

7. LIVING IN THE KINGDOM

Knowing where all our belonging to the Kingdom has come from, life in the kingdom consists of looking to God for everything, especially through prayer, and living in the fullness of what God gives, towards God and towards others. 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them' (Eph. 2:10).

Where Your Treasure Is (Matthew 6:19–21)

Not a case of investing wealth in a future life, by giving it to the church or the poor (though it may issue in that), but knowing that God is our reliable never-failing treasure chest, and living from Him.

Ask, Seek, Knock (Matthew 7:7–11)

'And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him' (Heb. 11:6).

Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8), Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1–8)

These are further instances of Jesus' cheerful sense of humour with regard to the sureness of these things. When we are assured of love, and free of anxiety, we can wear these things lightly, and without heaviness (see Matthew 11:28–30). While we may consider it irreverent or improper, Jesus does not mind comparing (and contrasting) his Father with a grumpy home-dweller woken up at midnight by a pesky neighbour, or an unjust judge prevailed upon against his better judgment by a persistently nagging widow! Compare Psalm 78:65–66, where God wakes up like a soldier from a drunken stupor:

Then the Lord awoke like a man out of sleep:
like a warrior that had been overcome with wine.
He smote his enemies in the hinder parts:
and put them to a perpetual shame.¹

Love and Good Works

On the cross God made Christ, who knew no sin in himself, 'for our sake . . . to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). We are therefore what God 'has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (Eph. 2:10). If this is so, then we may fully expect that our life in the kingdom of God will be full of righteous deeds. The apostle Paul concludes in his letter to the Galatians: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6); he then goes on to speak of 'the fruit of the Spirit' (in contrast to 'the works of the flesh'; see Gal. 5:13–26). Paul says in Romans 2 that God 'will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil . . . but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good' (Rom. 2:6–10). David Seccombe says that those who are 'patiently doing good' are people who have repented of their old life, and are now ardently seeking to please God'. He goes on to comment: 'In Paul's mind there is no divorce between believing in Christ and doing good, as there is in some mistaken preaching today. To repent and trust in God's Son is good and leads to all manner of good; to refuse to believe is evil and leads to evil. The gospel and doing good are inseparable partners'.² Some, out of zeal to emphasise that 'by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph. 2:8–9), have played down the importance

¹ Translations from *The Liturgical Psalter* in Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, 1995, p. 305, and Miles Coverdale version of the Psalms in *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

Given Jesus' propensity to compare or contrast God with disreputable figures, some have suggested that the master of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1–9 is another such figure. There is nothing in that parable to suggest this, but rather the contrary: 'Everything indicates that the master is an upright man . . . no breath of criticism is levelled at the master. If the master were ignoble, he would have acted in a very different manner. The steward is dismissed, but not scolded, punished, or jailed . . . Any line of argumentation that places the person and character of the master in a bad light will need substantial support' (Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, pp. 87–88).

² David Seccombe, *Dust to Destiny: Reading Romans Today*, Aquila Press, Sydney South, 1996.

of good works, to leave the impression almost that the gospel is only all about forgiveness over otherwise unchanged lives. In contrast to that, the writer to the Hebrews urges that, once we have 'full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water', then, holding to the hope God has faithfully promised us (of 'new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home' 2 Pet. 3:13), as we see approaching the Day that will usher that in, 'let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds' (Heb. 10:22–25).

Some of the parables of Jesus have to do with the 'love and good works' that are part and parcel of being saved and belonging to the kingdom of God. While our sinful tendency might be to take them wrongly as charting our way into the kingdom by the good works we do, we will take care to interpret them as the loving deeds of grace, by the Spirit, that follow those who believe (as in Rev. 15:13).

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

The question put to Jesus by the lawyer—a teacher of God's law—was an interesting way of putting it: '*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*' Is that the way it works?

Recently we were watching on television a program about death, featuring the Scottish humourist Billy Connolly, who is close to death himself, because he's been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and Parkinson's disease. He was at a mosque talking with a Muslim undertaker—a lovely young guy, black African. The Muslim undertaker was saying that death is not something to be afraid of, because they believe it is not the end. And out of his care for Billy Connolly he asked him gently, 'What do you believe about what happens after death?' and Billy said, 'Well, I'm still not sure—I'm kind of looking on, trying to weigh up my options'. And the Muslim undertaker said, 'I think that if you have tried to do the right thing, you should be OK'—that was the best he could come up with. That's when Billy Connolly said, 'I think that's what bothers me!' And we said, 'That's exactly right!'—if it all depends on how well we've done the right thing, when maybe there are times when we haven't, where does that leave us then?

So what was going on with this lawyer with Jesus, who wanted to know what he had to *do* to inherit eternal life? He was obviously devout, and keen to do the right thing. And how did Jesus address his issues, particularly this matter of thinking that inheriting eternal life all depends on *what we have done*, and how well we've done it?

Jesus could have said, 'No! What makes you think that *what you do* could ever get you eternal life with God?' That would be a good question. But Jesus didn't say that. The young Muslim undertaker obviously had a care for where Billy Connolly was at with regard to issues of life and death. Jesus was the past master—and the present master—of loving those who came to him and pastorally caring for them where they're at. And Jesus picks it up from where this lawyer is at. The lawyer is a religious scholar, who knows and studies the law of God—it's obviously important to him—so that's where Jesus starts:

He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" (Luke 10:26).

That would have been music to the lawyer's ears—someone who wants to talk with me about what's in God's law! And the lawyer is delighted to go straight to the heart of it:

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

This lawyer took some words from Deuteronomy 6, about loving God, and Leviticus 19, about loving your neighbour, and he put the two together, to express the core of the law of God. We know Jesus did this too, but he wasn't the first, or the only one, to do that. Here it's the lawyer who is doing it to Jesus. And Jesus is glad to affirm him in that: 'he said to him, "You have given the right answer"'. And because this lawyer had asked Jesus what he should do, Jesus gives him something to do:

You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live (Luke 10:28).

—do this and you'll have life that goes on into eternity with God. And Jesus then proceeds to tell this lawyer his story of the Good Samaritan, and ends it by saying, 'Go and do likewise'—go and do that, be like the Good Samaritan. So far so good?

Many of us perhaps would be very satisfied with that. If we have a mindset that life all depends on what we do and how well we do it, and we are prepared to stick to that, then we will say, Yes, loving God, and particularly loving your neighbour, is the way to go. It's a mindset that is very common, and popular, in Australia. If you're a Fred Hollows, the ophthalmologist who restored eyesight for thousands of people in Australia and elsewhere, you'll get an Order of Australia award—and fair enough too. People will even call you a 'Good Samaritan', and many would say that is what real Christianity is all about—doing good.

Why then was this lawyer still not fully satisfied when he had already said 'Love God with all you've got, and love your neighbour as yourself', and Jesus had replied, OK, 'do this and you will live'? Because the lawyer did not stop there, but went on to ask another question about who his neighbour was, which then led in to Jesus telling the story. No doubt there were other things going on under the surface, that were not immediately obvious. But there are enough clues there for us to pick up on what was really happening.

First of all is the reason the lawyer came to Jesus in the first place, and asked him that question about inheriting eternal life. Luke tells us:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus (Luke 10:25).

So there was an underlying motive in the lawyer's question. He wasn't just innocently asking something to find out the answer. He had a hidden agenda: he wanted to 'test' Jesus, to catch him out, so that he would have something against Jesus. This was increasingly becoming a feature of Jesus' ministry. By the end of the next chapter of his gospel Luke tells us:

the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say (Luke 11:53–54).

That is what was starting to happen with this lawyer—he was looking to find some fault with Jesus, maybe so he wouldn't have to go along with Jesus in all he was saying and doing.

Looking for faults in other people is also part of the Australian mindset. Do we not see a bit of that each week that Parliament sits, despite calls to come together, and to lift the bar of how people treat each other in Parliament? Why do we keep on doing that? Maybe we think that by putting other people down, we can bolster ourselves up a bit. And why do we want to bolster ourselves up? Is it because we sense deep down that there's something about ourselves that we're not happy with, and we seek to reassure ourselves that we're really hopefully OK, by putting other people down so we can say, 'Well at least I'm not as bad as so-and-so?' And it becomes habitual—a national mindset.

And despite appearances to the contrary, this lawyer was quite unsure of himself. Jesus knew that, too, which is why Jesus was treating him so carefully and gently, even though the lawyer was trying to have a go at him. But the lawyer gave himself away when he asked Jesus that second question. Luke tells us:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29).

Why do we feel we have to justify ourselves? Is it because deep down there is something about ourselves that we know is not right, and we have to try desperately to make it right by justifying ourselves, putting ourselves in the right, especially when someone has spoken a hard word to us that we can't afford to admit might be true, or when we suspect that we might not have done the right thing in a particular instance? And do we see how that desire to have to justify ourselves feeds into the mindset that life all depends on what we do and how well we do it, because we can't afford to admit that we might not have done it right, or we think we might be able to get it right in the future if only I just do this and I just do that, and then I'll be OK—'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

So 'wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"' and with that second question, and his reason for asking it, the lawyer left himself wide open for Jesus gently to put his finger on where the lawyer was really at, if he was prepared to see it. Built into the story are those who 'passed by on the other side'—the priest, and the Levite. Religious officials, who should have known better, but almost instinctively put themselves and their own comfort ahead of the needs of this half-dead beaten up body. Because that's what we end up doing when our foremost preoccupation is to justify ourselves and put

others down—we end up looking after ourselves at the expense of others. That blind selfishness is what damns us, and bedevils all our attempts to keep God's law of love. Especially if we are perversely trying to keep the law of God to justify ourselves, which is not what it was designed for, and never works. Maybe some sense of that underlying selfishness is what was bothering Billy Connelly, as he faced his own death. So in the story there was the opportunity for the lawyer to see himself, and for us to see ourselves, in those who 'passed by on the other side'.

Not only that, but if we are of a mind to justify ourselves by putting others down, then in the end we will need someone to hate and despise and reject. If you are Labor, then it will be the Liberals and the National Party. If you are Liberal, then it will be Labor and the Greens. If you are the Crows, it will be Port Power, and so on. For everyone together, it will be the umpire. And the Jews right next door to them had a people they hated and despised—the Samaritans. A mongrel mob—not your true believers—defiled pagans. The lawyer probably would rather spit than say the word Samaritan. So Jesus' mention of the Samaritan in the story as the one who showed kindness would have gone like a shockwave through the lawyer and the crowd that was listening. It would have really shown them up. The lawyer at the end still had trouble bringing himself to say the word 'Samaritan'. When Jesus asked, 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' the lawyer answered, 'The . . . one who showed him mercy'.

But in that answer the lawyer also indicated that he was starting to get it. And it was in his use of the beautiful word, 'mercy'. We often say it ourselves in our liturgies: 'Lord, have mercy'. The Greek words for that are '*kurie eleison*'. Anthony Bloom, a Russian Orthodox Archbishop in Britain, in a book on prayer, said that word in Greek has connections with the words for olive tree and olive oil. When we pray 'Kyrie eleison', we are praying, Lord, pour out your mercy and compassion and loving tenderness and let them flow over me and into me like the anointing olive oil.³ If only we knew it, we are living in the middle of God's mercy all the time. That's why the sun still comes up each morning, even though nothing much has changed as far as human nature is concerned.

There was a bit of mercy happening in the story:

a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them (Luke 10:33-34).

When we come to the stories or parables Jesus told, it is not enough just to look at the story. We need also to look at the person telling the story—at who he is and what he has come to do. This incident took place shortly after Jesus had 'set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51), when Jesus was starting to tell his disciples, 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised' (Luke 9:22). Over against our selfish putting down of others in order to justify ourselves, Jesus chose the path of taking that all in to himself—all that hatred and resentment that had started to come against him even in the lawyer's first question—to take it all away. He would be despised and rejected like the hated Samaritans, he would be stripped and beaten like the man on the Jericho road, and left not half dead but completely dead, on a cursed cross, as he took into himself the final consequences of all our refusal to participate in God's love. He would love to the end, and that love would prove stronger than death, and he would rise again. And from there he would pour out on us the oil of God's compassion and mercy and forgiveness and peace and tender loving-kindness, to bring us back to God, for ever—eternal life.

Even as he was telling the story, Jesus was pouring this wine and oil into the sad life of the troubled lawyer, and binding up his wounds. Which may be what brought the lawyer in the end to use the word 'mercy'. It was in response to that word that Jesus said, 'Go and do likewise'. Not this time 'Go and love God with all you've got and love your neighbour as yourself in obedience to God's law', but, in the face of your failure to do that, receive God's wonderful mercy and, as you receive it, show it out to others. May be the anointing oil of God's mercy came upon the lawyer as he listened to Jesus telling that story. May something of that also have come to us, as we have listened to him here in this amazing story.

³ Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *School of Prayer*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1970, pp. 32-35.

The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46)

‘When the Son of Man comes . . . he will sit on the throne of his glory’ (Matt. 25:31; compare 26:63–66; 2 Cor. 5:10); Jesus’ reference to himself as ‘Son of Man’ here relates directly to what was to happen in the action of the cross and the resurrection, which Matthew recounts immediately after this parable. ‘All the nations’: Those to whom the gospel of the kingdom has come (see Matt. 24:14), after the disciples have been sent out by Jesus in Matthew 28:19. ‘As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats’: Compare Ezek. 34:15–24. While this figure of the shepherd makes this a parable-like story, it actually relates to a real event, apocalyptically described. At this time the good and bad, previously mixed together in God’s people (compare Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50, the Wheat and the Weeds), are now separated out for judgment.

How have some come to be blessed by His Father, and to be ‘righteous’, and what constitutes the blessing? Why are others in a state of being cursed, and what is the difference (see Eph. 2:1–10; Gal. 3:10–14; compare Gen. 12:3; 15:6)? All sinners are cursed and under God’s wrath from the beginning; but God promised and gave to Abraham the blessing of righteousness/justification, which has now come for all nations to those who believe in Jesus Christ. Being ‘righteous’ here, then, is the righteousness that comes by faith, not by works or good deeds. John Calvin: ‘the source of salvation flows from a deeper spring . . . their blessing started from the free favour of God . . . to be blessed of God means to be dear or beloved with God’.⁴ The blessing of God has come to them (compare Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:14) before they have done any ‘good works’. Indeed, these works have flowed from receiving this blessing. That ‘the kingdom’ they inherit has been ‘prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (compare Eph. 1:3–8) makes it clear that what has happened has more to do with God’s gracious saving purpose than with our making or deserving.

‘I was hungry and you gave me food . . . thirsty . . . a stranger . . . naked . . . sick . . . in prison’: These acts of kindness in meeting human need were part of the fulfilment of the law of God (see e.g. Ezek. 18:16; Job 22:6–7; 31:16–23; Isa. 58:7, 16; Matt. 10:42; James 2:15–17; 5:14; 1 John 3:17; Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37; Heb. 13:2, 3; 1 Tim. 5:10). But how is Jesus saying that these deeds were done to him? Jesus identified himself and his Father with those who came with his gospel, especially under persecution: ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me’ (10:40; compare Acts 9:5; hence 1 Cor. 12:27; 8:12). The persecution of believers and those who proclaimed the gospel gave plenty of scope and need for such acts of kindness.

The astonishment of the (justified-by-grace) ‘righteous’ shows that they had no consciousness that they were doing these things to Jesus himself. They are surprised and quite ignorant of the good works they have done for the King. They know of nothing that they could claim to their credit, nor are they interested in doing that. They have not been keeping a record of their good deeds before God—they have not even remembered them themselves. This parable is sometimes taken to say that intentional social ministry is the be-all and end-all of Christian faith. But here it seems what they had done has come out of them in a spontaneous way, where they have been more concerned for others than for themselves—they have not even bothered to register with themselves that this is what they have done. Certainly scoring ‘brownie points’ to get in good with God is not an issue for them. For someone to be like that, something special must have happened to them. Nothing to prove, no concern for self, only unselfconscious concern for others. What has happened? For a start, they must have had all their sins forgiven. Because it is the people who are still guilty and have things still to hide that are the ones who still have something to prove, and may go to any lengths to do it. How has that happened? In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is the one who has come to save his people from their sins (1:21). And he is the one who in this story is sitting on the throne as Judge and King. They are the ones who have come to know *him*, and have received all that he has brought from the Father.

Who is this one they have come to know? How is he as they have come to know him? He is the one who has come in the Father’s love to fully identify himself with the whole human race, in all its sin and in all its need. When he started his life in the flesh, where was he born? In a stable, in lowly circumstances. When he began his ministry, where did he go in obedience to the Father’s calling? To Galilee, to that benighted and oppressed region where no one would chose to live if they didn’t have to. What did he say to them? Blessed are the poor in spirit—those who have no spiritual resources left—Blessed are those who

⁴ *Calvin’s Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Volume 3, Tr. A. W. Morrison, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 114.

mourn—those who haven't got much to be happy about—Blessed are the lowly—those at the bottom of the pile—for those are the very ones to whom God is coming even now as I speak to you! So closely did Jesus identify with his disciples that he called them his own family. He said, whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And his unselfconscious identification with us sinners went even further than that. He said that when he was lifted up on the cross he would draw all people to himself. He embraced you and me and all of us in that great and terrible cross, and there, we are told, he bore all our sins and all their terrible condemnation, and that we died there with him, so we wouldn't have to die out there all on our own, because it was our death there that he died. You can't get any closer, or more closely identified in love, than that. He is the one these 'righteous' have come to know. They have found themselves loved by him and brought into total forgiveness by him, and so they have been free to be about what he is about with regard to those who are poor and the oppressed by human sin.

So they have been kind to 'the least of these who are members of my family' [lit. 'my brothers']. In Matthew 12:48-49, 28:10 and 23:8 this is used of Jesus' disciples, not the wider community. See also Jesus' concern for the 'little ones who believe in me' in 18:6, 10, 14. This is not to say that acts of kindness should not extend to the whole of humanity (see Gal. 6:10; Prov. 19:17).

The converse is true of those who have neglected to do good or care for those who belong to Jesus in the work of the gospel (see Matt. 10:24-25 in contrast to 10:40-42; John 15:20). If they have refused the blessing commanded through Christ, they remain in the former state of being cursed and under God's wrath, that all of us sinners have been in already from the beginning.

The blessing and the curse are now finalised: 'eternal' is used of both the 'punishment' of the accursed and the 'life' of the righteous. Nations are judged on the basis of their treatment of the disciples of Jesus (compare Gen. 12:3), and so of Jesus himself, and his Father.