ready to come to the table. And when we come, what a day of rejoicing it will be. We'll come to the table giving thanks for all that *he* has done for us.