

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 18 *"Wealth, Status and the Kingdom"*

"The King is coming!" We are at the last passage before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; the king comes to his city, the Lord returns to Zion, the exile will soon be over, the forgiveness of sins achieved. So Jesus reiterates the way to enter his kingdom: not by status, not by wealth, not by scrupulously keeping the commandments, not by self-reliance; but by prayer and humility and repentance and faith, by generosity and shedding the bondage of wealth.

1) *Prayer, Repentance, Generosity*

First, those who would enter Jesus' kingdom must persist in prayer and crying out to God. He may seem slow to answer, but he is just and he is good and he does hear the cries of his people. So nobody should abandon prayer because it seems unanswered. If unbelieving human judges can be prevailed upon, how much more ready is God your Father to hear your cries. Do not give up.

Secondly, get over the self-reliance that blinds you to your real condition. Do not be like the Pharisee who *"thanked God he was not like other men!"* He was proud of his religious observances, and went beyond the requirements of Torah to fast twice a week - not just on festivals - and to tithe all he had - not just the produce of his own land. He was thankful to God that he was not a thief, an evil-doer, an adulterer! What could be wrong

with that? you might ask. Only that he had such a high opinion of himself that he despised "sinners," and presented himself before God as a paragon of virtue.

No, says Jesus, this is not the way into my kingdom! The despised tax-collector, covered in shame, who cries *"God have mercy on me, a sinner"* is the one who in that moment is made right with God - justified, pronounced not-guilty, pardoned, declared righteous in God's sight. *"Whoever humbles himself will be exalted, and whoever exalts himself will be humbled,"* says Jesus.

Or the man with great wealth, a "ruler" - probably of the synagogue - who has always been righteous (according to his understanding of the Law), but cannot part with his wealth to follow Jesus. *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom"* says Jesus; impossible, you could say, from a human point of view, but *"what is impossible with men is possible with God."*

Then there are the children whom the Twelve try to keep away from Jesus - in the 1st C. there is no sentimental attitude towards children as we have today; children are nobodies, valued only for their potential, *"lowly"* if anyone is lowly in that society - even among the Jews. But *"the kingdom belongs to such lowly ones as these,"* says Jesus, not to rich synagogue rulers married to their wealth, not to proud Pharisees who

thank God for how good they are! So *“receive the kingdom like a child.”*

2) *The King Must Die*

And as if to focus the minds of his hearers, especially the Twelve, Jesus uses this moment to announce again that when he reaches Jerusalem, he will be *“handed over to the Gentiles... mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, killed – and on the third day rise again.”* The king will be killed. The opening of the kingdom to many people, far beyond his followers now, will be possible because he will knowingly and willingly lay down his life to open the door. For him there is no pride, no wealth, no self-importance; he will become lower than the low – despised and rejected, crucified on a thief’s cross outside the city wall. All this he knows already; all this he embraces, all this will lead to his new and risen life, and to the spread of the kingdom far beyond the bounds of synagogues and Pharisees or even of Israel herself.

The entry into the kingdom is marked by the lowest place, not the exalted one. Whoever wants to join Jesus in the kingdom will have to learn the way down. Then they will be justified; only then will they be exalted. But of course few of Jesus’ hearers, few even of his closest followers, have any idea what he is talking about. They cannot yet shake their cultural blinders that say status and wealth and goodness and purity are what count with God, as they do in their society. It will take the crucifixion and the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit in power before even the Twelve will “get it.”

3) *The Kingdom Today*

Now it takes only a little thought to realize that misunderstanding about how to enter

the kingdom of God has persisted down through the ages to us.

There are still people who think it’s about being good, and making God so grateful to us that he welcomes us in. There are still people who think it’s about status and wealth, and imagine that to cultivate people of wealth and status, in the hope of getting them into the kingdom, will be “good publicity for God.” We live in a celebrity culture, and some people have brought that right into the churches.

There are still people who are thankful that God has made them so good. It is a subtle snare, isn’t it? “Thank you, Lord, for giving me so much good in my life; my health, my wealth, my job, my family, my home, my life here on Long Island. I thank you that You have kept me from the pit; that I have not been dragged into the gutter by alcohol or drugs, or had to suffer financial ruin, or the loss of my marriage or the waywardness of my children.” What do you and I give thanks for at Thanksgiving? God’s goodness which has made us “good”? Or are we like the tax-collector who can only say “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”? What are we most grateful for: our good lives, or God’s forgiveness?

What about status? Could we give it up? Or have we worked all our lives to achieve it, and are now defined by it? How hard it is for some people to enter the kingdom of God! Not impossible, with God; but very hard for people! So here’s that question again: what kind of people are we becoming? If we go on this way, who will we be 10 years from now? If we are at the peak of our careers, who will we be when we are retired? If we are parents who are totally devoted to the welfare and development of our children, who will we be when our children are finally “gone”? Which parts of our self-image, and the way we present ourselves before God, depend on the

happy combination of circumstances we enjoy right now? Who will we be when things change, as they surely will?

Is being part of the kingdom of God – also known today as the Church of Jesus Christ – a major part of who we are, of how we see ourselves? How much is faith worth to us? Is it the community of God's people that keeps us going? Or is "church" a once-in-a-while thing we do "for the children?"

And what about prayer? Is ours sporadic, often neglected, or persistent? Does it build on a deep trust in the love and wisdom and power of God? How long do we keep up prayer? I can tell you that in past months, I have seen prayers answered that I have prayed daily for years. That is not a tribute to my persistence; it is a tribute to the grace and mercy of God. But there are some things you can never give up praying for, and some people you can never stop praying for.

Are we part of the kingdom that Jesus began? Have we grasped why he had to die and rise again? Do words like atonement and reconciliation mean anything to us? Are they living realities, or just "church language" that passes us right by? There are choices to be made: Jesus presented them more and more plainly to his hearers as he neared Jerusalem. Do we want to be his followers, part of his kingdom? Then we must listen to his call, and trust him, and do what he tells us to do. That may require significant change of heart on our parts, because he makes it clear that we cannot "have it all;" there are aspects of our life and culture now that we would have to let go if we were to come into his kingdom.

The Bible calls that "*repentance*;" turning towards God. It takes a work of the Spirit in us to do it, and it is not a once-for-all event, because we continue to stray. But if we will persist in seeking his will, his way, his

kingdom, Jesus promises that nobody will be turned away. We just have to stoop low enough to get in.

Let us pray...