

How to get right with God

Mark 10:13-31

Covenant Waterfall, 17 January 2021

Read

Pray

Introduction

In 2015, Donald Trump, who at that time was campaigning for the Republican Party presidential candidate, made the following statement during an interview:

“I’ve never asked God for forgiveness. I like to be good, I don’t like to have to ask for forgiveness. I am good and I don’t do a lot of things that are bad, I try and do nothing that’s bad. I have a very great relationship with God. I try to lead a very good life and I have.”

Whether you love or loath Trump, easy to be quick to judge him on this statement – but the reality is that he expresses something that actually comes very naturally to all of us. Sinful desire to get right with God on our own terms. Bent to justify ourselves, do the right steps, be good in order to be right with God.

Today’s passage deals with *the question* that all of us at some point in our lives wrestle with. How can I get right with God? What we’re going to see in this passage is the only two ways one can approach this question – either salvation by your own efforts (default setting) or trusting in salvation by God’s efforts. What we’re going to see ultimately is that because God accomplishes every bit of our salvation, that means there is no way we can earn it. We can just receive it by faith as a gift of grace from God.

- Nothing to offer, vv.13-16
- Everything to offer, vv.17-22
- God does it all! vv.23-31

A. Nothing to offer, vv.13-16

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them.

The passage begins with some parents bringing their small children to Jesus in order for him to bless them. As they are doing this, Jesus' own disciples rebuke them. Why? Seems unnecessarily harsh! What we need to remember is that children back in those days had absolutely no standing in society. They were considered to be bottom of the pile, the last of the last.

This may seem strange for us where today, children are more important. Tend to be the centre of attention in families, parents' lives end up revolving around their kids. Not so in first century Jewish world. They were seen as having nothing to offer, not being useful for anything, having no skills, knowledge and they couldn't work the family land. So they were seen as unimportant and insignificant, having no status in society. So it would have been natural for the disciples to see these kids as an irritation. Why should their Master be bothered!?

Jesus reacts to his disciples in verse 14, **"But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."**

Jesus is furious! He wants the children brought to him! Why does Jesus feel so strongly about having them with him? He tells us directly in this verse, **"for to such belongs the kingdom of God."** In the kingdom of God, contrary to the culture of the day, children are not second class citizens. Instead, they are fellow image-bearers of God. In particular, children of believers are part of the covenant community – they're part of the church. It's for this reason that we believe as Presbyterians, as Reformed Christians, that it is biblical to baptise children, include them in the worship service, teach and catechize them, so that they are brought up in the faith in the hope that one day they will be able to confess Christ themselves.

Jesus continues in verse 15, **“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”** ¹⁶ **And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.”**

What does Jesus mean here, when he says that you can only receive the kingdom (gospel), if you receive it like a child. What is it about little children that Jesus sees as conditional to receive the kingdom? Is it that our faith needs to be childish – naïve, simple? That we should not think too deeply about theology or doctrine, nor engage too rigorously with God’s Word? That instead we should just stay on a childish level of feelings and simplicity?

No! The reason Jesus exhorts us to receive the kingdom “like a child” is not that we would be spiritually immature for the rest of our lives. Instead it is because children model what it is to be a true believer. Think of a little child – they have nothing to offer, they’re helpless, they are completely dependent on their parents for years – they don’t bring anything to the party. But they’ve got everything to receive – care, food, clothing, education, love, attention. Children receive everything they get as a free, undeserved gift.

What Jesus is saying here is that unless we receive the kingdom like this – without thinking that we deserve it because of anything we’ve done, but like children – knowing that we are helpless and really have nothing to offer, and can only receive God’s salvation as a gift of grace by faith, then we will not be able to enter into it.

B. Everything to offer, vv.17-22

¹⁷ **And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

As Jesus leaves the children, a man runs to him and kneels before him, calling him ‘good teacher’ – asks him: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”. In other words, what must I do to get right with God? / how do I get to heaven? This is *the* question that all of us wrestle with sometime or another in our lives. It’s interesting, the man’s question reveals two things to us about our natural human condition. Firstly, shows that there is an awareness that we’re not okay as we are – that we know something is wrong and we need to get right with God. Secondly, see that the way to get right with God that comes naturally to us (fallen

nature) – is for us to do stuff, to work our way somehow to heaven, to be good and better people.

Verses 18-20 continue:

¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.’” ²⁰ And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”

Before Jesus answers the man’s question (how can I inherit eternal life?), he first comments on how the man addressed him – called him “good teacher”. Jesus first responds to this, saying that no one is good but God alone – Gk = no one is good but the one God. What’s Jesus’ point? Is he denying his own divinity? No! What he’s doing is showing up this man’s false assumptions, which we will see revealed more clearly in the coming verses – that it is possible to attain perfect righteousness, it is possible to be good in God’s sight. Here, Jesus corrects this false assumption by stating unequivocally in verse 18, that only the one God is good.

Then Jesus proceeds to answer the man’s question, in verse 19. He does so by listing the second table of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20), which sums up the moral law – laws that govern our relationship with each other and to God. Why does Jesus list the laws in his answer to the man? Clear point - that in order to inherit eternal life, you need to obey the law.

The man then responds to Jesus in verse 20, saying, I’ve kept all the laws since I was a kid – I’ve ticked all the boxes, I’ve kept Torah, so I’m a good person, I’ve lived a moral and upright life – haven’t murdered anyone, stolen anything, cheated on my wife – I’m pretty decent. So because of all this, surely God is going to accept me, as I deserve it?

This man may certainly have been righteous according to the law in his external observations of it. He may have been good in his own eyes, but tragically he was completely blinded to the reality of the state of his soul. He was blinded by self-righteousness and pride – in his own goodness. His heart was still hard, he had come under no conviction of his sins, he had no sense of the holiness of God.

The reality is that all of us break the law every day, repeatedly. We may not have physically murdered anyone, but we've all been guilty of murder in our hearts by hating others. We may not have cheated on our spouse, but we're guilty of committing adultery in our hearts by lusting after others. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us the true state of our hearts, **"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"** We deceive ourselves by trusting our supposed external righteousness, when the reality is that all of us fall short of God, and none of us **"does good, no not one."** (Rom 3:12). None of us even seeks for God, in our sinfulness.

Verses 21-22 continue...

²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." **²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.**

Jesus now responds to the man who thinks he's entitled to inherit eternal life. Jesus looks at him and loves him. Despite the man's lack of awareness of his true need for God, Jesus has genuine compassion and love for him. Maybe he recognises his desire to try and do the right thing.

Then Jesus gently exposes the man's idol – his wealth. He tells him to sell everything he has and give it to the poor, then he'll have treasure in heaven. But as we see in verse 22, he is unable to do it. He **"went away sorrowful."** His wealth mattered more to him and God. While on the surface he'd kept all the other commandments, Jesus exposes here that he'd broken the greatest commandment, **"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."** (Deu 6:5). The tragedy that we see here is that this man loved his wealth and possessions more than God. Jesus showed up his idol – the thing in his life that he loved more than God.

What we see here in this man is someone who on the surface has everything to offer. He's trying his best to live a righteous, godly life in obedience to God's laws. Surely he's done enough to get right before God? Yet before Jesus, we see that there is only One who is good and righteous – God himself. Jesus, God the Son, is the only One who has perfectly obeyed the entire law. Before his presence, as Isaiah 64:6 says, **"all our righteous acts are like filthy**

rag.” None of us, like the rich young man, can ever be saved by our own obedience to the law – all fall short, no exceptions. Leave us hopeless? No – trust in Christ and his perfect obedience. Romans 5:19, **“For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”**

C. God does it all! vv.23-31

(23-27) And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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.” ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”

Now Jesus brings it all together. His disciples are still trying to figure this all out – Jesus has blessed little insignificant children, yet a rich man who seems to have ticked all the boxes, has walked away from Jesus.

Jesus says to them in verse 24 that it's difficult to enter the kingdom of God and then goes on to declare in verse 25, that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. There's absolutely no evidence that there was a gate in Jerusalem called the eye of a needle which could be entered with much effort. That really contradicts Jesus' point here. Point – a camel – biggest animal in Israel, cannot squeeze into the smallest object – the eye of a needle – it's simply impossible!

The disciples are astounded. Who then can be saved? (v.26). Jesus turns the screws – v. 27 – with man it is impossible. Man cannot save himself. Our good works, morals, level of obedience, amount of spiritual techniques, how many miracles we've done, how much we've tithed – all count nothing towards our salvation. It's not even that we do our bit and God does his bit. We don't even contribute 1% to our salvation – we simply cannot contribute anything – it's impossible, as sin has touched our whole being, making us dead to Christ and enemies of God, deserving of his judgement.

It's impossible for man to save himself, says Jesus, but not with God. All things are possible for God! Here is the truth to which Jesus has been working up to: God saves us entirely and completely, from beginning to end. We bring nothing to the party, we play no role in it and we don't deserve it. God does it all.

God the Father elected us unconditionally before the foundation of the world and predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:4-5). God the Son redeemed us from our sins by dying on the cross and rising from the dead, forgiving us (Eph 1:7). God the Holy Spirit sealed us with himself, guaranteeing us our salvation by causing us to be born again of his imperishable seed within us (1 Pe 1:23), giving us a taste of eternal life to come, which we cannot lose and no one can snatch from us (Eph 1:13-14).

It's abundantly clear that the Bible teaches from A – Z, God has done it – he alone has saved us, and saved us completely. Salvation indeed belongs to the Lord! (Jonah 2:9). If he's done it all, the only thing we can do then is to come to him, like little children, empty handed, realising our poverty and great need, and receive it as a gift.

Ephesians 2:8-9, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

This is the glory of the gospel – that we've been made right with God, not by our own actions, but by the actions of Jesus Christ. And because he's done it all, we can only receive this gift of grace by faith. Live a life in obedience to God as an overflow of receiving this gift.

Jesus ends in verse 31 by saying, ³¹ **But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”**

Those who are first – the rich young man, the ones with supposedly everything to offer, good and righteous in your own eyes, thinking you've ticked all the boxes, think you deserve God, you're right with him because of what you've done – you will be last, you will not inherit the kingdom of God – instead spend eternity under God's judgement and wrath, because you have not actually trusted in him, but in yourself.

Jesus then says that those who are last – the little children, ones with nothing, helpless, who realise your deep need for forgiveness of your sins and that on your own you will always fail and fall short of God - you will be first. Trusting wholly on Christ, on his good works, God

clothes you in his righteousness, removes your sins as far as the east is from the west, calls you his own sons and will welcome you in to eternal life in the new creation.

Friends, repent from trusting in yourself – all insecurity and burden that brings, having to always strive and prove yourself to God. Instead trust in Jesus Christ, receive his free gift of grace by faith – receive his peace and rest, knowing that he has done it all!

Amen