

Luke 18-19

JESUS BLESSES THE LITTLE CHILDREN: 19:15-17

1. Jesus tells his disciples not to prevent parents from bringing their children (even infants) to him for a blessing, saying “it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs”. He says further that to enter the kingdom one must “receive the kingdom of God as a little child.”

In the ancient world, perhaps because of the high infant mortality rates, children were generally not valued, except for their potential to eventually grow into productive teens and adults. Green points out,

Although it is easy to romanticize about children with respect to this pericope, such qualities as ‘innocence,’ ‘openness to the future,’ and ‘trusting’ are not the first ones that come to mind when reviewing general perception of children in the first century. [650]

Nevertheless, as far back as our written record goes, commentators have understood Jesus to be praising *trust* (Carson, Bock), *openness* (Carson), *humility* (Carson, Cyril of Alexandria), *innocence*, esp. meaning *ignorance of sin* (Ambrose, Calvin, Cyril of Alexandria), *sincerity and eagerness* (Evans).

In the passage before this one, Jesus praises the humility of the repentant tax collector as important for entry into the kingdom of God. What about children is being praised in this passage? How do children receive things? How do adults receive things?

2. Calvin understands this passage as indicating that while adults are reconciled to God only through faith, children may be reconciled through the laying on of hands as in baptism. This is likely because Calvin sees in these verses Jesus praying for the children to be part of the kingdom of God. First, is this passage *consistent* with infant baptism? Second, does it *teach* that infants should be baptized?

THE RYR: 18:18-30

3. Jesus quotes five of the ten commandments. What do these five have in common? How does Jesus’ further requirement to sell all and give alms relate to the remaining commandments, or to Jesus’ summary of the law?
4. To modern ears, there is an apparent disconnect between Jesus’ statement in 25 about camels¹, needles, and the rich entering the kingdom, and the disciples’ reply in 26, “who then can be saved?” If we read 25 as saying that the rich have the hardest time entering the kingdom, shouldn’t the disciples be feeling reassured that their sacrifice (28) has gained them entry into the kingdom? What’s going on here? Why were the disciples downcast?
5. Jesus has castigated the Scribes for weighing down the people and not lifting a finger to help them (11:46). Yet Jesus, knowing the RYR’s love of money, places the greatest possible burden on his shoulders. The RYR walks away “very sad,” perhaps never to return. Suggest this approach in a modern evangelism class and you are sure to get a dirty look from the teacher.

¹ It has long been popular to assert that there was a gate to Jerusalem called the “needle’s eye”, through which one could only pass on one’s knees, after removing one’s burdens. This is apocryphal (K. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 165-66; cf. Also Keener’s Matthew commentary on 19:16), as is the suggestion which goes back to Cyril of Alexandria that “camel” was a term for a thick nautical rope. These are weak attempts to soften what Jesus clearly meant to be not just difficult but “impossible for mortals” (27).

Preachers are fond of saying it is the role of the church to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Some have suggested that Jesus uses precisely this approach:

This is why Jesus taught two ways to go to heaven. Sometimes, he taught that eternal life was a free gift from God to be received by simple faith (Jn 3:16; 6:29; etc.). Sometimes, he taught that you have to earn your way to heaven by doing good works. He didn't embrace two contradictory soteriologies—he spoke to two different kinds of people.

Whenever Jesus teaches the “earn your way” approach, it's always to people who think they can (Mt 5:17-48; Mk 10:17-22; this lawyer). And it's always so they'll realize they can't earn it and humble themselves to receive it as a free gift...

Whenever he teaches the “free gift” approach, it's always to people who realize they can't earn it (Samaritan woman; etc.). There is no need to convince them of this, so he goes straight to the good news.²

A blunt approach for relating to unbelievers is also found in the following passages: Peter's address in Acts 3:14, 4:10; Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, Peter and Simon Magus in Acts 8:20, Paul in Athens in Acts 17:29-31, etc. Have you ever attempted this approach when sharing the Gospel? Name someone you know who is a good fit for brass-knuckles evangelism, and describe how you might apply this method.

JESUS HEALS A BLIND MAN: 18:35-43; ZACCHAEUS: 19:1-10

6. Those at the low end of the totem pole—those with little honor or money or power—take the lime light at several points in chapters 18 and 19: the widow chivvying the unjust judge; the tax collector sneered at by the Pharisee; the little children brought to Jesus; the blind beggar; and Zacchaeus—all contrasted with the RYR, who walks away from invitation by Jesus himself into the kingdom of God.
 - a) If you want to change the path of the Roman Empire, you send Constantine's wife a dream. Soon Christianity's not just legal, but people are flocking to churches. So why did Jesus primarily target the powerless?
 - b) Would you characterize those you interact with as rich/powerful/honorable, or poor/powerless/shameful, somewhere in between, or a mixture?
 - c) When did you last share the gospel with someone, or share visibly some aspect of your faith, or reach out to or minister to someone outside the church?
 - d) A friend reports that the prayer ministry at his church tends to attract those who are in need and are aware of their need, and at times those who aren't believers. (The latter probably because his pastor from the pulpit tells those who want to know more about the gospel to go to the prayer room after the service.) Would this work in our church? What other ways can you think of for meaningful contact with those who are aware of their need—and preferably those who don't know Jesus?
7. The blind beggar is the first person in Luke to publicly identify Jesus as the Messiah (18:38). Jesus announced in his inaugural address in 4:18-19 that his ministry would fulfill the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah by bringing good news to the poor, setting captives free, healing the blind, etc. Throughout Luke we see that the salvation brought by the Messiah, the signs of the year of Jubilee, overflow beyond forgiveness of sins.

² Gary DeLashmutt, <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/nt/luke/gary/luke10-2.htm>.

a) What does salvation include in the following passages³, each of which employs a form of the Greek word for salvation, *sozo*?

- *Israel: 1:68-71, 76-77*
- *All people: 2:29-32*
- *The Garasene Demoniac: 8:35-36*
- *The woman with the hemorrhage: 8:44, 48*
- *The blind man: 18:42*
- *Zacchaeus: 19:9-10*

b) If an interested unbeliever asked, what would you described salvation as consisting of? How have you experienced the year of Jubilee in your own life?

8. A central aspect of Jesus' ministry, and one Luke takes pains to bring out, is his use of *table fellowship*. Table fellowship in first-century Mediterranean cultures had some distinctive properties [quoted from DJG]:

- Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy and unity.
- Even everyday mealtimes were highly complex events in which social values, boundaries, statuses and hierarchies were reinforced.
- Anyone who challenged these rankings and boundaries would be judged to have acted dishonorably, a serious charge in cultures based on the values of honor and shame. Transgressing these customs consistently would make a person an enemy of social stability.
- The extended family was the usual context in which meals were consumed. Coming together to eat became the occasion for sensing again that one was an integral, accepted part of a group.
- Beyond the house hold, people generally preferred to eat with persons from their own social class.
- Levites had to observe a six-week annual period of ritual purity prior to Temple service, during which they were forced to keep distance from other Jews.
- In reaction to the Hellenization of the century and a half prior to Jesus, a movement arose which later grew into the Pharisee movement. This movement encouraged all Jews to intensify their holiness and sense of unique identity by voluntarily living according to the priestly laws of ritual purity every day of the year. This particularly limited one's eating companions to those with "undefiled hands", i.e., persons in a state of ritual purity.
- An additional practice among Romans was the symposium, a drinking and talking party that followed a formal banquet. This provided not only for eating with one's peers but also for exchanges of wit and discussion of serious subjects of mutual interest. Many of Luke's readers would have experienced symposia as the central social activity of such groups as the popular funeral clubs, trade associations and philosophical schools.
- At these formal meals the diners reclined around a central table on couches most commonly arranged in a U-shape called a "triclinium." When we read in Luke of Jesus

³ Other passages using forms of *sozo* speak of the salvation of Mary (1:47); the shepherds (2:11); all flesh (3:36); the man with the infirmity (6:9); the sinful woman (7:37, 50); the ones along the path (8:12); Jairus' daughter (8:50); those who lose their lives for Jesus (9:24); "a few" (13:23); the leper (17:19); and "who?" (18:26).

reclining, many scholars believe a symposium is being described.

- a) How, in Luke, have you seen Jesus depart from the above practices? What elements of the gospel did Jesus teach and act out through TF?
- b) Contrast modern evangelical use of TF with that of Jesus and the early church. In particular, consider its use for evangelism, for enfolding others in the family of believers, for maintaining that family, and for overturning conventional social rankings.
- c) Modern table fellowship does not carry the same freight as ancient TF did. Is there some other, modern equivalent practice by which we build social networks—or are meals the main mechanism for us as well?

Ω

Fun Fact: In Matthew's version of the RYR, the latter asks what "good thing" he must do to get eternal life (Mt 19:16). According to Carson, "Many Jews believed that a specific act of goodness could win eternal life..." (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, 422).

Even More Fun Fact: It has long been popular to assert that there was a gate to Jerusalem called the "needle's eye", through which one could only pass on one's knees, after removing one's burdens. This is apocryphal (K. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 165-66; cf. also Keener's Matthew commentary on 19:16, and *Hard Sayings of the Bible*), as is the suggestion which goes back to Cyril of Alexandria that "camel" was a term for a thick nautical rope. These are weak attempts to soften what Jesus clearly meant to be not just difficult but "impossible for mortals" (27).