

“To Such Belongs the Kingdom of God” (Luke 18:15–34)

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Many of the world’s greatest athletes have had setbacks in their careers. They’ve had injuries that have required them to have surgery. This is true of many of the greatest players in Boston’s sports history, from Larry Bird to Tom Brady. When an athlete is seriously injured and requires surgery, we realize that it’s wise for them to have that surgery so their bodies can heal properly and they can continue their careers in time. Eleven years ago, Tom Brady had a serious knee injury during the first game of the year, one that required knee construction surgery. He missed the rest of that 2008 season. But he returned the next year and has been playing very well ever since.

I doubt that when Brady had surgery, anyone thought that he made the decision to have surgery because he was weak. I don’t think there were critics who said, “Tom, you’re going to have surgery? That’s such a crutch!” Right after surgery, I suppose there was a time when Brady had to use actual crutches, and I doubt people were heckling him by saying, “Crutches? That’s such a crutch!” Yet, strangely, when it comes to the topic of religion, some people think that way. They think that religion is a “crutch” for people who aren’t strong enough to face the world on their own. They think that believing in God, particularly the God of the Bible, is something that comforts people who are too weak to live in a world that is cold and threatening. It’s a far braver thing, in their eyes, to be one’s own lord. Such people gladly quote the famous poem by William Ernest Henley, “Invictus,” which ends with these words:

I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

It’s interesting how no one seems to do that with surgeries. What would we think of Tom Brady if, eleven years ago, he refused to have a doctor repairs the ligaments in his knee? Imagine the team doctor is urging Brady to have the surgery, and so are Bill Belichick and Bob Kraft. And Tom Brady says, “I’m not going to have a doctor knock me out and then cut into my body. I am the master of my career, I am the captain of my body.” We would think he was being foolish. Now imagine that Brady says that he realizes he needs surgery, but he’s going to do it on his own. He’ll study a little and then fix himself. There have been player-coaches in the past, players

who coached their own team at the same time. Bill Russell and Pete Rose did this at the end of their careers. But I've never heard of a player-surgeon.

We realize in some areas of life that when we have a problem, the wisest thing to do is to have someone else fix it. When we have a serious injury or a disease like cancer, the wisest thing is to have a surgeon repair a part of our bodies or remove a tumor. Agreeing to surgery is a recognition that there are problems that we can't solve on our own. We must let someone else take control of our bodies. We must trust that they can fix us.

The same thing is true when it comes to our human condition. The reality is that we have problems we can't face. The biggest one is death. Everyone who is thoughtful thinks about the inevitability of death and wants to know how to live triumphantly in the face of that brutal reality. I'm reminded of the work of a French philosopher, who happens to be an atheist, named Luc Ferry. In his book, *A Brief History of Thought*, he says that all philosophies and religions deal with the reality of death. He says that "Man knows that he will die, and that his near ones, those he loves, will also die. Consequently he cannot prevent himself from thinking about this state of affairs, which is disturbing and absurd, almost unimaginable."¹ Of course, we don't always think of literal death itself. But we do think of the many faces of death: death of a career (perhaps due to an injury), death of a relationship, death of a season of life, death of our favorite restaurant or TV show, death of a loved one. How do we deal with all this decay and death? Ferry says that "the irreversibility of things is a kind of death at the heart of life."² "To live well, therefore, to live freely, capable of joy, generosity and love, we must first and foremost conquer our fear—or, more accurately, our fears of the irreversible."³

So, what promises us real life in a world of irreversibles? What promises us hope in a world of death? Or, setting aside death for a moment, what can fix this world that is broken by greed, selfishness, war, and corruption? What can fix my broken soul? Is there a doctor who can perform a surgery on the human condition, removing the bad parts, healing whatever good remains?

¹ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York: Harper, 2011), 2–3.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Christianity promises us that there is a Great Physician who can and will make everything right. It offers us salvation from death and decay. It offers an ultimate healing of our souls and of the whole world.

Since Christianity promises such wonderful things, why aren't more people Christians? I suppose there are many reasons, all of which can be called unbelief. People don't believe it's true. And there many reasons why people don't believe. One is that they really don't know what Christianity is and they've never been given good reasons to believe. In our society, that happens frequently. People simply don't know the evidence for Christianity. A second reason is pride: Christianity says there is a King who reigns over the universe and that King is not you. Or, to put it differently, it says that you can't fix yourself. Christianity requires humility, and the people who think Christianity is simply a crutch are often people who are quite proud. A third reason why people don't believe is that they already have a god in their lives that they worship. We call this idolatry. Of course, most people don't think they are worshiping a god or an idol. But whatever is most important to us, whatever we trust in for security and peace and meaning and comfort, whatever we love the most, whatever dictates our behavior, that thing is our true god, the true object of our worship. Christianity says that we must worship the true God and forsake all false gods. Many people don't want to do that, so they don't come to Christ in faith.

The reason I bring all this up is because today we're going to look at a passage from one of the Gospels, one of the biographies of Jesus, that contrasts two types of people. There are children, who can be quite trusting in others. And then there is a proud man whose real god is his wealth. Jesus tells us that to enter into God's kingdom, to be one of God's people, to be forgiven of all the wrong we've ever done, and to have life eternal, we must have the faith of a child. Jesus also says that those who put their trust in other things will not enter the kingdom of God.

We'll see all of this in Luke 18:15–34. We'll start by reading the first three verses. Here is Luke 18:15–17:

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."⁴

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

People were bringing infants to Jesus, probably so that he could bless them. The word used here of them, βρέφος, is used of babies, including unborn babies (Luke 1:41, 44). In a world of high infant mortality, perhaps they wanted Jesus to heal them, even preemptively. But when Jesus' followers see this, they rebuke these people. They probably thought that Jesus was too busy to bother with babies. They were not viewed as important people. But Jesus says, "Let the children come to me, . . . for to such belongs the kingdom of God." Jesus isn't saying that all babies and toddlers are automatically part of the kingdom of God. He's not saying anything about infant baptism. He's making a point about faith. So, he says, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

Young children rely on parents and other adults for many things. An infant is totally reliant upon a parent for food, clothing, protection, and just about everything short of breathing. A toddler relies on parents for those same things, even though they are a bit older and can walk. Even young children trust their parents to do many things for them. It wasn't all that long ago that my children were asking us to help them brush their teeth. The point that Jesus is making is not that we should be childish in every way. There are many ways in which we shouldn't be childish. Children aren't well educated or wise. They don't know how to handle the complexities of this world. But Jesus says that we must rely upon God the way that a child relies upon a parent. We must trust that God and God alone can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

God alone can open the wide the gates of his kingdom for us. God alone can remove our problem, our tumor, our disease, the incurable wound of our soul. We call that sin. Sin is all the wrong actions we do. But it's more than that. It's a power at work in us, one that distorts our desires. It takes us away from God and causes us to think that we are gods. It's a failure to love God, to trust him, to worship him, and to obey him. God made us for those things. He made us to have a right relationship with him. But sin destroys that relationship. Sin is what causes decay and death in this world. And the one thing that we can't do on our own is remove sin and its effects. We cannot uproot it and kill it. It kills us. So, we must trust that God can do this. Such faith honors God.

Luke, the author of this Gospel, contrasts the faith of a child with the faith of a proud man. We see this in the next passage, verses 18–30:

¹⁸ And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good

except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹ And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” ²² When 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.” ²³ But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. ²⁴ Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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.” ²⁶ Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” ²⁸ And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” ²⁹ And 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, ³⁰ who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Now, someone else comes to Jesus. It’s a ruler, probably a man who had some position of civic or political authority. He was a man of good standing, probably someone very respected, someone very successful and, in the eyes of the world, a good man. He addresses Jesus as a “Good Teacher,” and he asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. In other words, how can I be part of God’s kingdom? The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, promised that there is life after death for God’s people. Death is not the final word. There will be a resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:2). Those who are part of God’s kingdom will rise to “everlasting life.” They will live with God in a new world, a physical world much like this one but cleansed of all sin. There will be nothing evil, nothing bad. It will be a beautiful and bountiful world in which there is no death (Isa. 25:6–8; 65:17–25).

It’s a bit strange that the ruler would ask, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” You don’t do something to inherit something. You inherit something as a gift, usually because you just so happen to be related to someone else who died. But Jesus doesn’t focus on that. First, he asks, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” That is true. The Bible says that all mere human beings are not good (Rom. 3:10–12). In fact, Jesus has already called his disciples evil in this Gospel (Luke 11:13). I think the reason why Jesus says this is not just to claim that he is God. Jesus is not a mere man. He is the God-man. As the Son of God, he has always existed. He is not a created being. But over two thousand years ago, he also became a human being. And he alone lived a perfect life. He never did anything wrong. He didn’t sin because he wasn’t tainted by the power of sin. So, Jesus might be saying something like this: “You have called me good, but only God is good. So, if I’m truly good, I must be truly God.” I

think what Jesus is really doing is getting this man to see that he, the ruler, is not good. He is also getting the ruler to focus on God, and not on himself.

Then, Jesus says, more or less, “Obey the commandments to inherit eternal life.” Then, he mentions five of the Ten Commandments: don’t commit adultery, don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t lie, honor your parents. The Ten Commandments were at the heart of the covenant made with Israel in the Old Testament. Basically, God said to Israel, “If you want to remain my people, this is how you’re supposed to live.” The logic of the Bible when it comes to sin is that if it were possible for us never to sin, we would live forever with God. But our obedience must be perfect. Our righteousness must not be relative to others. We can’t say, “Well, I’m better than most people, so that must be good enough for God.” God demands perfection. Jesus is trying to get the ruler to think about whether he has been perfectly obedient, perfectly righteous.

Amazingly, the ruler says, “Oh, I’ve always kept those commands, even from my youth.” Perhaps it’s not too hard to avoid breaking those five commandments, at least in fairly literal ways. However, elsewhere, Jesus says that if we have lust for someone who is not our spouse, we’re committing adultery, and if we hate someone else, we’re committing murder (Matt. 5:21–30). But the ruler didn’t understand that. He sincerely thought he had a perfect record when it comes to those commandments.

But Jesus knows this man’s heart. Jesus left out some other commandments. The first is not to have any other “gods” before the true God. The second is not to make any idols. Jesus knows what this man’s true god is and he asks this man to forsake that god. So, he says, “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.” Jesus does not command everyone to sell everything. This is the only time he says that. Next week, we’ll meet Zacchaeus, a wealthy man who leaves his old life to follow Jesus. Zacchaeus gave away half of his wealth, not all of it, and there’s no hint that he failed to do what Jesus required of him.

One thing that’s important to see about Jesus is that he treated people as individuals. He knows the hearts of people. He doesn’t automatically put everyone in groups. He doesn’t say that all rich people are bad and must give away all their wealth. He doesn’t say that all poor people are good and have been unfairly oppressed. In short, he doesn’t play identity politics. He doesn’t lump people together into stereotyped or generalized groups. He is the Great Physician, and part of what makes a doctor great is the ability to accurately diagnose a person’s health. Jesus peers

into the soul of this rich man and sees that his true god is money. So, he asks this man to get rid of that god. The best way to remove the grip of greed in your life is to give your wealth away.

But this ruler won't do it. He won't part ways with his wealth. Instead, he is "very sad." The same Greek word is used of Jesus on the night before he died. In that case, it's translated as "very sorrowful" (Matt. 26:38; Mark 14:26). Jesus has promised him eternal life, a heavenly treasure that can never be taken away from him, and the man won't make that deal. He was grieved at the thought of it. Jesus then says that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, which is simply an impossible thing.

Why does Jesus say that? Is it that being rich means one is a particularly bad sinner? No. The Bible doesn't say that the wealthy are worse sinners. The Bible doesn't say that money itself is the root of all evil. The Bible says that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). Money is a powerful idol, one that promises comfort and security.

I saw a powerful illustration of this in the recent movie called *All the Money in the World*. It's based on a real story. The grandson of J. Paul Getty, an oil magnate, was kidnapped by Italians in Rome when he was a teenager. This was in 1973. Getty was recently known as the richest man in the world. The kidnappers demanded a \$17 million ransom for the teenager's release, but Getty refused to pay. At first, he believed that his grandson, Paul, and the boy's mother, Getty's daughter-in-law, concocted the kidnapping story as a way of bilking Getty. Later, he finds out Paul has actually been kidnapped, but he still refuses to pay.

In a scene with Mark Wahlberg (who plays a fictional security agent and former CIA agent, Fletcher Chace), Christopher Plummer (who plays Getty) says he can't pay the ransom because his financial position has never been more vulnerable. There is news of an oil embargo, which has raised the price of oil. However, he fears that the embargo will be lifted and that the price of oil will crash. The two characters then have this exchange:

Chace: We have to pay.

Getty: This simply isn't possible. My financial situation has changed. . . .

Chace: Mr. Getty, with all due respect, nobody has ever been richer than you are at this moment.

Getty: I have no money to spare.

Chace: What would it take? What would it take for you to feel secure?

Getty: More.

A little over three minutes later in the movie, there's a scene that teases the audience. Getty is called into a room by a secretary to meet with a man who asks if he's serious about making payment. Getty says he wouldn't be meeting with the man if he were not. The man says there can be no more games; payment must be made in cash on that day. Getty asks for proof first. "After you," says the man. Getty asks a man to give proof of his money; his assistant opens a briefcase containing cash. Then Getty walks to a small painting, which has been under a veil. It is a painting of a mother with a child. The man says, "Because of the painting's disputed provenance, it can never be publicly displayed." In other words, this is probably a stolen painting. Getty says he's disappointed about the painting's condition and isn't sure if it's worth the \$1.5 million price. The other man says that true masterpieces rarely go on sale. If Getty is unwilling to pay, he will never own one. So, Getty pays.

Getty was willing to pay \$1.5 million for a painting he could never display outside his home, even though he just said he had no money to spare to free his grandson. That is the power of greed. That is a picture of idolatry. He was so attached to his money and the things it could buy that he couldn't part with it.

But if "the love of money" is an idol, you don't have to be rich to worship that false god. Poor people can love money just the same. And idols aren't limited to money. The most important thing in your life could be a relationship, or sex. Some people won't come to faith in Jesus because it means not having sex outside the bounds of marriage. Some people won't become Christians because their boyfriend or girlfriend, or their husband or wife, isn't a Christian. Other people put their careers, or their entertainment, or their devotion to the great god of the gridiron, ahead of Jesus. If Jesus were standing here, looking into your eyes and peering into the depths of your soul, what would he ask you to give up? What would he tell you to forsake?

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, we read this:

²³ And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:23–25)

Inheriting the kingdom is a gift. It's free. But following Jesus is costly. It requires giving things up. But we gain far more by losing than we could ever gain by keeping. By giving up, we gain God and the whole world. By keeping, we retain our pride and our idol, but we lose

everything in the end. Jesus gives us the best of deals. It may appear that we are losing, but when we come to him, we can only gain. That's why Jesus tells his disciples that though they had left their homes and their careers, they have gained. He says that everyone who is willing to leave their old lives "will . . . receive many more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." We may leave old relationships behind, but we gain new ones in this life. We also gain peace and purpose by becoming Christians. And, in the life to come, we gain a perfect world, real life unending. We will live in a beautiful, joyful world, one full of the deepest pleasures, because we will live with the great being there is, God himself. So, becoming a Christian is not losing. It's gaining. The missionary Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

The disciples, who had given up so much to follow Jesus, wondered how anyone could be saved. How can we be saved from death? How can we be saved from the punishment that we deserve for our sins? How can anyone gain admission to the kingdom of God? If an upright man like this rich ruler couldn't gain entry, how can anyone else?

Jesus answered the disciples' question of who can be saved by stating that those who follow him, those who are willing to forsake everyone else, those who trust Jesus the way a young child trusts a loving parent, can be saved. Jesus said that this is impossible for us to achieve. "What is impossible with man is possible with God." But Jesus didn't say exactly how God could bring about this impossible state of affairs. How can God save those who can't merit salvation on their own?

Let's look quickly at the next four verses in Luke, Luke 18:31–34:

³¹ And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise." ³⁴ But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

Jesus had already predicted his upcoming death before (Luke 9:22, 44). But this prediction gives us more information. He says that in Jerusalem, where they will soon be, all the things written about "the Son of Man," a title Jesus uses of himself, will be fulfilled. He will be handed over by the Jewish leaders to the Gentiles, the Romans. He will be mocked and spat

upon. He will be flogged. He will then be killed on a cross, a Roman instrument of torture and execution. But on the third day, he will rise from the grave, in a body that can never die again.

The disciples couldn't understand this. They understood the words Jesus said, but they didn't believe it was possible. They couldn't see how Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Messiah, could possibly be treated this way. God hid this understanding from them until Jesus rose from the grave.

But we live on this side of the cross and resurrection, and we have the rest of the Bible. We know that Jesus was killed because of many factors: unbelieving Jews, unbelieving Romans, and even Satan, the devil himself. But ultimately, his death was God's plan (Acts 2:21–24; 4:27–28). The way that God could do the impossible, saving sinners, is by having someone live a righteous life in their place, die an atoning death in their place, and rise from the grave to show the penalty of sin had been paid in full and that all who are united to Jesus by faith will rise from the grave, never to die again. All who have a childlike faith in Jesus are credited with his righteousness. It's as if we never sinned. God doesn't just overlook our sin. No, the sins of all Christians were punished when Jesus died on the cross. And we're told that all who trust in Jesus will rise from the dead and live with God in paradise forever.

The question for all of us today is, do we believe this is true? Are we willing to trust Jesus? Do we trust that he is the Great Physician, the only one who can heal us? Are we willing to follow him?

If not, perhaps our pride is holding us back. We want to be in charge of our lives. But doing that is foolish. It's like wanting to be in charge of your own surgery. Perhaps we don't want to follow Jesus because it means changing our lives, giving up things we know are wrong, or things that we love and cherish too much. Think about this: someone or something will separate you from what you love. If you're not separated from that idol by something in this life, then death will separate you from it. What you're clinging to won't last. And it can't rescue you from death and from condemnation. What do you love more than God? What do you trust more than God? What dictates your behavior more than God? That is your idol. Give it up and follow Jesus. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

If you're not a Christian, I urge you to do this now. I would be glad to talk to you personally to help you follow Jesus and to answer your questions. But, Christians, we also must hear the words of Jesus today. We have a tendency to go back to our idols. We have a tendency

to not want to follow Jesus, because that path can very well lead to suffering. If the world hated our Master, it will hate us, too (John 15:18–19). But at the end of that path, beyond suffering and beyond persecution, is glory. Beyond even death is the risen Jesus, who will receive God’s children into his kingdom. Let us follow him on that path.