

“COME, FOLLOW ME”

Luke 18:15–34

Key Verse: 18:22

“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.’”

Are you good at following? Honestly, sometimes we prefer to be left alone. Or we’d rather do things on our own, with our own inspiration, on our own terms—not follow somebody else. And sometimes, our lives have various kinds of baggage not conducive to following. In today’s passage we’re coming to the end of this long travel section in Luke. Jesus encounters people with little children. Then, in contrast, he meets a rich ruler. He concludes by speaking with his disciples. All three encounters center around his words: “...and come, follow me.” In all three parts Jesus is teaching what it really takes to follow him. What *does* it take to follow Jesus? May God speak to us through his living word today

Part 1: “Like a child” (15–17)

As we’ve seen, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (17:11). He’s been teaching his disciples, along with some Pharisees (17:20–22). Here, after telling two parables about prayer, he gets interrupted. Look at 18:15. “Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.” Luke says it’s “even infants” being brought. These parents want Jesus to touch their little ones. In our culture, we might think of this as an emotional, warm and fuzzy gesture. But at that time, infant mortality was high. People couldn’t be sure if a young baby would live. They thought the touch of Jesus would bring health and protection. The disciples think these people are going too far, being too self-centered. They especially think that while teaching, Jesus shouldn’t be interrupted by this.

What happens? Read verse 16. “But Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.’” The disciples are rebuking them, but Jesus is calling them to him. To the disciples this is embarrassing, but Jesus does this because it’s

important to him. Is it because he just likes babies? Maybe. But he says here, “...for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” He’s using infants to teach us about discipleship.¹ What’s his point? In verse 17 he says: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” He’s telling us to receive the kingdom of God like a child. What does he mean? He means to receive it humbly and simply. Children have no problem receiving; it’s normal to them. As we follow Jesus, he wants us not to get proud and self-sufficient, but to keep growing in a humble, simple heart to receive the kingdom. Like a child we may be crying, laughing, smelly, or just quietly taking everything in, but Jesus wants us to come to him as we are and receive the gift of his kingdom.

His words “...and do not hinder them” are also important. Jesus never wants us to prevent little ones from coming to him. Not just children but also new believers. *How might we be hindering others from coming to Jesus?* We may not even be aware we’re doing it. But if we’re judgmental (Rom.14:13) or insisting on our own rights (1Cor.8:9) or pushing our own ideas, or even talking too much, we’re hindering people from coming to Jesus. We need to hear his words “do not hinder them” and take it seriously. Based on his words, we need to firmly decide never to put a stumbling block in anyone’s way of coming to Jesus (cf. 17:1–2).

Part 2: “Sell all...and come” (18–30)

At this moment, somebody else shows up. Look at verse 18. “And a ruler asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” It doesn’t seem usual for a ruler to show up to talk to Jesus.² And this man doesn’t seem hostile; he seems genuinely interested in Jesus’ answer. Somehow he likes Jesus and calls him “Good teacher.” What’s the response? Look at verse 19. “And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.’” Jesus welcomed the infants, but he doesn’t seem too keen on talking to this guy. What’s going on? And why does he emphasize that only God is good? Partly it’s because Jesus is not into flattery. But mainly, he seems to be addressing the ruler’s problem. What is it? This man thinks he’s good, when he’s not.

So Jesus says more. See verse 20. “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor

¹ In 9:46–48 he did something similar.

² Earlier, a lawyer came with the same question; but it was to put Jesus to the test (10:25–27).

your father and mother.” These are the moral and ethical boundaries God wants us not to cross. The Jews thought if they followed the Ten Commandments they could inherit eternal life. But here Jesus mentions only the ones dealing with how we treat others. Why? This is where this man has a problem.³ How does he respond? See verse 21. “And he said, ‘All these I have kept from my youth.’” He’s never crossed the line; he’s lived a clean life outwardly. But it’s not working. He still lacks assurance of eternal life. He feels empty, like something’s wrong. It tells us there’s more to following God than just living an outwardly moral life (cf. Mt5:27–28). God wants us not just to refrain from doing bad things. He wants us to know his grace and love, love him back, and with his love, to truly love others.

Read verse 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.’” Jesus can see into his heart. What’s missing is love. And what’s blocking him from loving is his earthly treasure. So Jesus is ready to perform spiritual open-heart surgery on him. He tells him to sell all he has and distribute it to the poor. It’s a huge challenge. But by doing it, this man can finally start obeying the commands to love our neighbors as ourselves.⁴ But if he only did this, he would just end up self-righteous. The commands of Jesus to “sell” and “distribute” are preparation for his final and greater command: “...and come, follow me.”

What can we learn here?

First, the only way to inherit eternal life is to follow Jesus. Even if the man sells all he has and distributes it to the poor, he still won’t have the assurance of eternal life. He’ll have that if and only if he follows Jesus. Why? It’s because we can’t earn eternal life with good deeds, even with extreme self-sacrifice. Even our greatest deeds can never atone for our sins; only Jesus can. Only Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for sin, once for all.⁵ We’ve all got to be found in Jesus our Savior and Redeemer; he alone gives knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins,⁶ and real assurance of eternal life. Apostle John says, “And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life;

³ God’s law actually makes us all more aware of our own sin; see Rom.7:7–9.

⁴ 10:27; cf. Lev.19:18

⁵ Heb.9:12,26; 10:10,14

⁶ Phil.3:8; Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; Luke 1:68; 2:38; 1:77; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18

whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1John 5:11–12). The only way to have this life is to follow Jesus (cf. John 3:36).

Second, to follow Jesus, we’ve got to give him our whole heart and life. It sounds easy just to say “I believe in Jesus”; “I follow him.” But talk is cheap. Following Jesus is no lip service. Earlier, he said if our hearts are devoted to treasure on earth, we won’t be rich toward God (12:21). Once, he told all his disciples, “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (12:33–34). He knew how anxious they were about material things, but still he challenged them. Why? It’s because if our heart gets entangled in earthly treasure, we can’t really follow him. We’d like to rationalize and justify our wealth on earth. But it doesn’t work; wealth steals our hearts away from Jesus. How can we really follow him? 9:23–24 reads: “And he said, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.’” Jesus means we have to be all in, holding nothing back, and believe we have real treasure in him. St. Paul wrote: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...” (Phil.3:8). When Jesus is the greatest treasure in our hearts, we can use our wealth wisely (1Tim.6:17–19).

How does the ruler respond? Look at verse 23. “But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.” Up to this point he was doing so well; why does it end like this? It’s because the man never realized what an idol his riches were in his heart.⁷ For him, this is just the beginning of some very painful self-realization. He just can’t let it all go. It’s too radical a change. He’s got extreme riches, though. So, is he happy? It says here that “he became very sad.” It literally means “extremely sorrowful.” In his sadness he’s making a tragic decision; he’s choosing his riches instead of the chance to follow Jesus.

What happens? Look at verses 24–25. “Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, ‘How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person

⁷ Riches are often related to coveting; see Eph.5:5; Col.3:5.

to enter the kingdom of God.” Of course that’s impossible. Why is it so hard for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom? Jesus said earlier, “...but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Mark 4:19). Material riches are more deceitful than we realize. Paul writes: “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1Tim.6:9–10).

Look at verse 26. “Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’” They’ve been thinking material wealth is a sign of God’s blessing. This challenge to the ruler, and his response to it, is turning their value system upside down. Trying to help rich people may seem futile. But what does Jesus say? Read verse 27. “But he said, ‘What is impossible with man is possible with God.’” God can do impossible things in people’s sinful hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit. Soon, Jesus is going to encounter a rich man who does enter the kingdom (19:1–10). But this is all so unsettling, it finally gets a rise out of Peter. Look at verse 28. “And Peter said, ‘See, we have left our homes and followed you.’” Why is he saying this? He and the others need Jesus to tell them they’re going to be okay.

What does he tell them? Read verses 29–30. “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, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.’” It’s for them and for us! To follow Jesus, we need to learn to live for the sake of the kingdom of God. It’s always going to involve sacrificing things we’d rather hold onto. It’s not just about money. Jesus mainly mentions our greatest treasure, our human family. Practically, he’s talking about making him and his kingdom our first priority. To do this involves making sacrifices. We can’t cut his words out of the Bible just because we don’t like them. When we follow God’s lead to make such sacrifices, it never goes unnoticed by him. God blesses us now, with many more spiritual family members, and ultimately, with eternal life in his kingdom. To follow Jesus challenges the pattern of this world, which is basically living for self.

Part 3: Suffering (31–34)

In the last part of today's passage, Jesus takes the twelve aside and tells them what's going to happen to him in Jerusalem (31–33). It's going to be brutal. He's going to be turned over to the Gentiles to be mocked, treated shamefully, spat upon, then flogged and killed. On the third day, he will rise. All these things will accomplish what's been written by all God's prophets in the Old Testament. It's all part of God's plan for world salvation. Jesus is ready to go through with it all. He trusts his Father God, just like a child. He's ready to sacrifice even his own life for God's kingdom. He's setting the example of real discipleship for us all. Look at verse 34. "But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." This reveals that they, too, had their hearts elsewhere.

Read verse 22 again. May God make us humble and simple like a child in following Jesus. May God help us repent of any idols and give our whole hearts and lives to following Jesus. May God grant us a new decision to truly follow Jesus in his way of suffering to carry out God's will.