

LUKE—WEEK 22

HOW TO ENTER THE KINGDOM



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Lazarus and the Rich Man, an anonymous 31x22 cm Illumination (ca. 1035–1040) on display at Germanisches National Museum, Neuremberg

Jesus is directly asked by a ruler, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He knows the ruler’s heart, and knows his claims of goodness are bogus, so He answers with a command He knows the ruler won’t obey.

But before this conversation, Jesus teaches some lessons on how to really get saved. You must receive the kingdom as a little child. You must humble yourself. You must pray incessantly. You must be always prepared, for no one knows when the end times will be.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

Luke 17:22–18:23 — How to Enter the Kingdom
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1 Luke 17:22–37 (NKJV)

Then He said to the disciples, “The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them. For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, in that night there will be two men in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.”

And they answered and said to Him, “Where, Lord?”

So He said to them, “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”

This passage parallels a much longer description in Matthew 24:15-51. Both are cryptic, but the general themes are clear. They prophesy about *the days of the Son of Man*. They make these essential points.

- 1) No one can predict *the days of the Son of Man*.
- 2) These days will take everyone by surprise.
- 3) Don't fall for false prophets making claims about the arrival of *the Son of Man*.
- 4) *The days of the Son of Man* will be obvious when they get here.
- 5) Be vigilant and brave.

Jesus warns against trying to figure this out too specifically. That's why, when the disciples ask, “*Where, Lord?*” He gives them a, “You'll know it when you see it,” response.

Unpredictable and cryptic things are part of being a Christian. When you turn everything over to the Lord, you never know what's going to happen next. That's both scary and comforting. Everyone likes to have control over their own fate; that's why many folks prefer carry-on to checking bags when they fly.

But, if Jesus is who He says He is, turning things over to Him is the safer option. Of course, this does involve a different definition of safe.

2 Luke 18:1–8 (ESV)

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

This parable is pretty straightforward. Luke even gives us the interpretation up front. *They (we) ought always to pray and not lose heart.*

If an unjust judge who couldn't care less about his people can be pestered into doing the right thing, then so would a righteous and loving *God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night.*

But the portrait of the judge caving in to the widow's incessant nagging still doesn't feel quite right. It's easy to see the unjust judge not caving in, or even slapping her with a contempt of court charge. Why doesn't he do that?

The answer's in the Greek. The colloquialism that's translated here as, “*beat me down*,” literally means to have visible bruises.

In other words, widow's pleadings are producing a visible result; everyone can see what's happening.

The judge is worried about his image. His giving her justice is in his own interest.

Note also that this comes right after Jesus' teaching about the second coming. This passage is to be understood in that context. He's hinting that the timing of His return will test their patience. Then He reiterates that theme with, “*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*”

We ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Is there something you had been praying for that has dropped off your screen, even though it's still unanswered? Did you change your mind about what you were asking for? Did you give up?

If it's the latter, bring it back. Ask the Lord to direct you and to clarify your heart on this issue. If it was a great passion (and you don't feel led to revise your stance), rekindle that passion.

If it's painful to want something that much and not get it, offer your heart on the altar by praying hard anyway.

That's a supreme form of worship.

3 Luke 18:9–14 (ESV)

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The message of this passage is easy to understand, but it raises a challenging issue. Sin can ruin every good thing by turning it into pride. How can we keep whatever good works we do from going to our heads? What is the key to remaining humble while being a servant of Christ? Should we beat ourselves up over everything we do wrong?

The Pharisee’s prayer provides a clue. He focuses on comparing himself to other people. Also, the two things he brags about are ways that he exceeds the standards of the law. Fasting was commanded only on the Day of Atonement. Tithing was required only of earned income (e.g., crops). The Pharisee makes a point of outscoring everyone else, and bragging about it in prayer.

Whatever we have done for Christ, it pales in comparison to what He has done for us. It also pales in comparison to what the first-century Christians did, or what the Christian martyrs throughout history did, or what the persecuted church is doing right now. It’s easy to see that the things we do here in the land of plenty aren’t worth getting puffed up about, but what keeps great Christians from getting puffed up?

The tax collector’s prayer provides another clue. He isn’t thinking about how he compares to other people; he’s just thinking about his sin. The secret to humility is seeing our depravity. The process of sanctification exposes the horrors of what’s inside. Serving Christ actually helps humble us by clearing our vision. All the great saints were anguished about their sinful nature.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. — Romans 7:24–25 (ESV)

Not only are we spared the persecutions that some Christians around the world endure, we even avert our eyes from knowing about it.

Never stop praying for the persecuted church. The danger they face is hard for us to imagine. The enemy is everywhere and far more dangerous and creative than we know.

Ask God to encourage them and to show them the value of their witness. May His face shine upon them.

Also, pray for their physical protection. Ask God to send angels to their side when danger erupts.

4 Luke 18:15–17

Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him, and said, “Let the children come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such belongs the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.”

I used the New King James translation here because it correctly renders the Greek emphatic negative (οὐ μὴ — “ou may”) in verse 17 as, “by no means.” This feels strange, but it must be important.

The people think that Jesus’ touch will benefit their children, even though the babies don’t seem to be sick. This partly explains the disciples’ concern, but they also seem to be jealous of Jesus’ time. The disciples aren’t trusting Him to make His own choices. Yikes!

Jesus replies by making a point that doesn’t quite seem to fit. He doesn’t talk about whether it’s important for people to bring babies to Him to be touched. He speaks of children instead of infants (παῖδια — “paidia,” instead of βρέφη — “brephay”) and He’s referring to what they do of their own free will, not of what parents do to them. He’s turning this into a teachable moment.

In fact, the analogy here is wondrously accurate, but it’s with the parents not the kids. They are coming to Jesus with exactly this child-like attitude He commends. They don’t know of any underlying mechanism for why this is a good idea; they just do it.

But the emphatic negative here is important. There’s a similarity between the disciples’ attitude and that of the Pharisees. They’re overthinking things. They don’t see how simple it all is.

We do this too. While it’s good to teach the details of the plan of salvation, we tend to think that understanding those details is how you get saved. The result isn’t faith in Jesus; it’s faith in the cross, or faith in a plan, or even faith in faith. Yikes again! Saving faith is faith in Jesus as Lord.

Consider the thief on the cross—who was obviously saved. He didn’t know much, but he knew that Jesus’ was coming into His kingdom. That’s saving faith—faith that conforms to Romans 10:9.

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. — Romans 10:9

And notice that the thief didn’t know that Jesus’ would conquer the cross through resurrection; his faith was even more childlike. He just knew that Jesus would reign.

Now we know. Denying the resurrection now would be incompatible with confessing Jesus as Lord.

Ask God for simple faith. It’s okay to think hard to try to understand scripture, but praying for simple faith is different. Confessing Jesus as Lord means letting Him take over—wanting Him to take over.

Ask God to teach us to rely on Him and not on ourselves—or our understanding.

5 Luke 18:18–23 (ESV)

And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” 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.” But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Note that this is not a parable. The ruler is a real person with a real history. There’s no way he has kept all those commandments. Jesus says, “*You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’*” When he replies, “*All these I have kept from my youth,*” Jesus has a golden opportunity to shoot him down; He had just said, “*No one is good except God alone.*”

Instead, He acts like He buys it and zooms in on the ruler’s main weakness. “*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.*” This is a straight up invitation to become a disciple. The real disciples accepted a similar offer, leaving everything (e.g., boatloads of fish) behind.

Bang. No deal. Jesus is serious and the ruler is not. *But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.*

But why does his being *extremely rich* automatically mean he’s *very sad* and the deal’s off? Since every American is *extremely rich* by biblical standards, does this mean we’re not willing to be disciples?

It is good to be challenged by these questions, but the historical context is often essential. In the first century, there was no industrialization, no machinery, and very few inventions. It was virtually impossible for an individual to have become *extremely rich* by creating great wealth. Wealthy people got rich off the labor of others. The ruler’s wealth was created by their productivity that he “collected.”

This guy was no Thomas Edison. His wealth showed his approach to life, and it’s not that of a disciple.

Of course, we’re no Thomas Edison either. Still, everyone has more “wealth” because of all the Thomas Edison-like things people have invented. Life without electricity would be a big step back.

So, what level of wealth is okay?

That’s the wrong question. We shouldn’t be as poor as the average person in the first century. We’d be less healthy and less productive. Jesus doesn’t want us to make stupid sacrifices.

This issue is how we treat other people—and not just their money.

We mustn’t be selfish in the way the ruler was.

