

Better than the American Dream

Part II

New Castle Bible Church

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Text: Mathew 19:13-30

INTRODUCTION

Before we open God's Word, I would like to begin with a word of prayer.

When Jesus was brought before Pilate, He said in John 18:36...

My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But My kingdom is not from the world.

Jesus' kingdom will be in this world, but it will not be of this world. It isn't worldly. In other words: *Pilate, My kingdom will look nothing like your kingdom. My rule will look nothing like Caesar's rule. All that defines and symbolizes your kingdom has nothing to do with Mine.*

Pilate knew a world held in the balance by brute force. Historically, Pilate was a cruel man who kept order through fear. He was no different than most of the Caesars—cruel, sadistic men who ensured order at all cost. The people throughout that vast empire did not love Caesar, but they feared him. Most were either slaves, or like the Jews, subjugated by military force.

Physical strength was valued, achievement was rewarded, wealth was desirable.

But... *My kingdom isn't anything like this. My kingdom rejoices when lost sheep are found. My kingdom welcomes the weak more than the strong, is home for the oppressed, and cares nothing about your wealth.*

Rome wasn't alone, however. Man-made kingdoms are all much the same, and all have values that reject the values of Jesus and His kingdom. Throughout Matthew chapters 19 and 20 we see a clash of values. Sacrificial Devotion, Childlike Dependence, Eternal Life, Grace & Generosity...

These are not the values of this world. In fact, as a general principle, those who are first in God's kingdom tend to be last in the eyes of the world... and those who are last in His kingdom tend to be the people whom the world esteems.

As Americans, we value freedom, hard work, and the ability to get ahead. The American Dream is fundamentally about getting ahead—a dream of upward mobility, hope that I can improve my social and economic position. Those who rise, perhaps from rags to riches, inspire us. *They've done it. Wow! That's success!*

While I don't want to diminish anyone with a "rags to riches" story, that kind of success isn't kingdom success. It seems from our passage today that the more wins you acquire in this world, the harder it becomes to enter God's kingdom at all.

Success and riches may not prevent you from being saved... but they might. So, Jesus warns us today not to mistake worldly success with kingdom success. That's the main point of our passage. Do not mistake your worldly success as kingdom success. What gets you ahead in America simply doesn't get you ahead in God's kingdom. Sadly, what gets you ahead in America may draw your heart away from God and cost you eternal life.

God values the kind of people that the world doesn't: Dependent, helpless, broken people... the kind who come to Him with nothing to offer, just a heart ready to mold. What we will see is that...

Humble dependence delights the heart of God

Self-Sufficiency (though valued here) shuts the kingdom of God

Total devotion (to Christ is costly) but it will be rewarded in the presence of God

☐ If you're able, please stand as we read God's Word for us today...

Matthew 19:13-30

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

¹⁶And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And 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." ¹⁸He 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, ¹⁹Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus 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." ²²When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again 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." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." ²⁷Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸Jesus 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. ²⁹And 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. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

I. Humble Dependence Delights the Heart of God (v. 19:13-15)

You can't read far into the Gospels without seeing Jesus embrace someone who's weak. John's Gospel devotes a whole chapter to a Samaritan woman—5% of the whole book! She was an outcast to Jews and even to her own people, but she wasn't any of that to Jesus.

And if you extend your study to the entirety of Scripture, you will see many times over where God embraced the weak.

I think of Hagar who had been humiliated, and yet God was there.
Joseph who had been betrayed by his brothers, and yet God didn't leave him.
Rahab who had been shamed by countless men, and yet God saved her.

In each of these accounts and many more, God's heart is drawn like a magnet to weakness. In Psalm 68:5, the Lord tells us He is "Father to the fatherless and protector of widows." If you know the pain of shame and betrayal, feel cast out, abused, and broken, you've come to the right place. God delights to help the weak. He doesn't notice the strong and independent, but the exact opposite. God loves dependent people.

If dependence actually *delights* the heart of God, it shouldn't surprise us to Him draw near to children... and that's what we see in verses 13-15 of today's passage. Humble dependence delights the heart of God.

Jesus had just entered Judea and taught to a large crowd (Matt 19:2). They watched his interaction with the Pharisees on the question of divorce, and He handled Himself very well against them. That interaction was over, and the disciples were ready to depart the area (Matt 19:15). But parents started to bring their children to Jesus for a blessing.

I've read that parents brought their children to a rabbi on the Day of Atonement each year. I'm not sure how often they did this or how many did it, but there was some precedent to the practice. Rabbis would pray a blessing upon children.

The disciples, however, didn't like it. Verse 15 tells us they departed after Jesus blessed the children, which means they would have left sooner. *If it weren't for all these parents bringing their kids to Jesus, we would have been on road by now.* And so, they "rebuked" the parents.

C'mon folks, we've got to get going. Jesus isn't some simple rabbi—this is Israel's messiah!

As the disciples "rebuked" the parents, Jesus rebuked His disciples. Mark 10:14 says the Lord became indignant. *How dare you keep the children from Me!*

"Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them!" Such an amazing statement—that God Almighty would bend so low as to enjoy our children.

"...for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Jesus loved children for the simple fact that they're needy. They need help all the time. They need direction.

Daddy, can you tie my shoes? Mommy, can you help me put on my shirt?

So highly dependent. Children enter this world with nothing but their neediness. I remember back when my children were newborns how I longed for the day they would just sleep through the night. And then constantly for the days to come they needed us minute by minute. It can wear you down.

What drains us as parents is what delights the heart of God. That neediness is exactly what Jesus loves about children... and that's why the kingdom of Heaven belongs to all who are like this.

Dependence isn't a nuisance to God. As adults we become independent, which is appropriate in ways. But age and experience do not mean we need God less. Parents, think back on the days when your children needed you, sometimes, minute by minute... and be like that with God.

Whatever burdens you carry today, no matter how great or how small, go to Jesus with it... and keep going to Him. Not only does God Almighty hear you, He delights most in you when you most depend upon Him.

II. Self-Sufficiency Shuts the Kingdom of God (v. 19:16-22)

Humble dependence delights the heart of God, but self-sufficiency does not. Self-sufficiency is the opposite of childlike dependence, and it shuts the kingdom of God.

Wealth is not sinful. Abraham was a wealthy man known as the father of all who have faith. David was a wealthy man known as a man after God's own heart. There is nothing wrong with being wealthy, just as there's nothing wrong with drinking wine. Whether wine or wealth, neither is inherently wrong, but both can be intoxicating and dangerous.

Before us in verses 16-22 is a rich man. He's young—in his 20s or 30s—and Luke's Gospel adds that this man was a ruler. A religious ruler. Young men rarely presided over a local synagogue, but some did at times. Apparently, this is one of those times. Here's a young man who is so zealous for the Law that the elders in his town appointed him to serve.

This man is devout, wealthy, prominent. "And behold" this rich young man came to speak with Jesus. Mark's Gospel says he "ran up and knelt before" Jesus (Mark 10:17). That's pretty unexpected—a rich, young, Jewish ruler running out to catch Jesus and kneeling before Him. *Wow!*

Foxes and birds had more of a home than Jesus did, and yet, this man at the top of the Jewish social strata had to speak with Jesus. This man wasn't trying to corner Jesus—he's sincere, desperate for an answer about salvation.

I've got to know! I must know the answer, and maybe Jesus can help me?!

“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” It’s a great question. It was thought that righteousness and riches went hand-in-hand. So, if you were a wealthy Jew, it meant God approved of you.

Wealth was a stamp of God’s approval. Poverty was not. Worse, disease and disability were considered a curse. Remember the blind man in John 9? The disciples looked at him and thought someone must have sinned horribly for *this* to have happened.

The rich young ruler ran up to Jesus with an urgent question: What good deed must I do to be saved? *Wait...* “Why do you ask Me about what is good? There is only one who is good.”

In other words: *Why are you asking Me this question? You know that God is good, and God has told you all you need to know about this question. You’ve read the Torah. You know what God has said.*

“If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”

Since riches are a sign of God’s approval, and this man is rich. That must mean he’s keeping the commandments.

Jesus, you know I’m rich... clearly, I’ve kept the commandments. God must be pleased with me. Right?

This man, along with Jesus’ disciples, had mistaken worldly success for kingdom success. Riches come from God’s hand, but riches are no sign of God’s approval. We really struggle with that as Americans, don’t we?

We’re the wealthiest nation on earth, so clearly God has favored us, right?

We’re the largest church in town, so clearly God is pleased with us, right?

If God prospers you, thank Him; and if He does not, praise His Name all the same. The measure of kingdom success isn’t wealth and material blessings. Worldly success is a blessing, but it is not a sign. The measure of kingdom success is purely how well you follow Jesus.

Let the results be as they may, but success in God’s kingdom is a function of following.

So, what did the young ruler want? Certainty of his salvation. He had learned God’s Law as a young child, likely had much of it memorized. *The stuff I learned in Sunday School is good, but there must be something more. How can I know I’m saved?*

Out of breath and on his knees before Jesus: “What do I still lack?” *Jesus, tell me! I must know!* Those Sunday School truths just weren’t enough. It’s like believing the gospel is all well and good, but I’m beyond that now. I believe it, but I need something more now.

I’m reminded of the most influential theologian of last century was the Swiss-German theologian, Karl Barth. He wrote a famous commentary on Romans in 1919 that rocked the world of German liberalism. Towards the end of his life, April of 1962, the University of Chicago invited Barth to speak. One of the students asked him to summarize his theology in a sentence.

He said, “In the words of a song I learned at my mother’s knee: ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’”

Sunday School truths we learn as children are so simple. Following God does not take us beyond them, only deeper into understanding them.

And Mark 10:21 says that “Jesus, looking at [the man], loved him...” He loved this man’s sincerity, loved the man’s zeal and eagerness. He knew the young who knelt before Him was in turmoil.

What must I do to be saved from hell? What more must I do? What more is it?

Jesus’ answer comes at the end of verse 21. *You must follow Me.* Do you want to be saved? Follow Jesus. Do you want certainty of your salvation? Keep following Jesus.

The young man had thought his wealth meant God’s approval. Thus, *wealth should make me certain I’m in the kingdom... but it doesn’t.* He had been clinging to worldly success, working hard to acquire more of it... the more success I find, the more it means God must be pleased with me.

Jesus loved the young man, and said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

God had asked Abraham to follow Him, and in order to follow Abraham gave up his homeland, his security in life, his wealth, family members. He was even ready to give up Isaac. True, saving faith follows God to whatever end.

God asked this rich young ruler to follow Him. The young man was devout and zealous, so eager to be saved... but success was his god. Faced with the prospect of losing it, he went away sorrowful that day. He wept. Not all who desire to be saved are saved.

The thing that made this man feel godly was the very thing that kept him from God. “Sell what you possess and give to the poor.” *Repent of pursuing worldly success! You think it means God is smiling upon you, but rather, all that unused wealth is a truckload of evidence to be presented against you on Judgement Day that you never loved God or love others. You loved only yourself.*

Jesus laments in verses 23-24 how difficult it is for successful people to be saved. Riches remove dependency from our lives. So, the less we need others, the less we will see our need of God and turn to Him.

It’s so hard for the rich and successful to enter into eternal life, but “with God” it isn’t impossible. This text is not here that we would despair and give up. It’s here as a warning. Don’t let wealth keep you from the kingdom. Strive to see yourself as a child in constant need of God, and be willing to follow Him to whatever end he takes you.

Humble dependence delights the heart of God. That helplessness of a small child is such a treasure to the King. Self-sufficiency is esteemed in this life, but it shuts the kingdom of God.

Jesus urged the young man to give all and follow. What does it mean to follow, and is it worth it to follow Jesus? Yes, because verses 23-30 tell us that total devotion to Jesus will be rewarded. No sacrifice made for Christ goes unnoticed.

III. Total Devotion Rewarded in the Presence of God (v. 23-30)

As the disciples watched the young man go away in tears, they had some questions of their own.

So, riches do not equal God's approval?

They were "greatly astonished" (v. 19:25). They weren't just a little bit surprised. This would have been like finding out you've been wrong about something your entire life. *If riches aren't a sign of God's approval, then who has God's approval? "Who then can be saved?"*

And before Jesus responded, verse 26 says He "looked at them." The look on Jesus' face must have spoke volumes. He gave them a look. *We've been together for three years, and you still don't understand? Rich or poor, financial status proves nothing about heaven or hell. "With man [salvation] is impossible."*

The young man had worked hard, and God had blessed his hard work with riches. That only means God is gracious, not that He is pleased. So, who can be saved? Who gets into God's kingdom? Answer: No one. It's impossible for any man to keep the commandments well enough.

The only reason God's kingdom will have anyone in it is because God sent His Son to pursue the lost. Like throwing a banquet that no one wants to attend, God sent His Son into the streets to gather people to be there. It's only "with God" even because of God that the impossibility of salvation becomes possible and that His kingdom actually has people in it.

With God's help, that rich young ruler could have received a new heart, a heart like Abraham, the father of faith, who followed God to whatever end.

You can imagine gasp when the disciples hear this. *So, what have we been doing the past three years with you, Jesus?! "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" After all we've sacrificed, is there anything in it for us? Is it worth it, Jesus?*

If you've never wondered whether it's worth the cost to follow Jesus, it's probably because you've never begun to follow Jesus. The journey of faith can be difficult, and it may cost you every worldly success.

Peter knew this. He could have stayed back in Galilee and lived a simple life with his family as a fisherman. No persecution or poverty... just a normal life. But then Jesus called him, and the cost of following Jesus kept mounting.

We've given up so much. What's in it for us, Jesus? Why should we keep going?

I had lunch with a missionary couple a few years back. The two had spent their lives ministering to a remote village in Asia. Decades of work met with physical and emotional hardships. They were discouraged. The husband confessed he's wondered at times if he's wasted his life. They had seen very little fruit, hardly a small church after all those years. What hope would you give to this couple? The same hope that Jesus gave to Peter.

Total devotion to Jesus is costly, but in the end, it pays. "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."

When Christ returns, He will physically reign on this earth. He will sit upon David's throne (2 Sam 7). A whole new world order, and as for the disciples? They get to share in Jesus' glory.

Incredible, because when kings conquer a realm, they consolidated power. Not so with Christ. When He returns to overthrow the old, He will delegate His power and authority to much lesser creatures... and the apostles will reign over a new Israel. An Israel in the land God long ago had promised Abraham. An Israel at the epi-center of the world, not subjugated by anyone but gloriously blessing all the nations of the world.

And to us?

Revelation 5:10 says that "we shall reign on the earth.

1 Cor 5:2 says that "the saints will judge the world."

I don't know what part of the new world that you or I will preside over, but I do know that the new world will be governed by the redeemed. Some of us will receive more than others, but all of us will share in Christ's reign. His reign becomes our reign; His glory becomes our glory.

"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." Following Jesus isn't a waste. Total devotion to Him may cost you everything. But the kingdom is like the man in Matthew 13 who found treasure in a field, and joyfully, eagerly sold everything he had because he *had* to have it.

The cost to buy the field wasn't even worth comparing to the treasure it contained!

No sacrifice for Jesus goes unnoticed. The reward in His presence is a hundred-fold greater than anything we might have lost, but not just the reward, eternal life itself. And what exactly is that?

John 17:3 — "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Reuniting with friends, inheriting a resurrected body, enjoying streets of gold, reigning in the new world—such incredible blessings! But none of these can sustain our joy for an eternity. What makes heaven, heaven is none of this. Heaven is heaven because God is there. He is the sun that will shine endless rays of blessing and delight forever and ever upon us.

And though we will know God a little more with each moment of eternity, He's inexhaustible. We will find after a thousand years we haven't even scratched the surface of the Trinity. There's always be more to know about God, more to love, which will forever give us more and more reasons to fall in worship.

EXHORTATION

So, what is the American Dream compared to Christ's kingdom? It's not all that much. That doesn't mean we must now take a vow of poverty—that's not the point here.

The point is not to mistake true success. Please do not ever think that because you are successful here, God must be pleased with you. Praise Him if He has prospered you, but depend upon Him to keep you from becoming intoxicated with your success.

God delights in the humble dependence of children. Strive not for greater independence; rather, strive to remember you are just a child before the King. Like children, keep going to your Father in prayer—daily, hourly, minute by minute—keep going to Him.

Humble dependence delights the heart of God.
Self-sufficiency shuts the kingdom of God.
Total devotion is rewarded in the presence of God.

With this in mind, I would like to close with a prayer from Proverbs 30:8-9...

God, please give us neither poverty nor riches; feed us with the food that is needful,
lest we become full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?"
or lest we become poor and steal and profane Your Name.

Lord, give us neither too much nor too little that we would not be tempted by great wealth
or great poverty. Give us just enough each day that we could more easily set our eyes upon
You and see the greatness of Your kingdom.