

Matthew 19:13-30
Time for smaller matters

Be part of the kingdom of heaven

This passage takes me back to one of my earliest encounters with the Bible.

I discount the primary school lessons when we were told to take out our “Scripture” text books. I really can’t remember much about *them*, apart from their dark purple covers, quite big, wide pages for such a relatively thin book, but those covers were only slightly plasticised thin card, so they very quickly curled back and looked really scruffy. Oh, and I remember the collective groan when we were told to take them out, for what was a universally despised part of the curriculum.

They certainly gave me no insight into the Bible itself. So when, in what is now Year 6, back at **Trewirgie Junior** school, it was decided that some of the pupils would be asked to lead a part of the school assembly by reading out a Bible verse, I was really stuck. You see, it wasn’t a Bible verse of *their* choice, but of *our own* choice. How on earth was I to choose?

So first of all, back at home, there was the search for a **Bible** somewhere in the house at home. And that was difficult enough, if I remember right.

Then it was a question of thinking what to read ... because it’s quite a big book, really! And what did I know of it, at that age, and not being taught any of it? I guess I was quite lucky to be one of the earlier ones to have this problem, because the thing that came to my Mum’s mind was “that verse about ‘**suffer little children**’” - which we were to hear quite a few times over subsequent weeks, as other families revealed their collective ignorance of much of the Bible’s contents.

But it’s all very well to vaguely remember a verse. It took Mum and Dad together much of the evening to locate it. And I don’t think it greatly made an impression on me, either, other than just remembering this as an incident from way back. Because, two things:

Suffer ... that old-fashioned use of the word, meaning simply “permit” ... that wasn’t exactly obvious. You probably get the meaning from context, but it’s still a bit disconcerting.

And this second one might be just me, because at that stage, 10 or 11, I was used to being told **what a big boy you are!** ... so that passage, mentioning the “little children” ... well, yes, that’s *them*, not me. Sure, Jesus is interested in *little* kids. But ... was that the implication? ... not me? I’ve grown out of it, perhaps? So this is just one more irrelevance?

But now I come back and look at that passage again ... in the context of this second half of Matthew 19 ... and I am reassured. In this passage Matthew puts right next to each other *two* encounters, the first between Jesus and the little kids - who were even more insignificant in the culture of this day than they are today.

And the second is someone who is at the other end of the social spectrum, someone who has it all. He is rich, he is in a position of quite some authority and respect in his local community, and, I think significantly, too, he is still described as young. He has got it all.

But Jesus has time for *him*, too. And, I would argue, for anyone in between, in society’s reckoning, this “**rich young ruler**”, as we probably know him, and a batch of **little kids**. That means he will have time for *you*, too, wherever *you* fit on that scale.

And the kids were just kids. And he was seriously confused. And then, to cap it all, Jesus' disciples get all confused about what he has been saying, and he takes time to answer *them*, too. Isn't that just wonderful? You don't have to be anyone special, and you don't have to already have it all figured out. And you don't have to be some particular distance along the track of discipleship, either, in order for Jesus to be interested in *you*.

Jesus takes time for all sorts

... for a bunch of little kids (13-15)
... for a confused successful young man (16-22)
... for astonished and worried disciples (23-30)

- **... for a bunch of little kids (13-15)**

Just remembering the context here - although Matthew has not seriously flagged this up, it's going to become increasingly obvious as we move through the latter chapters of his book - Jesus is starting back towards Jerusalem.

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

(Matthew 19:1)

And he already had the first of what will turn into many, and increasingly acrimonious, run-ins with the Pharisees, over the coming chapters. See how they come with not just a tricky question, but a mean agenda:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

(Matthew 19:3)

And therefore you might think that the rest of the book is going to be about that big picture, Jerusalem, the Cross, the sustained opposition from the Jewish teachers and leaders, all heavy-duty stuff. It *is* going to include that, of course. Jesus *is*, after all,

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

(John 1:29)

But it is not just done as what we might call a "job lot". There is individuality in it, too, such that Paul will write not just an "us" here, but ...

... the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

(Galatians 2:20)

And so Matthew starts off this section by introducing us to some non-entities. Little kids.

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray.

(Matthew 19:13)

And maybe we need to stop and think what we would have done in that situation. Because this is the *Messiah*, remember - from a few chapters back. And these are just little kiddies. They don't just run up to Jesus like kids would, but they're small enough that they need to be *brought* to him. They're that small. And, in the world of that day, they are that insignificant. Maybe it's something that Jesus could delegate to very junior disciples, but

they're surely not worth of his personal attention ... are they?

The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

(Matthew 19:13-14)

Now that is really emphatic, isn't it? Jesus says the same thing in two different ways. You can't mistake what he's saying, can you? These kids matter to me. So do you think that sometimes we have our priorities wrong, in church? When people start out in full-time Christian work, quite possibly they will start out as a youth worker, and, in time, move on "up" - I'm putting that in quote marks - to the greater task of being a preacher or pastor.

Back in RBC, when I'd not that long been converted ... could I help out with the Sunday School? Don't worry, you'll be in the class with the little kids, you and a few other fairly new Christians, just the one more experienced person in charge.

Does that give, well, maybe not quite as chilly a message as those disciples did, actually rebuking the people, shooing them away, dismissing those little kids as beneath any level of real importance? But ... the tinies can be looked after by the least experienced, least trained of the teenagers?

Folks, having mentioned RBC there, let me tell you that I have been impressed with Andrew Chapple's involvement there, until quite recently, I think, insisting that he still wanted to be involved in the work of teaching in their Sunday School groups, even though he was clearly the most experienced elder in the place. *That*, I think, much better fits in with Jesus' assessment of the value of mere "little kids".

Currently, in our society, kids count for a whole lot more than they did in the society Matthew was addressing. But there's always going to be a bottom of the heap, the kind of people that are thought to be of least significance. It will change over time. It might need big sudden outbursts to bring things to the public eye and change society's thinking. Remember how long it took for the UK to **abolish slavery**, for example.

But before there was Wilberforce, with his *slaves' lives matter* campaign ... before there was the **black lives matter** campaign - compromised though it may well be, with some unsavoury political agendas not too deep beneath the surface - here is Jesus with his *small lives matter* statement: Let those kids *come*. I have time for them. In *my* kingdom, which will very often totally reverse the assumptions of this world, these are people in their own right, with significance in their own right. And ... a big statement, this:

"... for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

(Matthew 19:13-14)

Let's not push that too far. Jesus isn't saying here that children should be christened, though some denominations use this to support them doing so. He's not teaching that children who die in infancy will automatically be saved, as far as I can see. Much as you and I might like to believe it, I can't see that that is clearly taught in Scripture.

Look at what this *is* saying, though. Not "to them belongs ...", but "to such ..." ... or we could expand that to "to such as them ...", "to people like them ...". The insignificant in this world's scheme of things. We're going to see shortly someone in this passage who has some kind of standing in society, and is rich ... and it works *against* him. Whereas, says Jesus, being small, being unimportant, being *not* special ... it's as if the kingdom of heaven is designed for people like that.

It was Luke, rather than Matthew, and very often a champion of societies underdogs (which would have included women, in those times, too) who recorded a parable in which Jesus shows the wealthy and well-to-do absenting themselves with various offensively trivial excuses from a great banquet, ... so who end up enjoying the feast? It's the world's little people:

“Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ ... ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.”

(Luke 14:21-23)

And that was told in response to a rather presumptuous comment at a meal to which Jesus had been invited:

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

(Luke 14:15)

Folks, do you see what this is saying? The kingdom of God - of the kingdom of heaven, same thing - is not reserved for the high and mighty, the rich and the famous. Instead ...

“... for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 19:13-14)

To little people, to the under classes, to the great unwashed, to the ones that nobody will choose to play in their team, the odd, the lonely, the smelly, the forgotten. Jesus has time for *them*. Instead of rebuking them, instead of thinking *I'm not really sure we want someone like THAT in our church*, disciples should be positively *bringing* them to Jesus.

But ... not only them. Up next pops a rich and successful man, a pillar of the local community ... but in far more desperate need than he realises. And Jesus takes time to speak at length to *him*, too. Even if it ends up going nowhere, Jesus has time ...

- **... for a confused successful young man (16-22)**

Though to start with, we wouldn't realise these credentials! At first, he seems like just the ordinary kind of guy, the way Matthew and Mark tell it:

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, ...

(Matthew 19:16)

It's Luke who calls in a "ruler" (Luke 18:18). We just have to read on with Matthew to find the "rich" and "young" bits. Anyway, let's hear his question.

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

(Matthew 19:16)

Just pause a moment. What would *your* answer be, if someone came and asked you that same question? Isn't it actually a bit loaded already? It's not entirely "the wrong question", but it's seriously skewed with false assumptions, isn't it? So to just give a straight answer, if you're not careful, might just reinforce those deadly false assumptions ... such as the one that eternal life can be earned, in the first place. That's clearly what this man is doing. See the way it's phrased over in Luke, with the word *inherit*:

And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

(Luke 18:18)

Inheritance is about *rights*. He's asking about how he can receive eternal life *as a right*, as a deserved reward, isn't he? And the main problem of that question is that the right answer is that you just *can't*.

But this is a *young* man. Matthew mentions it twice:

The young man said to him, ... When the young man heard this ...

(Matthew 19:20,22)

I think that's significant here. He has not yet had much experience of life, I would imagine. He has had success handed to him on a plate, quite possibly. Things have come easily, and he is just too full of confidence that - particularly with all these advantages - he can succeed at just about anything he wants. He's certainly naive about how well he has already performed, as we'll see in a minute.

So Jesus does what is always wise when faced with that kind of question. He stops to consider just where this question is coming from. What's the agenda? What might be the false assumptions underneath the asking of the question - and what answers therefore might be expected? And rather than play along, and effectively endorse those assumptions, Jesus tosses in a rather *unexpected* not answer, but another question.

"Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good."

(Matthew 19:16-17)

It's a bit cryptic, I have to admit. It certainly seems to focus on the understanding of the word "good". I think I might paraphrase it as "How can I be good *enough* to deserve eternal life?" - with, again, that false assumption that it is even possible to be good *enough*. But Jesus' first response, knocking him off balance, is only part of his answer. He is going to *show* how empty that assumption is. And it's going to hurt.

"If you would enter life, keep the commandments."

(Matthew 19:17)

Now remember that the NT argument is that those commandments are a bit of a **Catch-22** for us. If we human beings were good enough to keep them, then we wouldn't need to keep them *in order to obtain* eternal life; we would already have it. Only, we're *not* good like that. That is the result of what we call "the Fall", right back at the start of Genesis. So we end up *needing* to earn eternal life, because we no longer have it, but *unable* to earn it. All that the commandments do is to point that sad fact out. The commandments themselves are good, but they're now acting a bit like a **thermometer**, diagnosing the spiritual illness ... but not able to effect a cure.

And then the commandments act like a **signpost**, too, pointing out where we should go to get that cure: we need a Saviour; we need The Saviour. We can be saved not by obeying commandments, but only by putting our faith in him.

For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

(Galatians 3:21-22)

But this naive young man just cannot see the problem. "Keep the commandments"?

He said to him, "Which ones?"

(Matthew 19:18)

I'm really not sure what this guy is thinking, but his next answer suggests that he is thinking that he's on a winner now. For when Jesus answers ...

And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

(Matthew 19:18-19)

... see the immediate rather proud response!

The young man said to him, "All these I have kept."

(Matthew 19:20)

Now if this young man had been less full of himself, he might have stopped and thought over something rather curious in what Jesus *didn't* say. The way Matthew records it, it looks as if Jesus just starts rattling through the man-directed section of the 10 Commandments ... *but* he misses out one of them. Did you notice that yourself? What happened to, just after the one about false witness ...

"You shall not covet ..."

(Exodus 20:17)

It looks as if his attitude towards possessions is a huge blind spot here. So huge that he doesn't see it even when Jesus gives him this big nudge. He doesn't stop to even blink, never mind think, by the looks of it. "Covet" is so far off his radar that he doesn't even notice Jesus' omission. And so he can just bounce back the absurdly naive claim that he has ticked all these boxes. Every one of them. Since he was just a little kid.

And his next comment, I am really not sure at all how to take.

The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"

(Matthew 19:20)

Now you could just take the words as being rhetorical. He could be just sort of bouncing on the spot like a proud **puppy**, just innocently pleased with himself, making that statement in a rather less proud form by phrasing it as a question.

Or you could see them as rather more proud, a clear claim that Jesus should now agree with this self-assessment. Daring him to disagree, almost.

Or, I just wondered, as I read these words a few times this week, could it be that somehow he still senses that something is missing? He has run through the arguments himself, he has **checked all his sums**, and they still seem to add up. But there is something missing inside which gives the lie - or at least leaves a huge question mark on his soul - about whether his rich and self-satisfied life really *is* all that there is.

After all, he had come up to Jesus to ask him this question, hadn't he? Why would he do that if he was really so totally convinced that he had fully decoded the **puzzle of life**?

Folks, could it be that some of you here, even now, feel the same kind of way? Is this all there is? “What do I still lack?” *What am I still not getting right?* - because inwardly there still seems to be something of a hole that does not seem to be properly filled.

If that's you, please don't feel that Jesus' next words are specially aimed at you right now. That's not everyone's solution. It is Jesus' remedy for his specific diagnosis of this individual. Jesus is going to take his “what do I still lack” question at face value, and give him the answer he needs.

Remember that at times love means saying difficult things. Mark points out that Jesus says the next words *because of* love.

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: ...”
(Mark 10:21)

This was the one thing that above all this man needed to hear, perhaps, his best, perhaps his only chance to see just what he did still lack. To understand that he had located his treasure firmly on earth, and was still bankrupt as regards the kingdom of heaven. He had invested his soul in something that, in the light of eternity, is worthless.

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.”
(Matthew 19:21)

“Perfect” there in the sense of complete and whole. He has asked what one thing is lacking. And Jesus has told him how to remedy that lack. And he finds sadly that he has been possessed by his own possessions. He held them so tightly that now **they gripped him** ever more tightly, constricting him and squeezing his life away.

When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.
(Matthew 19:22)

The only one recorded, I've heard it said, as going away from Jesus in sadness. Actually, that word doesn't mean just a bit of disappointment, but it originally had the much stronger nuance of being actually *pained*. Distressed, at the very least. Not just sad, but *sorrow-full*.

And it really is a sad little cameo, isn't it? I think we certainly see this young man bouncing onto the stage, probably hopeful, looking for affirmation, or, failing that, the one quick fix to make his life *perfect*. Youthful and totally unrealistically over-optimistic. There is no quick and simple fix. We do not need a spiritual plaster to cover a spiritual scratch. We need to be born again. And we need Jesus to die and rise again, if our sins are going to be covered, forgiven, and buried for all time.

Jesus has taken time to speak at some length to this now tragic figure. The little kids with nothing are encouraged. The man who has it all realises that he has nothing of eternal value. And Jesus now needs to take time ...

- **... for astonished and worried disciples (23-30)**

That Kingdom of Heaven thing is so curious, so totally upside-down to our thinking. First Jesus says that it's for the nobodies of society, people that batch of little kids that the disciples had been so quick to shoo away.

And now a man who apparently had it all, he says, finds that that “all” is his worst problem.

And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 19:23)

There’s the prosaic way of saying it. But it’s so gob-smacking to those disciples that he needs to not just repeat it, but to give a wonderfully memorable picture to illustrate it.

“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.”

(Matthew 19:23-24)

Don’t worry about whether this is a specific small gate somewhere around Jerusalem that **camels** would find really difficult to get through. Could be. Or it could just be a figure of speech, something absurd that Jesus just coined then and there. It doesn’t matter which. *What it says* is far more important.

And it’s important because *we* are rich, most of us. Remember that. In the scale of things around the world, even someone on the breadline in this country is quite well up there in the world’s **Rich List**. Why do you think that there are so many **immigrants** lining up to cross the Channel even at obvious risk to their lives?

Folks, do we need to stop and think about what this might be saying to us? If Jesus says it’s difficult for *people like us* to enter the Kingdom of God ... are we kidding ourselves by ignoring his warning?

Several times during our life, Jenny has sort of shuddered when she heard that some **Lottery** or other had paid out tens of millions of pounds to one lucky winner. That’s the phrase that is just about always used, *lucky winner*. But Jenny’s reaction is absolutely right ... if Jesus’ warning is true. Are those huge payouts *actually* a serious spiritual danger?

But let’s not think in terms of simple such outlandish sums of money. Jenny and I are moving towards the stage of life when pensions will kick in, and we’re going to be appreciably better off in financial terms than we have become accustomed to over the course of our lives. Folks, that’s not a time to relax, spiritually speaking, but, if what Jesus says is true, it’s an appreciable spiritual challenge. The spiritual heat is being turned *up* on us. With more time *and* more money at our disposal, how are we going to make sure, by disciplining our thinking *now*, that we can be generous and gracious with those things?

If we’re honest, aren’t we still quite aligned with the disciples’ thinking here? Money has to be a blessing, *only* a blessing, surely? That’s one of the ways God blesses us, isn’t it? In which case ...

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?”

(Matthew 19:25)

And actually, they are exactly right, in some ways, too. That astonishment has jolted them along a bit towards a better understanding of truth. They are starting to realise that our natural instincts about salvation are just not reliable.

Riches are a challenge for us, not a compliment from God showing that we’re on the right track already.

Commandments are meant to convince us that we *can't* keep God's standards on our own, and we need to look for someone else to be our Saviour. Self-reliance in that area is just another word for fatal pride.

And what can we do to *inherit* eternal life - to have it as our right? Actually, we can't: it is only available as a free gift.

*All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel your need of him
(This he gives you!)*

And that is why we need Jesus' encouraging words here. He took time to speak to these men - and that they noted his words down and recorded them for us. This salvation thing, just trusting Jesus alone, and not something of our own effort ... we just can't achieve that. I just can't trust myself to trust Jesus well enough. I will struggle. I will surely fall and sin. I still can't stop, even as a Christian of many years. This is just not possible!

Exactly right. But ...

But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

(Matthew 19:26)

Even hope for astonished, suddenly wobbly disciples. Even hope for followers of Jesus like us. We might not see how on earth all of this could work. But we don't have to. That's God's problem. And with him, look ... repeat with me, if you want a memory verse for today

But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

(Matthew 19:26)

But, says Peter, we *have* followed in your footsteps a bit, Jesus, have't we? If there's so much that we *can't* do ... does that mean that that doesn't count at all?

Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

(Matthew 19:27)

Wasn't that a good and right thing to do? Where does that feature in your scheme of things, Jesus? Because of the grace of God, far, far more than we could ever imagine or sensibly hope for:

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."

(Matthew 19:28)

And it's not just those twelve. Listen 2000 years on, when this is still true:

"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."

(Matthew 19:29)

So Jesus has taken time for a bunch of little kids, for a confused successful young man, for astonished and worried disciples, and now he takes time to say those words to us, down through the centuries, too. Folks, take comfort from that.

But don't think there isn't a twist in the tail still to come!

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

(Matthew 19:30)

But that's for next time.

Be part of the kingdom of heaven