

THE CROWN OF DISCIPLESHIP

Matthew 19:16-30

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My previous congregation end up being 98% Afrikaans, all recent migrants. Each time a new family came to the church I would visit them. One question I often asked was 'Why have you come to Australia? Australia is a great place to be, but migration is not easy. You have left behind so much; your family and friends, your networks, your favourite places, your history and culture. But still you decided to come to Australia. Why?' Well in a sense they did a 'cost-benefit analysis'. They knew they would leave behind many things. But that was outweighed by what they would gain by coming here. Now, why do we do this sort of thing, this 'cost-benefit analysis'? Well, basically to reassure ourselves that we are doing the right thing, that the gain outweighs the loss. I am mentioning this to help us to appreciate what Peter says in our text in Matthew 19:27 *"Peter answered [Jesus], 'We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?'"*

Peter asked this in response to the Jesus' interaction with the rich young man. This person had come to Jesus and asked in (:16): *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Now, that's a very good question. And the young man it seems had come with the right attitude. The other gospels tell us he knelt before Jesus. What answer does Jesus give? Well, basically Jesus said to him that he needed to do two things. First, he needed to recognise his sin. That's why Jesus gave him the law instead of speaking of grace. He listed the commands the young man should keep. The young man rather audaciously says (:20) *"All these I have kept...what do I still lack"*. Perhaps, outwardly, he had kept them all. he hadn't committed adultery or stolen; or told lies. but what about in his own heart? The reality is that every one of us falls short of what God really wants from us. Sadly, he didn't recognise this. The second thing Jesus told him to do was (:21) *"...sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."* With this second item Jesus is saying to have eternal life you need to be willing to submit to him as Lord. The key thing Jesus is getting at is not that everyone has to sell their stuff and give it all away. What we have here is that Jesus has identified this man's idol; what he loves more than God. That could be any number of things for the rest of us. The point is that disciples of Jesus must acknowledge that Jesus has the right to expect complete obedience. So, because this man was obsessed with his riches, that is what he had to give up in order to follow Jesus. But we see he couldn't do it. He fits into the category of Luke 14:33 where Jesus says: *"In the same way, any of you*

who does not give up everything he cannot be my disciple." The young man by hanging onto his self righteousness and his riches in fact forfeited the thing he was looking for—eternal life. That's why this situation is so sad. Eternal life is not gained by being good enough, but recognising we are sinners in need of God's grace. Eternal life comes through serving Jesus who is himself *"the way the truth and the life."*

Now out of that incident Jesus gave some strong teaching. Verse 23: *"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'*" Notice what Jesus says, it is 'hard for a rich man'. How hard? It is impossible! That's what Jesus means by it being 'easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle'. This phrase was a colloquialism, a saying of the day. In the Talmud, the teaching of Judaism, there is a saying used in Persia: 'It is easier to put an elephant through an eye of a needle'. It was local way of saying something was impossible. So, Jesus states a shocking truth. What does he mean? It is impossible to come for eternal life on human terms. In one fell swoop Jesus eliminates all ideas of being saved by our own efforts. If the rich can't do it on their terms than no one can! Why is it impossible for the rich to be saved? Well because they have a false sense of security. That's their particular problem. Because of all their resources there is no sense of dependence on God. They can buy anything and buy their way out of anything. Because they are wealthy the rich are bound to this world. Much of their thinking is about how much they have got in the bank, how many houses and cars, shares and businesses? If that is their focus, they have little longing or thought for heaven. They already have it so good. If you think about it, we in Australia are incredibly rich compared to so many in Jesus' day. It is one of the reasons why it is hard to convert people today precisely because they are well off and feel no need of God. There is little sense of dependence on God. So why would they feel a need to be right with God through Jesus?

Now when Jesus said it was impossible *"for the rich to enter the kingdom"* it was a teaching that shocked the disciples. Look at verse 25: *"When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?'"* They were completely blown away with what Jesus said. It was contrary to everything in their tradition. Think of the sacrificial offerings at the temple, given to seek atonement with God. Well the rich people could buy all the sacrificial lambs in sight! They could atone for everything! The rich people could make huge contributions at the temple. Surely the rich could romp it into heaven. But Jesus says, no it's the opposite, for the rich it is impossible. That left them stunned. I mean if the rich couldn't be saved then who could be? The poor?! But poor people can't give money to help others. Poor people can't even buy

sacrifices that are very significant. So, if the rich can't be saved who can be saved? We see that (:26) *"Jesus looked at them and said, 'with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'" Did you notice what Jesus does? He looked them in the eye, so you know something very important is coming. In a sense he says: You are dead right guys! Any human being who thinks he can go to heaven by his own works or wealth or whatever is a lost cause; it's impossible. But don't fret, because with God all things are possible. Even the arrogant stubborn independent rich can be saved. Jesus doesn't say how God will do it. But he himself is the answer! Jesus will do the impossible on the cross through his death and resurrection.*

It is interesting to see how the disciples respond to this. Peter, typically, speaks for them (:27) *"[Behold, now look] we have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"* Just pause and see what Peter is saying. He says in effect, 'Hey, look, we are not like that rich bloke. Look, we came on your terms. That's good isn't it? I mean that rich young man wouldn't forsake everything and follow you, but we did! We get the message. We dropped our nets, we left our tax tables, we said good bye to our employment and our families. We left everything to follow you. We did as you said; we have taken up our cross and followed you. That young man forfeited eternal life, but what about us? We've abandoned everything in life, so what do we gain? Now some people have criticised Peter for asking that question. It sounds rather mercenary. More likely Peter needed assurance. Especially after what Jesus said about the rich man. But it is a very natural question isn't it? We are grateful that Peter asked it because it's one that would certainly cross our minds even if we were too polite to ask it. I mean it is this cost-benefit thing isn't it? God has given us the ability to plan and to think through consequences. It's impossible for the rich to be saved. So where does that leave Peter and the rest? Is it worth denying themselves and taking up their cross? Or is following Jesus all about counting the cost, suffering for the gospel and leaving it all behind; is it all drab and hard work? That doesn't sound very motivating from our perspective does it?

The answer Jesus gives is very encouraging: (:28) *"Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'" What Jesus says here is awesome. Our NIV translates 'the renewal of all things'. The Greek can mean 'at the regeneration' or 'new birth'. Jesus said to Nicodemus that one had to be 'born again' to enter the kingdom. We personally have to be spiritually made alive, the power of sin in us broken, so we can respond in faith. The same word is now used of the creation. The earth will be reborn. The creation will be restored. Sin is not just a human issue. All creation has been under the curse of sin since the fall of Adam and*

Eve. The creation 'groans' under the weight of sin. It's why we have earth quakes and hurricanes and disease. The earth 'reborn', will be restored with the effect of sin gone. It will be a perfect world. And in that perfect world Jesus is saying to his disciples they will have places of honour; as Jesus sits on his throne they will "also sit on thrones". So, Jesus is saying that the disciples who have given up everything to follow him will not be without their reward. He is asking them to judge their losses in light of the blessings he is going to give them in the future. It is a cost-benefit analysis. The reassurance is no one is ever ultimately a loser when you serve Jesus. No matter what you lose in serving him this side of heaven. Listen to what Jesus said about all of us: (:29) "...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." He is saying no matter what it costs you to follow Jesus; and it may be your family abandons you for becoming Christian, like in Asia or the Middle East, perhaps in the persecution of Christians you lose your property. But what you lose is absolutely nothing in comparison with what you will inherit in the kingdom of God. God is a very generous God. His grace is amazing. He loves to give and give in abundance. Notice how Jesus says we 'inherit eternal life'. We don't earn it by good works. We can't buy it with our wealth. It's an inheritance from our father in heaven. It is a gift. A gift freely given because of Jesus' death and resurrection. God rewards us far, far more than our actions deserve. We will "receive a hundred times as much" says Jesus. God rewards us not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of grace. God's rewards for our faithfulness are disproportionately huge in comparison to what we are asked to give up or suffer. That's what Jesus is saying to Peter. 'Yes, I'm asking you to take up your cross and follow me. But I'm also reassuring you that if you follow me, you will receive a crown as I receive the crown'.

This issue of God's rewards for discipleship is vital for every one of us, because each one of us, at those times in our lives when we are called to make sacrifices for Jesus, will be tempted to be bitter about it. We will have the mindset of the rich young man. We will have things we will find very hard to give up. It may be wealth, but it could be other things, like that unbelieving girlfriend or following along with what everyone else is doing. We want to remain part of the 'in crowd'. There are things we may want to do that we know we cannot do because we are disciples of Jesus and sometimes it doesn't go down well. We might feel we are being robbed of the 'fun' or 'good life' we could have here. And if we do not believe that God's blessings hugely outweigh everything that we could possibly give up for him, we will be lacking the motivation to follow Jesus in his footsteps. Now Jesus is not asking you to deny yourself and follow Jesus just to give you a hard time, so you prove yourself to him. Jesus says 'I need you to follow me so that everyone in the world has an opportunity to come to know me, follow me and

receive eternal life. Yes, I might call on you to give up some things. But that will be absolutely nothing in comparison to what joy and honour I will give you.'

Throughout this 'Discipleship' series there is one thing I have wanted everyone to see. It is that the whole of Christian life is a very personal thing, and by that, I mean the person of Jesus. Discipleship means following Jesus. It's not about learning a set of rules for better living. It's not about us. It is for us, but it is not about us. It's all about Jesus. "Follow me" he says. What we will find is that when we do follow him it will involve the cross, yes, but also the crown. Whatever victory Jesus has gained through his death on the cross and his resurrection is also ours. In following Jesus, we find life, real life; eternal life. That eternal life is Jesus himself. So please, do the cost-benefit analysis: follow Jesus and receive the crown of life.