

## What must I do?

[Joel 2.23-32](#)

[2 Timothy 4.6-8, 4.16-18](#)

[Luke 18.15-30](#)

In today's Gospel, Luke continues with the question: How are we to approach God? Jesus is on his final journey to Jerusalem and has many encounters which tell us more about how to approach God in a helpful way. Last week we heard of the unjust judge who only did something about the widow's situation because she kept on nagging him, day and night. You will recall that Jesus said, **well God's not like that!** We can approach our loving heavenly father with our problems because just like a parent who want to provide for their children's needs, we have a loving God who delights to give us the help we need and will bring justice.

We heard too the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee had kept all the laws scrupulously (which would have made many of Jesus original hearers think that he was acceptable to God, but **he was so proud of himself and his achievements that God had no room to move in his life.** We cannot earn God's favour by keeping all the commandments. We obey what God calls us to do out of love and because we realise that this is the way to fullness of life. The tax collector in contrast is given approval because his **short, heart-felt prayer asked for forgiveness and displayed an openness to God's willingness to forgive** - and it is implicit here - to bring about restoration. So, we are to approach God with humility, a desire to be forgiven and a willingness to bring our lives into God's presence and allow God to work in us.

If the tax collector being applauded for his way of prayer was surprising, the fact that Jesus welcomed little children would have been even more amazing. We can imagine that just like today, individual parents loved their children and wanted the best for them - including bringing them to Jesus for a blessing. The disciples' reaction - to sternly send away these families - was symptomatic of the Roman legal attitude to children which held that they were of little account.

Jesus, in contrast, wholeheartedly welcomes the children and uses them to explain something about our proper approach to God - **we are to come trusting in God's goodness, with open and believing hearts...just like small children expect the adults in their lives to treat them with love and care.** This account is found in all three synoptic gospels, so it is interesting to see how Luke adds his own emphasis in his retelling of it. He records Jesus saying '*...it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>17</sup> Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*'

The account of the rich young man approaching Jesus brings up several issues. The rich ruler represents the wealthy lay leadership in the nation and allows Luke to deal again with a theme that he has consistently kept before his readers: wealth and generosity. In fact, this passage reflects a theme that is central to Luke - the disciple's trust should lead to a willingness to share what we have, for then we will find riches in heaven.

The rich man's attitude is like that of the Pharisee of last week. The self-confidence he reflects, along with his sense of sinlessness, is condemned by Jesus. In contrast, by trusting and following Jesus, we are given what he has asked for. We will have a rich reward, both now and in the life to come (vv. 29-30).

The man's question matches what a lawyer asked in 10:25: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' reply focuses on the standard of righteousness as represented in the Ten Commandments. The spirit of Jesus' reply today fits with he said in chapter 10: the great commandment to love God and extend that love to others. Having plenty of money was generally seen as a sign of God's blessing - which helps us understand the disciples' frustration in v 28 and 29. They have given up so much to follow Jesus - and he assures them that they v30 *will get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come (will have) eternal life.* But money, and especially when we allow money to be the measure by which we make decisions, can make us view others as means to an end, rather than as people.



But this young, privileged man is confident that he can stand before God on his own merit: he has kept all the commandments since boyhood. What Jesus does is test the man's heart and attachments. Is God placed ahead of worldly possessions in this man's life? Does the man really love God and others? So Jesus tells him that he lacks one thing: he must sell all his possessions.

Jesus goes on to promise the man treasure in heaven if he will follow him. We too need to come to Jesus, to trust him like a little child and to show humility and openness.

The young man finds the choice a painful one, and he refuses to consider it, choosing his wealth instead. Jesus responds: "*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!*" He looks at the man as he says it. Wealth and the false sense of security that comes with it can prevent us from meeting God. Jesus says that a camel can get through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich person can enter the kingdom. Jesus is using here his common style of rhetorical hyperbole, making it clear that a rich man on his own will never

make a choice for the kingdom. It is impossible. The priorities it requires demand a new heart. But then Jesus reminds us that God can do the impossible. God can change hearts and priorities. God's power and grace bring the change. People do not save themselves or earn God's blessing; God provides it.

Somehow, it is not easy to recognise our own self-satisfaction or its impact on others. It takes humility to acknowledge how we need to change to bring life and healing to our world and our relationships. Unfortunately, self-assurance or even arrogance is far easier. However, if we want to allow the grace and compassion of Christ to grow in us, it will take a commitment to being broken or having particular things stripped away in order that true humility may be an unmistakable mark on our lives.

Like this rich young man, we cannot work our way into the Kingdom of God. In Joel 2 we read how God promises to take the initiative:

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
<sup>29</sup> Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

We are encouraged that God loves to give good things to us! The physical signs of prosperity: threshing-floors full of grain, and the vats overflowing with wine and oil, are matched with the spiritual outpouring of love and power. Visions and dreams are future focussed- God wants us to live positive and fulfilled lives now and into the future.

In 2 Timothy 4 Paul reflects on his faithfulness as he nears the end of his life. He has *fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith*. He looks forward to the heavenly reward he will receive, assured that God, who rescued him in the past, even when others deserted him, will bring him safely into God's kingdom.

So, in conclusion, what do these different encounters tell us about how we are to approach God? We are to be trusting and accepting of God's leadership in our lives, just like little children respond to a caring adult. We learn from the rich young man that our finances are not to be our priority. We are to let God change our hearts and our priorities. We are to expect to see the signs of God's Spirit in our lives. What dreams or visions is God laying on your heart? And finally, like Paul, we are encouraged to keep on, to finish the race, to fight the good fight. May God who empowers us, bring us to a place of love and humility, where we are able to learn and grow from all the situations we undergo.