

Leave behind what can't come with you

Luke 18:18-30

(Get out of your own way - from 3:25)

That's the voice of Kendrick Lamar bridging two tracks on U2's latest album with some sarcastic blessings. He's making people squirm. People who hold on to things that have nothing to do with being blessed by God or being part of His Kingdom.

Human beings do hold on to arrogance, fame, riches, putting people down, and lying. And Lamar paints a picture of the destiny for people who cling to these things. Life in their own little Kingdom - alone, apart from the people that Jesus welcomes and gives significance to, self-protecting but also self-defeating. This world and its ways leads nowhere.

In Luke 18:18-30, Jesus has a discussion with a man who wants to know about another world, another life, and how to have it. In v.18, this rich and powerful man asks Jesus, 'How do I inherit eternal life?' Actually, the Greek might translate better as 'how do I inherit life in the age to come?'

I mention that because for some people, the idea of living forever isn't that attractive. Life's got its good bits - but it's also got a lot of pain and difficulty, and it just gets so *exhausting*, right? Who wants to live forever?

But this rich and powerful man isn't asking about living today's life for all eternity. Even this guy, who's got power and money and a pretty good life from the little we hear of him, *yearns for more*. He's asking about 'the age to come.' A *different* age. A different life.

As a Jew, he was looking forward to the age of the Kingdom of God - where there would be freedom from oppression, sin, pain, death - everything that robs us humans of life to the full. He wanted to inherit a life that would last forever, yes, but also that would be *infinitely better* than the one that even he was living now.

Do you yearn for that? For a life that goes on forever? For a life that is starkly *better* than this one? That yearning is the starting point for coming into this Kingdom of God that Jesus says He has come to bring. The thing is, plenty of people I know just don't yearn for that at all. For so many people, although life's not perfect, and may even be quite hard really - they're content that this is it, and happy to make the most of it.

But if you *do* yearn for a better life - fuller in time because it's eternal, and fuller in relationships and experience and goodness because it's an 'age to come' - then listen in to Jesus' conversations in this passage about how we get that 'life to the full.'

Here's what I've picked up from what Jesus has to say here: The way into this better and eternal life is a journey of human identity that involves *leaving, following, entering and receiving*. In that order.

There is something that you will need to *leave behind* from your life in this world. Then there is a King to *follow* in place of you being in charge of life - that's Jesus. Follow Jesus, and you will *enter* the Kingdom of God - the community where God is King; the family where God is Father. And in doing that, you will *receive* things that more than replace what you left behind at the start of your journey.

This is all a bit different to how the rich and powerful man thought a life with God works. In v.18, he approaches Jesus and asks, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit a better and eternal life?' And there's two misconceptions there that Jesus is going to deal with.

The first is addressing Jesus as 'Good teacher.' Jesus picks him up on it in v. 19. He doesn't let it slide in an 'I know what you *mean*' sort of way. No, He says, 'Why do you call me 'good'? No-one is good except God alone.'

Maybe Jesus is telling the man that flattering Jesus isn't going to get the man in with God. Maybe He's challenging the idea (which *still* loads of people rhyme off today) that Jesus could be 'a good moral teacher,' and it will do to learn from His example and teachings. 'No-one is good except God' - He's teasing out that if you're really going to accept the goodness and truth of what Jesus says, you're going to have to accept that He is who He says He is.

He is what we sing and celebrate at Christmas: 'God... with... us.' If you have this yearning for a better life than this one, and you're willing to look with us to Jesus to tell us how to have it, then realise who it is we're approaching together. Because He is not just a 'good teacher.'

What's the difference between treating Jesus as a teacher and treating Jesus as God?

(Feedback - Worship. Sharing whole life. Kingship.)

The second misconception is in the question itself: 'What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?' Again, this guy is like a lot of people today. If you get to a point of wanting more than this life with its fleeting goodness, stubborn tragedy and exhausting day-to-day rhythm, you can say, 'Okay, I want a better life, life *with* God, life beyond death. What do I *do*?'

That question is the default for people who feel capable of doing things for themselves. This rich and powerful man was probably pretty capable to have got where he was in life. Same could be said for many of the people living in our parish in a suburban house. 'God, just show me what I need to add in to my list of things I must attend to, and I'll see that it gets done. I'm pretty driven, you know. I can do it.'

Jesus humours him for a moment. 'You know the commandments, don't you?' Then Jesus quotes some of the ten commandments to him - interestingly, the ones to do with how you relate to other people rather than the ones to do with how you relate to God in worship.

So far, the rich man likes where this is going. 'I've kept all of these since I was a boy!' he says. His hope is rising; he thinks he's on the cusp of grasping the eternal ticket.

In the same moment, the hopes of ordinary people around him were sinking, as each one looked at this well-dressed respectable good person. And they remembered how they *hadn't* kept all these commandments; not nearly. The cheating. The harm they'd caused others. The theft. The lies they'd told about people. The way they'd treated their parents.

But Jesus changes all the emotions and expectations in v.22. 'You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come, follow me.'

Mark's version of this tells us more about the emotions, in Mark 10. The man's 'face fell' - and with it, the hope that had been soaring in him. Tom Wright puts it well: 'The rich ruler... looks into the face of the one he calls 'good' and turns away sad.'

The disciples were 'amazed.' This rich, powerful, good person *lacks* what he needs to have life with God? Luke reports in v.26 the shocked crowd asking in effect, 'If *he* can't be saved, what chance have *we* got?'

Jesus replies in v.27 with something you'll know if you're a Christian, and that you need to know if you're not. 'You can't save yourself. You can't save other people. It's not possible. But God can save. With Him, it is possible - for any person.' That's something you might need to be reminded of, even if you are already a Christian.

Let's just go back over Jesus' words in vv.22-25 and see *how* God brings people to be 'saved' - that is, to be rescued from sin and death, and to be welcomed into this eternal and better life. It's what I described earlier on - it involves leaving, following, entering and receiving. In that order.

Jesus tells the rich man that the obstacle to him sharing in this life with God now and forever isn't something he *hasn't done*, or even something he *has done*, but actually it's something he *hasn't left behind*. It's a 'leaving behind' that is the 'one thing you lack' that Jesus describes.

What Jesus tells this rich man to leave behind is all his money. 'Sell everything, give it to the poor. The whole lot. Then come and *follow* me.' vv. 24-25 remind us that following Jesus leads to '*entering*' the Kingdom of God (the same language about 'entering' as we saw in the last passage about little children). And the promise is, in v.22, that if he leaves behind these earthly riches, he'll *receive* treasure in Heaven.

It's a direct choice between the life of Heaven and the life of Earth. It's a stark challenge that the two can't be mixed, and both an invitation and an ultimatum served up on a plate before this rich man. 'Make your choice.'

At this point we start worrying about whether Jesus is telling us to sell all our stuff and give it to the poor, and whether if we don't do that we're really Christians. And the usual explanation that's given (which I offered you myself last time we looked at this story in another gospel) goes like this:

Money was the idol in the rich man's life that he needed to completely topple before he could really make God the object of his worship. We all have different idols - that is, different things that we treasure more than God and give more of our love and attention to - so Jesus might challenge us in different ways.

The important thing is (so this explanation goes) that whatever might be the idol in our lives, we put it second to loving God. And we all go away feeling nice and reassured. 'Oh right, that's fine. I mean I definitely don't love money more than God. Or anything else, actually. I definitely love God the

most.’ (And then subconsciously... ‘So I don’t need to respond to this teaching. I can just go home and have lunch.’)

I think it *is* helpful to say that this was a particular instruction to this rich man. v.22, Jesus ‘*said to him...*’ v.24, ‘Jesus *looked at him* and said, “How hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!” This was *his* idol, his challenge, his personal encounter as he approached Jesus and got more than he bargained for.

But if we tell ourselves, ‘I don’t love money, or anything else, more than God’ - first of all, we’re often lying to ourselves. And secondly, we’re missing the point. *Jesus was telling this man the thing he needed to actively leave behind*, before he could *follow* Jesus, *enter* the Kingdom of God, and *receive* life in the age to come.

So what is it that *you left behind* in order to follow Jesus, enter the Kingdom, and receive life? Or what is it that you will need to leave behind if you’re going to start following, entering and receiving?

There are people who have grasped that if they are going to have the better life with God beyond death, that involves entering the Kingdom of God. They might not use that language; but they get that it means becoming part of the people of God - the church, the community where God is King, the family where God is Father.

And they get that the way to enter this Kingdom of God is to follow Jesus. They even get that this means more than believing Jesus lived and died for our sin and rose to life, but that ‘following’ means a day-by-day active and deliberate coming to Jesus and saying, ‘Where are you leading me today?’

But so many of us have left out the part about leaving things behind. *That is the one thing the rich man in this passage lacked* - and Mark’s gospel tells us it was enough to see him walk away from Jesus and eternal life. You see, you either leave behind what Jesus tells you to, or you leave behind Jesus.

There’s always something that needs to be left behind. Not least because, when Jesus taught us to ‘repent, for the Kingdom of God is near,’ He was teaching us to turn away from and leave behind sinful ways of living that can’t exist forever.

So there may be patterns of living you need to leave behind, that contradict what God has taught us about life together with Him. There’s probably also

identity stuff to leave behind. The rich ruler in this passage was told to leave behind his money. That's the thing that identified him (it is, after all, the only thing we know him for).

If you're going to enter the Kingdom of God and have life with Him forever, then 'follower of Jesus' is going to become your core identity. Nothing else. So what was the thing that used to define you that you left behind to make life in Jesus your identity? Or what is it that you still haven't left behind that Jesus is calling you to leave behind now?

It could be an achievement. It could be a failure. It could be a memory. You can't undo these things, but you don't have to be defined by them.

It could be a job or role you have. It could be a person or people. You don't have to leave your job, your family or your friends to follow Jesus - but you do have to leave behind finding your core identity in these things.

It could be another faith or belief system. You do have to leave that behind. There's no pick and mix, design-your-own-god, or following more than one King. Jesus says, '*Follow me.*'

It could be a mix of things or one thing. But whatever it is, there's a leaving behind to be done before the following, entering and receiving.

What do you need to leave behind in your life to follow Jesus?

In vv.28-30, Jesus has a conversation with someone else. It's His friend Peter. Peter gets slated often enough for being too quick to jump in and too slow to see what Jesus is really saying. But in this passage, kudos to Peter. He has grasped exactly what Jesus is saying.

'We have left all we had to follow you!' I imagine Peter calling this out passionately; defiantly, even. He sounds out the two things that people need to do in response to Jesus Christ. He *gets* it. 'We left things behind - actually, we let go of absolutely *everything* - and we did it *in order to follow you.*'

Jesus responds in a really affirming way in vv.29-30. He talks about both the Kingdom of God and life in the age to come forever. He's affirming to Peter and the other disciples who have left behind and followed that it's those like them who *will* enter the Kingdom of God and *will* receive eternal life.

More than that, the things of Earth they have left behind will be more than replaced by the things of Heaven they will receive. When Jesus spoke with the rich man, He told him to give up earthly riches, and was promised treasure in Heaven. When Jesus speaks to Peter, He talks about something different. It wasn't money that Peter was emotional about leaving behind. It was family.

And Jesus tells him that when entering the Kingdom of God means leaving family behind, you receive much more of family *in this age* as you enter this Kingdom. Do you remember what the Kingdom of God is? It *is* family - the family where God is Father, the community where God is King. This family isn't just a nice idea that you can't see and feel and touch and hug though. It's sitting right next to you just now.

It's the church. Here is your brother and sister. Your parents, your children. Here is your family. Here's what God offers you for the family the things of family you had to leave behind. There's lots of reasons why 'entering the Kingdom of God' or 'serving the Kingdom of God' might mean losing something of family.

The person who becomes a Christian and finds their relatives become colder towards them. The person who is geographically far from home because of where God has them serving Him. The person who can't have a family of their own because God has called them to live a single life, for one of a variety of reasons.

These people need to be able to discover that the church family is a 'thing of Heaven' rather than a 'thing of Earth.' So let's be the best kind of family here. When we have joys, we'll celebrate together. When we have pains, we'll share the load. When we have disagreements, we'll work them out with both humility and forgiveness. When God newly adopts someone through faith in Jesus, we'll give them the biggest welcome. And we'll love each other unconditionally.

Life in a church family, when it's happening as God intends it, is one of the ways that we get a foretaste of the 'age to come.' One way we get to lick the spoon and taste something that's going to be fully baked and served up in eternity.

Leaving behind what you must and following Jesus doesn't mean getting a ticket for eternal life to hold on to. It means entering a Kingdom of God that is already breaking into this world, this community, your life experience. It's

here in part, and it's growing. It's worth leaving everything else behind if you have to, like Peter and his friends did. Because by following Jesus, what we have entered, and what we are heading towards, is infinitely better.

So leave, follow, enter and receive. Leave behind whatever Jesus is telling *you personally* to leave behind. Follow Jesus, from this day on, and don't take your eyes off Him so that you can keep walking with Him. Enter the Kingdom of God - this family, this community, that Jesus leads you into. And receive in this age many times more than what you've left behind, and in the age to come, eternal life.