Surrendering Idols in Childlike Trust
Luke 18:15-30

Last week Martin preached on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in which Jesus contrasts the pride and self-confidence of a religious Pharisee with a despised tax collector who comes knowing he's a sinner and trusts not in himself but in God. The passage concludes with the words "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (18:14b) And so it's into this context of humility that Luke records the incident of Jesus blessing the little children that were being brought to him. Let's read it together from Luke 18:15-17.

So we're told that people were bringing their children to Jesus so that he could bless them. They are having a dedication service; it's a joyful occasion. You can imagine the setting. Parents are bringing babies, and letting their toddlers run up to Jesus, and Jesus is just picking them up, putting them on his knee, putting his hand on their heads and praying for God's goodness to be upon them. So why are the disciples so furious? What's wrong with that? Surely, it's a beautiful scene in the life and ministry of Jesus. Well not according to the disciples. You see they didn't want Jesus itinerant preaching, teaching and healing ministry to be interrupted by annoying little children running up to him and getting in his way – afterall he has far more important things to do right? Like ministering to adults! The disciples are furious with the parents so they rebuke them and try to put a stop to it.

Now before we continue, I know that we read this and think, 'what is the disciples' problem? Who do they think they are?' And the tendency is for us to want to rebuke the disciples for rebuking the parents. But if we're to interpret this scene correctly, we have to appreciate how children were viewed in Jesus' day. You see while parents may have prized children - male children especially - in society they were largely ignored as unimportant. They certainly weren't considered worthy of much adult attention outside their families. It's not like today when children, at least from what I've seen in the UK, are pampered and entitled to all kinds of privileges and benefits. Back then, they were to be seen and not heard. Jesus has a tendency of using little children as an example. Perhaps you remember a previous incident in Luke that involved children – in chapter 9 the disciples are arguing over who of them will be the greatest and Jesus interjects by taking a child in his arms, who they would've considered insignificant and said "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all -- he is the greatest." (Luke 9:46-48)

And so while the disciples were perhaps doing what many thought was culturally acceptable, Jesus is not going to bow to their agenda and so he rebukes the rebukers and says "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them." You can just imagine their embarrassment can't you - the disciples stand there red-faced in all their frustration while the children and parents run past to get on Jesus' lap. And while this is undoubtedly a precious occasion for the children and parents, there is also a lesson here for Jesus' disciples which includes you and

me. You see Jesus wants to use this occasion to make a point and teach us about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus says, verse 16, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” He’s not saying that the Kingdom belongs to little children, nor is he even saying that little children automatically enter the Kingdom, but he is saying that those who want to inherit the kingdom of God, those who want to be his disciples have to become "like" these little children. But what does that mean? Surely we’re not supposed to strive for immaturity? Recently with the boys in the youth group we’ve been discussing about becoming a man and in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul urges believers to ‘put away childish things.’ So what do we do with this apparent contradiction? Well in fact it is no contradiction at all. Let me share with you a personal story that I think best illustrates what Jesus means when he says we must become like children to receive the Kingdom.

Back at the beginning of April Nicola and I drove back to England to meet my brother and his wife who’d flown in from California. The plan was to all drive up together to my parent’s house to surprise them with a family reunion. Now bearing in mind we hadn’t seen my brother and his wife, or all been together as a family for almost a year and a half, we were super excited, my parents had no idea even though it had been planned for months, and thankfully the surprise went perfectly well. My mum almost went into shock and it was great to all be together. But another part of the surprise was that I had also booked for us all to go to a camping barn for a few days in an area called the Lake District in Northern England, also known as ‘God’s own country’ for very good reason. Anyway we turned up – all 8 of us – at this place I’d booked and my goodness it was appalling. Glass on the floor, no heating, sofas torn apart, bins all full, toilets not flushed, the place smelled like smoke, discoloured bed sheets, actually there were no beds, just a few mattresses piled on top of each other. The place was a health hazard. I mean I wasn’t expecting 5* accommodation but this was unearthly! So needless to say I phoned the guy and arranged a refund but now we had nowhere to stay. We were stuck 2 hours from home, it was early evening and we had been looking forward to this stay in the Lakes all together as a family for months. It didn’t help either that it was Easter week so everywhere was full and the chances of finding anywhere else even close to our price range was extremely unlikely. So we became quite downcast, headed to a coffee shop to escape the usual rain and to be honest the situation felt a little hopeless! We prayed and then began to call and search online in that coffee shop, we debated, fretted, thought we were heading back, thought that it was all over and in fact I became very negative. It was then that the Lord showed me what Jesus meant about children and the Kingdom. We were all sitting there in a circle in café Nero in Kendal and I looked around at all my family as they frowned and panicked and stressed and searched and talked and then I looked at my 3 year old brother Isaac, who many of you have met, as he laughed, climbed around, sang and played without a care in the world, and I heard the Lord whisper in my ear – which doesn’t happen often, at least as often as I would like it to – “look at your little brother – is he stressing? Is he frustrated, is he worrying or does he just trust that he’ll be taken care of? He doesn’t have to have it all worked out, neither

do you. Why don't you trust me like Isaac trusts" And this scripture came racing through my mind. What a picture of trust. There I am seeing all the impossibilities and there is Isaac having a great time. Isaac hadn't earned anything - he just trusted; he didn't even have to stop and think about whether he would have a safe place to sleep that night, or whether he would eat. He doesn't know what it means to even be concerned by these things-he knows his mum and dad deal with all that. It doesn't cross his mind-he simply and humbly trusts. And so I thought, you know what, I'm going to do the same: I'm going to stop fretting – I'm going to let God take care of this and not think that I have to have it all worked out! And man were we blessed beyond imagination… We ended up in the most amazing house you can imagine for a fraction of the price.

The point is this – that just as little children depend on their parents, so God's children should depend on their Heavenly Father. I know it sounds really simple but do we really trust Him like a child trusts their parents?

The problem is we like to depend on ourselves, we think we can handle it all but Jesus is saying that's not how it works in his Kingdom. We want to earn favour, we want to merit God's goodness, we want to be in control but Jesus says that not how it works. We have to become like little kids! Verse 17 "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Such simple trust is a prerequisite for entry into the benefits of God's rule. As one commentator (Bock) puts it 'in the Kingdom and in one's walk to be a child at heart is a good thing.' Guys, if little children can run into Jesus' arms and trust, why can't we? Let's come to him like children in trust and humility. Jesus does not bar any from coming. Every person is significant in his eyes - even children. It's that humble and childlike spirit that we should imitate. That simple faith and dependence on others that we see in children that gives us an excellent example to follow. We can only enter the kingdom when we come depending upon Jesus and not ourselves.

And so following this theme of entering the kingdom not by depending on ourselves but upon Jesus, and not trying to work it ourselves but rather trusting him as a child trusts their parents, we come to the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler. This episode's found in Matthew, Mark and Luke which highlights the special attention we ought to pay to it. So let's allow the Holy Spirit to minister Christ's words to us as we read from verse 18… (to 23)

Luke tells us that this man was a ruler. So he was a man in authority, possibly a synagogue leader or equivalent – he was well respected in the community. Matthew adds in his gospel that he was a young guy. Now when the NT uses the word youth it refers to anyone between the ages of about 24-40, so I'm sorry Martin, you're just outside the bracket on this occasion, but to be honest I do think that 40 is a way too generous view of young! But I guess I would say that as a 24 year old! Anyway, he's young, he's powerful and we are also told that he's rich. So he really has it all going for him – respectable, young, rich and powerful.

But he's troubled with a burning question about receiving salvation. Despite his rather high estimation of himself, his question uncovers his feeling of inadequacy

in his spirituality, otherwise he probably wouldn't be asking Jesus this question in the first place. He basically believes what the average person you might speak to in the street, or at school or at work believes: that your position in eternity depends on your performance on this earth. Or more simply put; you go to heaven if you do good. You go to hell if you do bad, well very bad. Eternal life is a reward for what you do on earth and you just have to do your best and hope it's good enough. This guy has come to Jesus and basically said 'well I'm not perfect, but I'm not too far off!' In a sense it's hard to know if he's coming arrogantly ("I have kept all these since I was a boy, I've ticked all the right boxes) or humbly ("Lord what am I doing wrong?"), but I certainly detect a genuineness about his question. Most of the questions from religious people that Jesus got asked were an attempt to trick him and humiliate him - "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" (Luke 20:22). "Why do your disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath?" (Luke 6:2). "This lady was caught in the very act of adultery. Shouldn't we stone her as Moses directed?" (John 8:4). But this man's question was no trick. It was a sincere question to which he needed to know the answer - how to inherit eternal life. The problem is he thinks he can save himself. I mean he's got rich himself, he's earned respect, he's worked hard and he just wants to make sure he earns himself salvation as well. I get the feeling that he wants Jesus' confirmation: 'Jesus I think I'm on the right lines. I think I'm ticking all the right boxes. Can you just confirm so I can carry on earning my salvation?'

But Jesus sees right through this man. Before he can even begin to answer this man's question, he has to deal with a grave misconception that this man has. He calls Jesus 'Good Teacher'. Well is Jesus not a good teacher? Absolutely he is. There has never been anyone better, but you see that Greek word "good" in both verses 18 and 19 means "pertaining to meeting a high standard of worth and merit." So what this rich young ruler is actually saying is 'Jesus, you're a good person. You're an excellent example. In fact you're definitely one of the best. If anyone could earn their salvation by their good deeds and acts of religious service you can.' But Jesus rebukes him and quickly addresses this misunderstanding. He explains "no one is good except God." As long as he thinks mankind can be good, he misses the point completely. Isaiah 64:6 tells us that all our good deeds are like filthy rags – actually the word used is 'menstrual cloths.' That's what God thinks of us trying to earn our salvation. He's tried to reduce Jesus to just a good teacher. But Jesus says 'don't call me good unless you actually think that I'm God, because only God is truly good. Jesus isn't just high up on the good scale. He's not better than most, not as good as some. Jesus Christ alone is in his own category: he's not the best among men. He's in his own league. He's divine. He's absolutely holy, perfect and sinless. However this man doesn't worship him as God but simply puts him in the category of 'one of the best. Great teacher. Honourable man. But Jesus rebukes him. He's either good because he's God or he's not. Romans 3:10 reminds us, 'there is none righteous. No not one.'

Jesus has to rebuke this man here because unless he grasps that our relative standards of goodness are way below God's absolute goodness and God's standards of righteousness, then he simply can't understand anything else about salvation. He'll always believe that he can attain salvation by his own merit by doing good deeds.

And so after he has caused the man to question his definition of goodness, Jesus reminds him of the commandments to which the young man immediately responds, "Oh yeah all these I have kept from my youth." Wow! What a guy! At least he'd obeyed what the Pharisees told him he needed to do but remember they weren't the best guides according to Jesus. But regardless of his religious achievements what's interesting is that although he thinks he's kept all the commandments he still senses a lack, a discontentment, and incompleteness in his spirituality. And maybe you're here this morning and like this man, you sense a lack, a hunger for something more that religion just doesn't seem to have satisfied. And that's because religion and legalism don't get to the heart, they focus on the externals. And so Jesus gets right to the heart of the issue – v 22 - "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and then come, follow me." Ouch! Cut to the heart. You see this guy aspired to something good and right: eternal life, but sadly, there was something he loved more than eternal life and that was his wealth and stuff. His love of money was overwhelming. He idolized wealth and material possessions. And so Jesus says a thing or two about money. Let's read verses 23-30.

Perhaps you're thinking, 'oh no, not another sermon on money, I can't take anymore!' I agree, it does feel like we've heard a lot of sermons on money, possessions and wealth recently doesn't it? But that's because 25% of all Jesus' teaching is on this subject? Why? Because riches and the kingdom of God don't mix easily and because it doesn't always go in first time but Jesus wants his followers to get it! One preacher (Ryle) said that 'riches incline people to pride, self-will, self-indulgence, and love of the world.' And whether we admit it or not, we are so rich! The craziest thing is everyone thinks that someone else is rich don't they? We prefer to compare ourselves to those we consider just a tad richer than us so we can dodge the conviction. It's hilarious! We all do it! It's so hilarious in fact that Jesus even jokes about it! Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through they eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom? Good teachers often have a good sense of humour and so did Jesus. That's probably why people wanted to be around him all the time. He was super fun to be with – no wonder kids loved him!

But all this to say that we are among the worlds richest and yet we don't think Jesus is talking to us! The hard truth is that Jesus is saying that the love of money, of wealth and worldly possessions keeps people out of heaven. That's a sobering thought and it's just as applicable to us as it was to this young rich guy.

But you know the whole point of this story is not about money in and of itself. Remember money is not the root of all evil. The love of money is and it's crucial that we don't miss Jesus point in his encounter with this young ruler. You see this was a desperate case of idolatry. This man's idol was wealth which is why Jesus tells him ' Sell all you have and distribute it.' One preacher (Ryle) said 'this man had to overthrow his cargo if he was going to save his life.' It sounds serious doesn't it? It is serious. Idolatry is serious business. Whatever comes between

you and God, whatever would hinder you from pursuing Christ wholeheartedly has to be severely dealt with. Why? Because it will keep you out of heaven.

My question to you this morning is this: what is the idol in your life? Perhaps it is the same as it was for this guy: wealth and possessions, perhaps it is something else: family, your children, your spouse, your home, your car, your job, your retirement, a relationship, your hobbies, your education. I don't know what it is for you. I know what it is for you and I know it is a daily battle to surrender it. It has to be ruthlessly dealt with. Jesus didn't tell everyone they had to sell all and distribute tio the poor but he told this man he had to. You see the discussion here is not as much about money as it is about idolatry. Jesus simply found this guy's idol. And he will find yours and deal with it accordingly if you will surrender yourself to him. If you want to know what your idol is just ask yourself 'what can I not live without?' The prospect of losing something in our lives often reveals if it has become an idol. I read what one preacher had to say about this passage and I thought he made an excellent observation. He said that there are two ways to find your idols: one is to follow your wallet, what do you spend your money on? How much do you give? How much you spend on yourself and how much you spend on those that need it, that's one way of determining idols - your bank statement! But the other way to find your idol is to figure out what's not funny to you. Jesus was joking with this guy about his earthly wealth. That's why he used the camel and needle gag, but this man didn't find his idol humorous. It meant the world to him. And this is so true; if we can't laugh about stuff because we hold it too close to us then there's your idol. No doubt I would laugh at some of the things you idolize but you would laugh at me idolizing the things that I do. Do you see the irony? Other people saw the funny side. People were laughing at the thought of this camel going through the eye of a needle. But not the rich young ruler. He wasn't laughing at all. He went away sad because his stuff meant too much to him!

What is it for you? What earthly thing has this kind of hold on your life? What consumes your thoughts and pay check? What is not a laughing matter for you? And more to the point are you willing to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to expose it? The problem is not money, possessions, income, family, hobbies, education; these are all good things! The problem is not with our things, the problem is with our hearts.

While you may think the idols in your life are impossible to release to God, Jesus reminds us in verse 27 that with God all things are possible and great rewards await us both on this earth and more importantly in the age to come. I urge you this morning to let the Holy Spirit gently reveal to you your idol and then surrender it to Him and enjoy the peace that and joy that follows as you trust him like a child trusts that he has your bests interests at heart and is working all things together for good for you.