

Today we move on from yesterday's happy scene of Jesus surrounded by little children, laying his hands upon them, blessing them and praying for them. Their little hearts would have been delighted to have the full attention of an adult other than their parents. And this would have been enough to cause people to stop and stare in the ancient world. It was so countercultural that even Jesus' disciples had tried to shoo these children away. But not Jesus, he welcomed them with open arms, and there was a lesson here also for his disciples about the kingdom of God.

In the very next scene, in today's passage, Jesus encounters someone who is from the opposite end of the social scale to these children. There was no shooing away a man like this. Matthew tells us that

he was young, Luke tells us that he was a ruler, they both tell us that he was rich. Being 'young' means he's likely in his twenty's or thirty's. As a ruler, he's likely a synagogue official, an important lay leader in the synagogue. And he's rich, in tomorrow's passage we'll read that he has great wealth. A rich young ruler.

The people of Jesus' day regarded wealth as proof of God's blessing and a reward for faithful service. So in the eyes of the people, including Jesus' disciples, this man was obviously blessed by God. And what's more as his story unfolds in tomorrow's passage, not only is he young and rich but he's also very moral. You can almost see the crowds part and Jesus' disciples move aside out of respect for a man like this and in anticipation of his encoun-

ter with Jesus. What a perfect recruit he would make! What a wonderful addition to the kingdom of God.

The rich young ruler starts well. He honours Jesus by coming to him and deferring to him as a Teacher. And his question is a good one. He asks how he might receive eternal life. Only the way he phrases his question reflects what he's been taught in synagogue and also suggests at something going on deep inside of him. He asks,

“Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

This is a good question, a genuine question, and a question that seems to reveal his own sense of personal inadequacy. Af-

ter all, to anyone outside- looking-in, this man must be the surest of bets to enter the kingdom. Only he has a nagging suspicion. Despite his obvious wealth, which Deut 28 seems very clearly to tie to God's blessing, and despite his strict religious observance as we'll see tomorrow, he senses that he still lacks something. Perhaps some good act, or some good work is needed to seal the deal.

“Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

Now I'm sure Jesus' disciples were half expecting Jesus to say, 'Come and follow me.' And in fact Jesus does say these words to him, but not at first. Instead, Jesus, who always sees into the heart, and who always goes straight to the heart of

the matter says,

“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

Don't you hate it when people answer your question with another question? It can be infuriating but seems to be a habit amongst the wise. So it's no surprise that Jesus, who is the wisdom of God, very regularly uses this technique. The rich young ruler has shown Jesus by his question that he thinks something is missing in his faith. He thinks that it may be doing some form of good and that this will ensure his entrance into heaven. So Jesus replies,

“Why do you ask me about what is

good?”

‘What is this talk of good? Only God is good. If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments.’

Now this of course sounds simple enough. Just keep the commandments. But that is exactly Jesus’ point. We can’t. No-one can. If we could, then we would indeed be good enough to enter the kingdom of heaven, on our own merits. But we can’t, because we aren’t.

With his usual brilliance Jesus has pinpointed the difference between saving faith and mere religious observance. Some people say that this is the difference between Christianity and every other religion that has been made up by human-

kind. Every man-made religion invariably amounts to a set of rules that you need to keep to in order to get to heaven, nirvana, paradise, reach enlightenment, be reincarnated to a higher status etc. Basically what do I need to *do, do, do* so that I can receive. Christianity however is not about what we *do*. It is only about what Christ has *done*. It's the acknowledgement that no matter what we do or how well we do it, there is nothing that we can do to earn our salvation, we are only saved by what Christ has done. 'No-one is good except God alone, says Jesus. Let me illustrate by steering this conversation towards the Ten Commandments.' Which will make for an interesting conversation in tomorrow's passage.

Think

But for the time that remains today I'd like you to have a think about one thing in particular – your religious observance. Why do you go to church? Perhaps you also attend a weekly bible study group. You may even volunteer in various capacities within your church. What are your motivations for doing these things? Are these practices what make you a Christian? So much in our human nature and our Western culture works to the formula of 'do, do, do and then I get.' And so it's easy to fall into the trap in our faith to start believing that I am a Christian because I go to church. But this is wrong. You can go to church every Sunday of your life and not be a Christian. It may seem like a subtle distinction but the truer statement is 'Because I'm a Christian I go to church.' Going to church

doesn't make us a Christian. Reading our bibles every day doesn't make us a Christian. Doing good in this world and being a moral person does not make you a Christian. There is nothing you can do that can make you a Christian except putting your trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour. Of course, once you've come to this realisation that we are saved by his grace alone, then out of this realisation flows all of these good things like regular church attendance, bible reading, doing good in our world and upholding the highest of moral standards. But the order is everything. 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?' There is no good thing we can do. Eternal life comes only through realising this, and trusting solely in what Jesus has done.

Pray

This is a good area to pray about. Because even if we are very clear in our minds that we are saved by faith alone through Christ alone, functionally it is easy to slip back into a lifestyle that reinforces something different. Or a lifestyle that projects something different to your family, new believers or to non-Christian colleagues at work who just see a busy Christian. Perhaps pray about these thoughts now and be sure to thank our heavenly Father that our life isn't one of earning and working and slaving away only to end up unsure if we've worked hard enough to be accepted into heaven – but one that is anchored in the precious sacrifice of Jesus through whom we are wholly and eternally loved simply by putting our trust in his name.