

Who Can Enter God's Kingdom?

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[0 : 00] Well, we live here in a part of Scotland where there are plenty of castles. If you're new to Aberdeen, you have lots to explore.

Some of our favorite family outings are to castles around the area. Just outside the city is Drum Castle. Or if you go a bit further, there's Crathus Castle.

Or if you go even further than that, of course, there is Balmoral Castle, the most famous castle possibly in Scotland. Why so many castles? Well, they're nice for us to look at today, aren't they? But that's not why they were built. They were built for people who wanted to feel like royalty. The king or queen of the castle, they're built to be impressive, aren't they?

Nothing more so than walking through the door of a castle. Under the great grand archway through the great double doors, you get the sense you're walking into something important, don't you?

[1 : 04] That is how castles work. That is how the kingdoms of this world work. But Jesus wants us to know today that that is not how God's kingdom works.

God's kingdom does not have a wide door or a big entrance. In fact, he says the door into God's kingdom is smaller even than the eye of a needle.

If you've ever tried to thread a needle, you know just how small that is. Which led people back then to ask, and surely it prompts us to ask too, who then can enter the kingdom of God?

If the way is so narrow, if the door is so tight, who can possibly go through it? Who can enter the kingdom of God and be saved? Well, that is what Jesus wants us to know today.

Just if you glance through these verses with me, see that is what he is saying to us. Firstly, the little children in verse 17, Luke. Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

[2 : 17] Then the rich man, verse 24, Luke. Jesus looked at him and said, what? How hard it is for the rich to, to what? Enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, 25, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who's rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Then verse 26, there's the question. Those who heard it asked, who then can be saved? Who then can enter? And in these verses, Jesus is answering that question then, isn't he?

Who can enter? And we'll see, just as in the parable that comes before this, the answer is not hard to understand. But it is hard.

In fact, Jesus says it is impossible for us to do on our own. Who then can enter God's kingdom? How must we come in? Well, again, today Jesus will turn our whole religious world on its head by saying, firstly, Luke, to enter God's kingdom, you must come like a baby.

Picture the scene, if you can. Jesus is on the road. He's traveling to the capital, Jerusalem. They are nearly there. And his reputation has gone before him.

[3 : 35] So that as he passes the towns and the villages, people come out to see him and meet him. And they bring their children with them to him so that he can put their hands on them to bless them.

And not only children. What does Luke say? Verse 15. People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. There are two Greek words for child that Luke doesn't use here. Instead, he uses a word that means someone even younger than a child. So here, babies or infants, even newborns.

The same word can actually be used of unborn children. Someone that young, that little, that fragile. People were bringing their babes in arms to Jesus to bless them.

But when the disciples saw that, they rebuked them. It's quite a forceful word. Stay back. Don't come any closer, they say.

[4 : 41] Now, we're not told why they say that. Possibly they think these babies are beneath Jesus to spend time with. They're that important to take up the time of the master.

Back then, children were not treasured quite in the same way they are today. They were seeing maybe more of a kind of necessary inconvenience. He raised them. They take.

It's a long time before they give back. So perhaps their point was, well, Jesus doesn't have time for babies. He's too important for this. Bring him someone who has more to give.

Bring him someone who can do more than just wriggle and cry in his arms. Someone who is simply more. But how does Jesus respond to these babies and their families?

What does he say, verse 16? Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them.

[5 : 45] Jesus says it's the other way around. He calls the children and he rebukes the disciples.

No, he says, bring the babies. Let them come and do not get in their way. See how emphatic he is. He puts the command positively and then negatively.

Let them come and do not hinder. He could have used one or the other, couldn't he? But he says both so as to stress how important it is to him that the babies are brought to him.

Now that on its own speaks volumes to us, doesn't it? About the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus opens his arms wide, doesn't he?

To the very youngest, most helpless, littlest among us. He's saying, isn't he, that these people belong in his presence.

[6 : 44] There is no such thing as being too little for Jesus. I don't know why our building is as it is, but there's surely a reason why one of only two stained glass windows in our church building shows this very scene.

If you don't know where it is, it's behind you at the top. If you haven't seen it, come to the front after and have a look at it. Because it reminds us of the place that children have who are born and brought into the church in the family of God, before God, in the covenant community.

That they are blessed by the head of the family, by Christ, in their being brought up to believe in him.

In the preaching and the teaching of his word, in the care and the love of the church family here, in the access that they have to him from their very earliest days, that they might come to him.

And that's all marked, of course, isn't it, by their baptism. When we bring children to be blessed by Christ, as they come into the covenant family, we're recognizing the special place that God gives them in the community of his people.

[8 : 08] That they are not to be kept away. Jesus so strongly asserts that here, doesn't he? Now, these verses do not teach about baptism, but they are part of that bigger picture, aren't they?

They're a piece of the puzzle. And so it is a reminder in passing, isn't it, how much we do value and love and want the children of our church here.

We love them being in church with us, don't we? When was the last time you told them that? I'm so glad that you're here. We were so encouraged as a family.

The first week after Samuel was born, we came in the morning together. And somebody just sent us a message afterwards to say how lovely it was to have seen us all there together.

I can't tell you how encouraging that was. Parents, encourage the children, encourage their families to bring them to Jesus. Because this is where he wants them, isn't it?

[9 : 07] Before him, in his presence, learning from him. We are a family to the boys and girls here. They are part of this church in a special way.

And so let them know that, won't you? Let them know that as Jesus let these babies know where they stood with him that day. But if we stop there, we've missed the main point of this passage.

Because actually, the shock is still to come. Look at why Jesus wants the children to come to him. If you just look at the end of verse 16. He says it's for or because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Truly, I tell you, anyone, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. So not only are the children to come to him, says Jesus, but whoever comes to him must be like them.

See, not only were the disciples wrong about the babies, but they needed to learn from the babies how to come to Christ. To enter God's kingdom, he says, you must be like these newborns.

[10 : 24] And if you are not like that, he says, you will not enter. It's non-negotiable. That's a challenge, isn't it? Most of you know, we have two little boys at home, a newborn and a toddler.

And a lot of what weighs on you as a parent is what to teach them and how to bring them up and what to give them. Well, here's the twist. That Jesus says, my newborn and my toddler show me the most important thing in life.

Which is how I need to come to Christ. What can Caleb give? And what can Samuel do?

Really nothing. In fact, they know best how to take. Sally Lloyd-Jones in the Jesus Storybook Bible describes children as gift experts.

Because if you give a child a present, you do not have to teach them, do you, how to take it. They simply take it. They tear into it, don't they? They love to receive. And they don't ask what they can give back or do in return.

[11 : 36] They love being given things. They are gift experts. And in the same way, says Jesus, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like that, freely, like a little child, will never enter it.

That is how Jesus says we need to enter God's kingdom not by our giving or doing, but simply by receiving his gift.

Now, perhaps that sounds straightforward and uncomplicated. What more is there to say? Well, here comes a certain ruler who shows us that we don't always know how to receive gifts.

So, second point, let go of your treasure. Let go of your treasure. Let's see what Luke's doing. He straightaway presents us with a contrast. What's the opposite of a newborn?

Well, somebody, surely, who has a lot, who can do a lot, who's rich and powerful and accomplished, not a gift expert. So, verse 18, a certain ruler, rich and powerful, asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[12 : 47] And the question itself betrays his heart, doesn't it? What must I do to come in? He's asking the same question, isn't he? And that is the whole basis of how he comes, his claim to goodness.

So, Jesus begins, doesn't he, by questioning what he means when he uses that word good. Why do you call me good, he says?

No one is good except God alone. Now, Jesus isn't denying that he was good. And he isn't denying that he was God.

He is interrogating this man's idea of goodness. Why does he think that Jesus is good? What does goodness mean to him when he calls Jesus a good teacher?

Well, it turns out what this guy understands is good is keeping a few laws. See, Jesus has said no one is good. But then he lists, doesn't he, some commandments from God's law as a kind of test.

[13 : 49] You know the commandments. He says, you shall not commit adultery, shall not commit murder, shall not steal, shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. Some of you might have noticed that's numbers five to nine of the Ten Commandments.

Most of what we sometimes call the second table of the law. That is how we are to love others.

What does the ruler say to that? All these I've kept since I was a boy, he said.

Done it all. Now, what a claim that is. If you were to read back through those commandments and think, how have I loved others throughout my life since I was a child?

Would you say, done it? What a claim. And we could discuss for hours whether or not that was true. Jesus says no one is good but God alone. I take it to mean that he hasn't therefore done what he says he has done.

But what does Luke want us to see here? If you were here when we looked at the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, you can see the parallels perhaps between this guy's attitude and the Pharisee, can't you?

[15 : 03] What's he saying? God, look what I've done. Or God, look what I haven't done. Aren't I good, God? And that is what we need to see. Like the Pharisee, his idea of what is good and worthy is keeping a few laws.

The problem with that is that that is a highly watered down idea of goodness. If I can tick these few boxes, surely God will see me as good.

Surely I can come in. But as Jesus says, only God can properly be called good. He is the source of all goodness and he is goodness itself.

And so whatever our outward compliance with his word, if we do not love him himself with our hearts, then we are far from good.

And Jesus is about to show this ruler that's what he's really like. Just if you have a look at verse 22. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, you still lack one thing.

[16:10] Sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. See, this is a test of what the ruler really loves.

Because it's testing him on the commandments that Jesus hadn't already listed. The 10th commandment, do not covet. That is set your heart on what you have or don't have.

And the whole first table of the law, the first four commandments that deal with how we are to love God. It's a test then of whether this ruler can really say he loves God.

Or whether his wealth and status and power and identity mean more to him than God's kingdom and eternal life. Would he love God or would he have his goods?

And if he had to choose, which would he choose? That is the question. So verse 23, when he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy.

[17:15] See, Jesus has just revealed to him and to us that his idea of what is good falls so far short of God and true good.

Because in the end, the ruler is unwilling to give up his worldly treasure, his wealth, his power, his status, his identity for God to love him, to come into his kingdom by trusting and following his king, Jesus Christ.

Now, it's worth saying, isn't it, at this point, that this isn't a test that Jesus normally gives people. He doesn't ask us to give up everything we have to follow him, to give away all of our money in that exact way.

It was a test for this man that is designed to take the blindfold away from his eyes and show him what really mattered most to him.

And so the question that Jesus is asking us, me and you today, is not necessarily about money, but rather, what would I not give up if it kept me from coming to Jesus?

[18:27] What would I not give up if it kept me from coming to Jesus? That is the x-ray question, isn't it? It opens up our hearts, shows us who we are, what we value most.

For this guy, it's his wealth that he would not give up. But it could have been other things as well, couldn't it? Perhaps overbearing work, spilling into every area of life, keeping our hearts from God. It could have been his love of being liked by others more than being accepted by God. It could have been his status as somebody important and powerful that he didn't want to give up in order to come to Jesus.

Money is an obvious one and an easy one in some ways because Jesus is saying the more of it you have, well, the more of it you have to give, the more you can do, the harder it is in our hearts simply to receive God's kingdom and not feel the need to give back and to do in return.

But work, power, relationships can do that to us too, can't they? And stop us receiving. Hence Jesus' vivid metaphor about the camel going through the eye of a needle.

[19:46] It's not just hard for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, is it? It's impossible for that to happen. And so it is impossible, says Jesus, for somebody carrying too much in their own hands to fit through the door of God's kingdom.

And so we must let go then of whatever it is that would keep us from coming. That's the big difference, isn't it? That's the contrast between the ruler and the babies.

The ruler has everything to lose. The babies have nothing to give. The ruler has a status, an identity to boast in.

The babies do not have that. The ruler can do lots. The babies can do nothing. But the babies know what the ruler doesn't know, which is how to receive.

And Jesus says that is all that counts in the end. Are you humble enough in spirit to receive a gift from God and not feel you have to do it yourself?

[20:53] The ruler didn't know that. He was sad. He did not come into God's kingdom because he wasn't willing to be, have, and do nothing to receive God's kingdom and gain eternal life.

He was not willing, was he, to become spiritually empty and naked and helpless. But unless we receive God's kingdom like that, friends, as naked and needy as a newborn, Jesus says we will not enter it.

So if you're considering following Jesus, that is something that you need to weigh up, isn't it? We cannot take hold of Jesus without letting go of ourselves and our stuff and what would keep us from him.

To close our hands around Christ, we first need to open our hands and release what it is that is stopping us from taking hold of him. We don't like having nothing to offer, do we?

We don't like being in that position. We want to be able to say, I did it, or I can do it myself. But we can't say that with Jesus. We can't say that with Jesus.

[22 : 07] So take time to count the cost. That cost will be different for different people. But whoever we are, we need to come empty-handed to him. Now perhaps you do want to know and trust and follow Jesus.

But there are things that you couldn't conceive letting go of. How can I let go of this to come to him? People back then had the same question.

Who then can be saved? Well, here is good news. What does Jesus say in verse 27? Jesus replied, what is impossible with man?

What is impossible is possible with God. What is impossible for us to do ourselves, God can make it possible for us. We can come to Jesus as spiritual newborns, friends, because God can give us new birth.

We can come to him with our hearts released from those lesser loves because he can give us a new heart. We must be born again to enter God's kingdom.

[23 : 14] And God can do that for you and for me when we ask him to. He can make us spiritually children ready to receive his kingdom.

When our boys were born in the operating theater, do you know what they did? They screamed for air. And before long, they were suckling for milk.

They knew how to receive like their lives depended on it because their lives did depend on it. And so they lived because they came needy, helpless, naked, and took the gift.

And it would be an awful thing, wouldn't it, for us as parents later on to demand something back from them in return. Or to expect them to have to do or to give something in order to receive that. Our hearts would break if our boys ever turned around and said, let us pay you back for everything you've given us. Because parents delight in giving what their children need to live, don't they?

[24 : 22] Well, so does God. Little flock, said Jesus. It is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. It is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

And so if there is anything holding us back from receiving the kingdom of God today, it is not in him. It is in us.

And so finally, friends, will you take hold of the king? Take hold of the king. See, while Jesus has been giving the ruler a heart x-ray, the disciples have had one as well.

Because the same disciples who tried to keep the children away in the first place now turn to Jesus and they identify with those very children. Peter said to him, we have left all we had to follow you. Here we are, he says. Lord, we are naked and empty and needy and helpless. That is how we've come to you. Because now they see clearly how they are like children, though they didn't see that at the time.

[25 : 31] They say we have let go of our lesser loves to come to you, our king. I wonder how you answered that question. What would I not give up if it kept me from coming to Jesus?

Well, if you're a Christian, the answer should be nothing. It should be nothing. Because you have come. And if you are a Christian, you should be able to say with Peter today, we have left all we had to follow you.

And now all I have I hold with an open hand. And if you can't say that and you would call yourself a Christian, this is a chance to ask yourself today what it is that really matters most to you.

To check your heart. Am I coming to Jesus humbly and empty and needy and not clinging to the things of this world?

Because Jesus' words in verse 17, they are uncompromising, aren't they? Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

[26 : 37] And that might come as a challenge to you today, but I hope that for most of us, this comes as an encouragement. Trusting that if you have come to Jesus, you have come like this.

That though we have counted the cost to follow Jesus, Jesus says that is completely worth it. Because our king says, in fact, we have lost nothing compared to what we gain from him.

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.

We get it all back many times over, he says, not only in the end, but right now, he says, whatever it is that we have left, relationships, homes, situations.

You might lose things precious to us, but nobody who has lost the love of others for the love of Christ is loved less in his kingdom.

[27 : 54] Than they were before. Because like the children, we are born again into a family, into the church. One writer, Tom Wright, he puts it much better than I could.

When he says, within the life of Christian fellowship, there are new homes, new families, new possibilities that open up for those who leave behind the old ways.

The church is called in every age to be that kind of community. A living example of the age to come. In that sort of selfless and trusting common life, church members themselves and the world around can glimpse what God's new world is like and learn to live that way more and more.

Friends, this, this is where Jesus promises we will find new homes, new families, new love in his church.

We are it. And so, brothers and sisters, whatever you may have given up or foregone to follow Christ, let your church family come around you to encourage you, uphold you, support you in this new life.

[29 : 07] There is such love in this church. Do you not stay at arm's length from those who love you because they love your Lord Jesus? And let this be true of everyone who begins to follow Jesus in this church.

You know, if we've been Christians a long time, it's easy to forget how costly it is for those who have maybe not grown up in a Christian home to follow our Lord Jesus.

Let us know what it might be that they have to lose. Let them not lose love. Let us come around. Let us support them. Because this is a reminder that that family love is what every new Christian and every old Christian needs.

And so, with that encouragement, would you take hold of King Jesus today?

Friends, the door into his kingdom, it is the size of a new baby. It is the size of a pinhead. But it is open. And so, come to him like that, like a newborn.

[30 : 18] Cry out to him for eternal life. Receive his kingdom freely. Let go of your life gladly. And know the love of his family today and forever as you walk with God's King into God's kingdom.

And let's pray together for that now. Lord Jesus, we have left all we had to follow you.

Lord, how we pray that that would be true of each one of us today. That we would each be able to confidently say that we have come to you empty-handed.

That we have come to receive your kingdom. That we have come like little children to a heavenly Father who is willing to give us all that we need.

Father, we pray that you would clear away in our hearts all the lesser loves that would keep us from Christ. Father, we pray and ask your forgiveness for the times that we have cherished things.

[31 : 36] That you would have us let go of in order to cling to Christ. Father, how we pray that you would help us all to enter into your kingdom today. And that we would know the love of Christ in this church.

Lord, from the very youngest to the very oldest. And that we together would embody what it is to walk with Christ. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.