

Luke 16:14-18

Forcing Yourself into the Kingdom of God

Main idea: God welcomes us into His Kingdom by grace. Do you believe it?

I want to know: what's the best thing you've ever done? Now, this is not the time to be modest, because we're in church and the Bible says to not lie. But if you don't want to toot your own horn, just talk in generalities, and say, "Well, I once heard about someone who..." and then name the best thing you've ever done. So what is the best thing thing you've ever done?

[congregation participation]

Well, I'm impressed! Some of those things are really awesome things! God must be really impressed too, right? I mean, those things are so awesome, that God certainly must let you into heaven because of your righteousness, right?

But maybe some of you are sitting there thinking, "Well, I've never done anything like that. I've never done something so awesome that I could really impress God. But I've also never really done much that was all that bad either. So God will surely let me in because I haven't sinned in the big ways like many others have."

So whether by our self-righteousness, or by our lack of wickedness, we try to force ourselves into the kingdom of God.

Of course, as Christians, we know that's impossible. We can never be good enough to earn heaven, and we're all bad enough to deserve hell, because even one sin, no matter how small, disqualifies us from entering God's perfect heaven.

And yet, did you know that Jesus actually said that there's a way that we can force ourselves into the kingdom of God? It's true. Luke chapter 16, verses 14 through 18.

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." (Luke 16:14-18)

That last verse is a hard thing for our society today to hear, but I actually think that if we understand this passage, all of these verses I just read are hard to hear, because we're all guilty before God. So let's pray.

Father, help us not to seek to justify ourselves, but to rest in Your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Last week's Scripture passage ended with Jesus stating that we cannot serve both God and money. So the logical response would be to see our money differently. We're not to serve our money, but to use our money to serve God, because it's really His money. But our knee jerk reaction to that message is, "I don't want to! It's my money!" We think, "Do I really need to serve God with my money? I mean, God doesn't need my money! No, He's not served by human hands as if He needed anything! No, I'll just continue to give what I want to give, what I can afford to give, and that's gonna be good enough."

But I want us all to realize that if we think like that, then we act just like the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, and therefore ridiculed Jesus.

I'm sure none of us would intentionally ridicule Jesus, but every time we read or hear a command of Scripture and think it's out of date, or just not practical, we treat Jesus and His word like a joke. We treat God's plan like a joke. And we continue to go our own way, the way that seems right to us, scorning God and His word.

Of course, none of us would admit to doing that. But I'm pretty sure we've all done it.

But just to be sure, let's take a little quiz. It's just two questions from two verses straight out of the Bible. Number one. Jesus said this in Matthew 19:21.

"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21)

So how many of us have sold all of our possessions and given them all to the poor, as Jesus told the rich young ruler to do? Anyone? Okay, number two. Jesus said this in Luke 21:4.

For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on. (Luke 21:4)

So how many of us have given all that we had to live on like the poor widow that Jesus pointed out? How many of us have given not just 2.5% of our income, which is the average amount that Christians in the United States give, not just 10% of our income, which is what many Christians think that we should give, but 100% of what we had to live on at any time in our lives? Anyone?

Of course, we might look at both of these and say, "Well, the first one was just a specific command to a certain person because money was his idol." And that might be true. But it sure seems like money is an idol for many people today. It sure seems like many people today are lovers of money, right? So maybe we should take that command a little more seriously.

And we might say about the poor widow that her offering wasn't commanded, but was merely an example of extravagant giving. And that might be true, but doesn't God call all of us to extravagant giving, following the example not of the poor widow, but of Jesus Himself?

All I'm saying is that we're often very quick to dismiss commands of Scripture because we don't like them, and when we do, it's like we're mocking Jesus and his word, just like the Pharisees did. So this is what Jesus said not only to the Pharisees, but to us. Verse 15.

And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."
(Luke 16:15)

The Pharisees justified themselves before men. They exalted themselves. They compared themselves to others and thought, "Hey, we're pretty righteous! We follow the Law. We're not like those pagans who don't obey God. We obey God, so God must think we're pretty awesome!" But Jesus told them, "No, you're an abomination to God." An abomination is something that causes someone disgust. When the Pharisees exalted themselves, thinking they were righteous, they were actually a disgusting stench to God.

Because we can never point to our works as the basis for our righteousness before God.

You know, as Christians we can be tempted to do the same thing. We might think, "Hey, we're pretty righteous! We follow the Bible! I mean, we're not perfect, but at least we don't get drunk every weekend. We don't sleep around. We're much better than all those people who sleep in on Sunday morning and don't come to church. We actually obey God a little, so God must think we're pretty awesome!"

But if you think like that, God tells you, "No, you're an abomination." Because we can never be righteous by our works. And if we think we're righteous because we're better than anyone else, we don't yet understand the depths of our sin. Jesus didn't die for you because you just messed up a few times. He didn't die for you because you just fell a little short of His standard. He died for you and for me because we've fallen drastically short of the glory of God and everything we do is impacted by our sinfulness.

In fact, I'm not sure I've ever done anything my whole life without at least some small impure motive, even if it's just that I hope someone will notice the good thing I did. Like, even right now, while I'm preaching, which is a pretty good thing, right, I'm thinking, "Man, I hope they like this sermon. I hope they like me. Oh, that was a good point. Good job. Man, they're really hanging on every word now. They better give me a raise for this one."

Listen, even if you do everything right on the outside, which is impossible, and has never been done, but even if you did everything right, you still have sinful thoughts, right? Jesus said in Matthew 5:28,

I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:28)

So looking at a woman lustfully is just as sinful as actually committing adultery. And the Bible says this in 1 John 3:15:

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. (1 John 3:15)

So hating your brother is just as sinful as actually murdering them. And Jesus said, "God knows your hearts." So there's not a single one of us that can say that we're righteous before God, because our sinful hearts are exposed before God, and we stand before Him guilty.

Verse 16.

"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void." (Luke 16:16-17)

I've been having a lot of fun lately with the question of the week. Not only can you answer it via the bulletin tear-off and via our website, but now I always post it to facebook every week, too. And usually I get a ton of answers that way. Like when I posted the question, "Who would be the main character in a movie based on your life?" there were 18 responses on facebook. And when I posted the question, "What's the smartest thing you've ever done with your money?" there were 33 responses, including Mike's response that the smartest thing he's ever done with his money was hide it from Marla!

But last week's question, "Are there any commands in the Bible that you don't understand? What do you do about those?"...crickets. Nobody answered the question on facebook, and only two people answered it via the bulletin tear-off.

Now, that tells me one of two things. Either one, we all understand the Bible perfectly, or two, there's a lot in the Bible we don't understand, and we don't like to admit it.

Why is that? I mean, as Christians, we fully admit that we're sinners in need of the grace of God, but then we get all self-righteous about our knowledge of and obedience to God's word. It's like we think we can be forgiven of everything...except for our unfaithfulness to the Bible! So we try to justify ourselves before men, like the Pharisees did, or at the very least we try to avoid admitting that we don't know the Bible as well as we should, so we act like we do, but all that does is prove once again that we don't measure up!

You see, that's what all of the Old Testament does. It proves that we are unable to save ourselves.

Have you ever noticed how everyone who actually believes in heaven and hell thinks that they're going to heaven. I mean, we hear people sometimes joke about going to hell, but that's usually just because they don't really believe in a real heaven and hell. Or they think hell sounds more like heaven than the way they picture heaven. So no matter what someone believes about Jesus, everyone seems to try to force themselves into heaven.

But God knows our hearts. So we can't force ourselves into His heaven. The Law and the Prophets testify to just how much we fall short.

So when Jesus said, "The Law and the Prophets were until John," Jesus was telling the Pharisees, "Hey, you think you're righteous because you obey the Hebrew Scriptures," what we call the Old Testament, "but if you really believed the Scriptures, you'd know how impossible it is to be righteous by your own works. You can't just twist the Scripture to mean whatever you want it to mean so that you can live however you want. You can't just force yourself into the kingdom of God by saying you're righteous enough. You can't just make the word of God void because you want to live by your own rules." In fact, Jesus said this in verse 17. "It's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void."

That's like saying every i will be dotted. Every letter in the Bible is there for a reason. No command is to be ignored. The Law and the Prophets aren't there for us to ignore or twist or justify ourselves. They're there to prove beyond all doubt that we've failed to obey them! And they're there to point forward to the only One who would perfectly obey them! Because when John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness, he came with good news! And the good news was this: even though we've all broken all the commandments and deserve hell, Jesus perfectly fulfills the Law and the Prophets, and we can enter the kingdom of God by grace through faith.

And then comes verse 18.

"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." (Luke 16:18)

"Well, that was random, Jesus!" Verse 18 seems to just be thrown in there, doesn't it? But it's actually not. Verse 18 is an example of the kind of thing that the Pharisees twisted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of the Pharisees taught that you could get a divorce for any reason. They taught that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce because he was displeased with her. But Jesus said, "No! If you do that, and remarry another, you commit adultery! And if you marry a woman whose husband did that to her, you commit adultery!" And men, if you even look at a woman lustfully who isn't your wife, you commit adultery in your heart. And women, if you fantasize about a man who isn't your husband, you commit adultery in your heart. That includes the images we look at, the books we read, the movies and shows we watch, even the

thoughts that go through our heads and hearts! I mean, if we take the Bible seriously, then I think we all have to admit that we're all adulterers at heart.

Listen, being a Christ-follower means obeying not just the stuff in the Bible that we like and understand, but the stuff that we don't like, and don't understand. So when the Bible says, "Love your wife" don't whine and say, "Why should I? She doesn't seem to love me anymore, either!" Suck it up, be a man, and love your wife! Love her with your actions, and your heart will follow. And if you love her like that, you'll reignite her love for you as well. But it's got to start with the humility to say, "I haven't been obeying God and His word, but because of God's grace, I desperately want to." Because being a Christ-follower means obeying not just the stuff in the Bible that we like and understand, but the stuff that we don't like, and don't understand, but obeying with a heart that seeks to love to obey will of God.

So when the Bible says, "God loves a cheerful giver" it doesn't mean that we can give whatever we want to give, as long as we give it cheerfully. No, it means that we ought to pursue having a cheerful heart about giving sacrificially to God. In other words, by the way that we live, do we justify ourselves, or seek to be justified by God? Do we try to bend God's word to fit our lifestyles, or do we allow God's word to break us and mold us into who God wants us to be?

So, you see, when we try to force ourselves into the kingdom of God by our righteousness, we can't get in. But when the word of God breaks us, we're forced in not by our will, but by God's will, and that's the good news.

But it's not because the Law of God was relaxed for us. It's not because God grades on the curve. God doesn't look at all of us and say, "Well, nobody's perfect, so I'll let the best ones in anyway." No, it's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

But you know what? Heaven and earth will pass away. Revelation 21:1 talks about it.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. (Revelation 21:1)

All that we work so hard for in this life will be gone! Even if you think you're working for heaven, the heaven that you're working for will be gone. The heaven and earth that we know will pass away, but that doesn't mean that one dot of the Law will become void. It means that after all has been accomplished, everything written in the Law and the Prophets, in the end, God is going to recreate the heavens and the earth, and somehow fuse them together, like the spiritual and the physical are no longer in different realms, but are one and the same, and being free from all sin and sickness and death, and that's only possible because of Jesus. Fully God, and fully man, who completes the plan of God for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.

So we're not brought into the kingdom of God because God's law was relaxed for us, but because Jesus fulfilled it in our place, and then died in our place, so that we would be forced into His kingdom by grace through faith.

So, you see, you force yourself into the kingdom of God not by your works, but by Jesus's work of grace, which you simply believe.

Is that something that you believe? Or do you still try to impress God? Trying to impress God with your good deeds is more foolish than trying to flap your arms and fly to the moon. You can't do it! You can't earn your spot in heaven by coming to church, or reading your Bible, or praying a lot, or doing any good thing that the Bible tells you to do. We do those things not to force ourselves into the kingdom of God, but because Jesus has already welcomed us in by grace. So we begin to live not as citizens of this world, in which we're constantly trying to prove ourselves, but as citizens of the heaven. We live not out of fear, but in joy, because of God's grace.

Lord Jesus, help us to believe. Help us to truly believe that You love us even though we have done nothing to earn it. And thank You that even though we were dead in our sins, You make us alive, and You give us eternal life by grace. Help us to believe it, and then live as citizens not of this world, but of the kingdom of God. In Jesus' name, Amen.