



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Mark 10:13-22

Mark

“Entering the Kingdom”

TRANSCRIPT

Some of you might wonder, how does the Holy Spirit raise up an elder. Well, He does that by manifesting those activities within a certain individual. As we’ve observed Mark, I think we’ve seen that in his life, his concern, his interest in the young people and various other ways. That’s how God raises up elders and makes them known to us. And that is a subject that we’re gonna take up in a few weeks, the subject of Ecclesiology or the study of church, in which we’ll deal with some of these matters. We’ll take a break in our studies in the Gospel of Mark for about a four-week study on the church, and that’s coming up in a few weeks so we’ll say more about that then. But then we’ll touch on that particular subject.

Also, I happened to be down there yesterday. I went down to the retreat and enjoyed it very much. I spent a few hours with the people there and was very impressed with all the kids that we have. Certainly not all the children from Believers Chapel were down there, but quite a few were and they were having a very good time. We want to remember them. Though it looks like the weather’s clearing up, we still want to remember them as they turn back, that the Lord would give them a safe trip. But I couldn’t help but think of them as I was considering our passage this morning because as you’ll notice, it does touch on children and the Lord’s affection for them and what they illustrate for us. The passage this morning is Mark 10 and we’ll look at verses 13 through 22.

Mark 10, beginning with verse 13: “And they began bringing children to him so that he might touch them. And the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Permit the children to come to me. Do not hinder them for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all.” He took them in his arms and he began blessing them, laying his hands upon them. And as he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to him and knelt before him and began saying to him, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the Commandments. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud.” That’s probably a paraphrase of the command not to covet, do not defraud. “Honor your father and mother.” And he said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up. Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack, go and sell all you possess and give it to the poor and you shall have treasure in Heaven and come, follow me.” But with these words his face fell and he went away grieved for he was one who

owned much property.” May the Lord bless this reading of His word and bless our time of study in it together. Let’s bow now in a word of prayer.

Our gracious, Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the privilege that we have to come together this morning again and to open the text of scripture and study it together. We pray that you bless us as we do that. We can’t understand this apart from your work within us through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. We thank you that you’ve given him to us. As Christians we have new hearts because of your generating work within us. And you have sealed those hearts with the Holy Spirit who is, as John calls him, “The Anointing.” He teaches us. We pray that you teach us this morning and guide us and direct us in scripture, a passage that reminds us of our helplessness. The fact that apart from your grace and your work within us, we are lost and even as Christians we are unable to perform as we should. We are totally and completely and forever dependent upon you. All men are dependent upon you, Father. They don’t recognize that, but Paul has told us that it’s in you that we live and move and have our being whether we believe or whether we don’t believe we are in you, the one who sustains our very breath.

And yet those who have put their faith in Christ are in him and in a unique way we are identified with him as our Savior and we have life eternal. That comes from you. It’s your gift and we thank you for it. We pray as we study our passage this morning that you would make these things clear to us, that we might know the position that we are in and never take for granted our dependence upon you. And that we might also be very thankful and live lives of genuine thankfulness, motivated in all we do by our love for you. We love you, Father, because you first loved us. Not because there was anything in us that caused us to do so, but because you moved us to come to you. Father, we pray that you bless us in that way, that you give us a clear understanding of the things that we will consider this morning. We also thank you that we can come to you as we are now, praying and seeking your face and asking your blessings upon us. As we do so, we pray that you would bless us in ways that you can bless us materially as well as spiritually. We pray that you would make provision for those who are sick. We pray that you would bless those in the hospital, that they would recover and that they would be able to leave very soon. We pray that you ease the pain they may be in. We pray that you give healing. We pray that you give great encouragement.

We pray the same for those who are in financial need, who are in need of employment, who are in financial difficulty. We pray that you would make provision for them. And we pray for the retreat as it concludes. We pray that you bless the words that are said there and pray that you would bless not only the speaker, but those who are listening. We pray for a safe trip back for all involved. We pray that that which they’ve learned will have a very good affect on their lives. We pray the same for us now and we pray the same tonight as we come together again. We pray that you bless our meeting, that it would be pleasing to you and edifying, that it would glorify the savior. We bless our nation. We pray for our leaders. Give them wisdom. Give them direction in these very difficult days in which we live. Now we pray that you prepare our hearts for the ministry of the Word through the ministry of music. We pray that you prepare our hearts to receive the teaching of the scriptures. May it be taught clearly and may we listen carefully. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

Our subject this morning is “Entering the Kingdom.” And really, there’s no more fundamental, no more practical and important subject to take up than this one: how to inherit eternal life. There are basically two ways that men follow to get to the Kingdom; one will get you there and one won’t. There’s the broad way and the narrow way. There’s the straight way and the

crooked way. Bunyan, in his *Pilgrim’s Progress* illustrates this with a scene in which Christian and Hopeful are walking on the King’s Highway to the Celestial City when they’re joined by a young man named Ignorance. He’s come up from the country of Conceit on the Crooked Lane. So Christian engages him in conversation and asks Ignorance what he would show at the gate of the Celestial City that it should open for him. He answers, “I have been a good liver. I pray, fast, pay tithes, pay alms,” And after all he was on the road. He had, obviously, a religious inclination about him, a spiritual interest of some kind. Many others weren’t even on the road for the celestial city. So he’s seeking eternal life.

But Christian pointed out to him that he hadn’t come by the way of the Wicked Gate. If you remember the story, that’s how Christian got on the way to the Celestial City. He comes to the Wicked Gate and there he sees the cross. As he’s looking at the cross, the burden of sin that was on his back falls off and rolls into the sepulcher, never to be seen again. Well, Ignorance hadn’t entered the path the right way, but Ignorance said it didn’t matter. You follow the religion of your country and I’ll follow the religion of mine. Well, the story progresses and ignorance is out of the scene of awhile until the last scene. After Christian and Hopeful had crossed the river, which was symbolic of death, and if you’re familiar with this great allegory by Bunyan, you know that Christian has a very difficult time crossing the river. He has doubts and Hopeful encourages him. All in all, he makes it to the other side and both of them go up to the city and they’re received into it.

As they’re looking back, they see ignorance coming across the river and he has a very easy passage, no difficulty at all. As he comes up to the gate and seeks entrance, he’s turned away. In fact the King sends his angels to bind him and carry him off to another hill where there’s a door that leads into eternal destruction. Bunyan concludes with the words: “Then I saw there was a way to Hell even from the Gates of Heaven as well as from the City of Destruction.” Men can come very, very close t the Kingdom and not enter into it. We see that in our passage this morning when the lord encounters two completely different types of people, the one small, the other great, and both combine in their own way to emphasize the truth, that the Kingdom is a gift. It can only be received. We can’t work our way to the Kingdom. We have no merit that commends it to us. We can’t achieve it or enter it by religion or by morality. The Lord, you’ll remember from our previous study, has just concluded a discussion with the Pharisees on the subject of divorce, and now in verse 13 we read of mothers and fathers bringing their children to the Lord for blessing.

So we move from broken homes to happy homes with parents who are seeking the best for their children. Now Mark states that they began bringing children, which might suggest to us older children, but Luke brings a little more clarity to the situation. He states that these children were babies. They’re infants, which they brought to him so he might touch them. That is he might put his hands on them and pray for the blessing of each child. Now that was a common practice among the Jews to bring their children to some great man or to the elders and seek the blessing of that individual on their children. It’s a practice that may go back all the way to Genesis 48 when, if you’ll remember, Jacob as an old man sits on his bed and he puts his hands upon the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, and he blesses them. So this may be a very old custom, but certainly a custom in that day, and one that may go back that far. Yet in spite of that, in spite of the antiquity of it, when the disciples saw the Lord holding these little children in their arms, they began rebuking the parents.

The Lord had been teaching a crowd of people and they had entered into this discussion or debate with the Pharisees, and so no doubt after all that he’s quite tired and they wanted to protect his privacy and protect his time and to them, children really were really a waste of time. They were

too young to understand anything. They were not like the Pharisees, which whom you could reason. With them you could talk and think and enter into some kind of dialogue. And of course the Pharisees were very important men in their minds, so they felt that these parents were imposing on the Lord, wasting his time, and they tried to run them off. The Lord, however, didn’t consider children a waste of time. He didn’t consider the parents as infringing on his time, so when he saw what they were doing, verse 14 states: “He was indignant and said to them, “Admit the children to come to me. Do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

The Lord had a genuine affection for children. We see that in other portions of scripture. We saw that not to long ago in chapter 9, if you’ll remember, when he was teaching his disciples on greatness there in that house in Capernaum. He takes a child in his arms and he instructs his disciples with that child. He has the same affection for children here. He desires to bless them. The parents bring these little children and he receives them very gladly. He wants to pray over them. He wants to provide blessing for them. But he was particularly concerned, I think, to point something out that these children represented. So fundamental to his concern here and to the rebuke is not so much the children themselves – though I think that’s part of it, of course, but what they represented and how they could instruct the disciples.

Obviously the Lord doesn’t mean that literally the Kingdom of God belongs to babies, belongs to infants. So some have seen in this statement support for the salvation of all who die in infancy. That may be a correct conviction. I believe that it is a correct conviction. But I don’t think that this is what the Lord had in mind and this is the point that he’s making in this passage. He’s making a comparison between those little children and the heirs of the Kingdom, and that’s clear from the fact that he says, “Such as these.” He doesn’t say that the Kingdom belongs to these, he says, “To such as these.” They make the comparison in the next verse as well. That raises the question what is the point of the comparison, and different answers have been given for that – that of innocence. And you can see how one might arrive at that position. We often refer to children as the innocents. They haven’t done things bad and so we consider them to be innocent or humility. Infants don’t seem to show any evidence of pride, at least in their infancy. As they grow older they do, of course.

If that’s the case it certainly would present a nice contrast to the Pharisees who were anything but innocent and anything but humble. And yet I don’t think that really fits with the Lord’s declared intention to call, not the righteous, but sinners and to seek and say that which is lost. The most common answer that’s given, at least among evangelicals, is that the Kingdom belongs to those like children in their receptivity and dependence. And children, infants, are certainly receptive. They can’t give, they’re not productive, they can only receive. We see that particularly when an infant is fed. It eagerly receives the nourishment that is being offered. It doesn’t question the nourishment. It’s not like some of us, the older we get the more wary we are of the food that we might be eating and we want to know if it’s got enough fiber in it or preservatives or too much sugar or whatever. They don’t do that. They don’t examine what they’re to receive, what is offered to them. They receive very eagerly and very gladly. Now they may spit it out after they’ve received it. They may not particularly like what they’ve received, but initially they receive it and receive it eagerly with unquestioning trust. And that’s why we speak of child-like faith – complete trust.

And so the Lord adds, in verse 15: “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child, shall not enter it at all.” As children receive in the material realm, adults and children also are to receive in the spiritual realm. Infants can’t do things productively. They can only receive. Likewise, we don’t inherit the Kingdom of God by the things that we do.

We’re incapable of doing anything to merit the Kingdom. We can only receive it. We can receive it only by faith. Now all of that is true as far as it goes, but I think we can go farther than that. In fact, I think we must go farther than that and ask the question why it is that children receive. Why can they only do that? I think when we answer that question we really come to the heart of the matter in what our Lord is saying. They can only receive because of the nature of a child. They receive because basically infants are helpless. That’s all they can do. This is the observation of the Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield who wrote: “The children of the Kingdom enter it as children enter the world, stripped and naked. Infants, for whom all must be done, not who are capable of doing.” Child likeness involves trust. It involves childlike faith. That’s involved in what our lord was saying.

But what characterizes children – babies – fundamental, the reason that they have childlike faith and the reason they are receptive is because fundamentally they are helpless. So how does one receive the Kingdom like a child? By recognizing our utter dependence upon God, by acknowledging that we are sinners incapable of pleasing God in and of ourselves, that we can produce nothing that merits eternal life and are dependent upon him, dependent upon his grace for that gift of life and that entrance into the Kingdom. And out of a sense of dependence, how of that understanding that we are undeserving sinners, with that understanding we trust in the Lord for all that is to be received. By nature we are all fallen creatures and I want to develop this for a moment because I think it’s very important and I think that it brings out the very meaning that our Lord is saying. We’ve all been affected by sin. Put in theological terms, we are totally depraved. That is a harsh term to use, I know, particularly in this day and age, so I think it calls for a little bit of explanation because it’s a term that’s very much misunderstood. It’s not saying that we’re all a bunch of perverts in the sense that the world might consider one perverted.

It’s not that we can’t do any good things – good in the relative sense of the term. We do good things. Men do good things to one another. The Lord even said that at the religious leaders of the day. He said they did good things for their children. But none of us can do perfectly good things. None of us, on the one hand, are as bad as we could be. Total depravity doesn’t say that we are. By the grace of God, the common grace of God, men are restrained in their evil and they do good things, but not perfectly good. Total depravity simply states that sin has affected the total man. Every aspect of our being – our minds, our will, our affections – all of that has been so effective that everything that we do, everything that we think in some way, in some measure, is tainted by sin and as a result it’s unacceptable to God. You wonder, well that’s a statement. That’s a theological statement, but what’s the proof for it?

There’s a great deal of proof and we can’t go over all of it, but I’ll cite one example that I cite frequently because I think it says it so well and so clearly and that’s Romans 3 where Paul makes the statement: “There is none righteous.” None. Period. He goes on: “None who understands and none who seeks for God. None who does good.” Paul is quoting the Old Testament, so that’s a testimony to both the old and the New Testament. If you want further proof for it, read Romans 8:5-8, Ephesians 2:1-3. Why is that? Why is it that none does good? Because by nature, apart from the regenerating, life-giving grace of God, human nature is corrupt. The heart is sinful and as a consequence of that, everything that proceeds from it is sinful. It cannot but be sinful as a result of that. To use Jeremiah’s description of the heart, it’s desperately wicked. It’s been compared to a rusty cup. You can put plain water into a rusty cup. The water itself is not rusty when it goes into the cup, but it will always taste rusty. Whatever you put in, it’s going to

have that rusty taste, not because that’s the nature of the water or whatever it was put in, but because of the condition of the cup.

That’s what the heart is like. Everything that flows out of it has that taste of sin about it. The problem is that we possess a rusty nature. We possess a fallen condition that is by nature opposed to God. So what comes out of it – reflects that nature, reflects that bent of that heart, because it’s bent away from God? All of our actions are reflected of that. It’s natural. If we want to talk about free will, there’s where we see free will. We freely, willingly choose to rebel against God because it’s the nature of their condition. It’s the natural thing to do. So if we’re to receive Christ, if we’re to decide for him, which is totally contrary to the natural man, the bent of his heart, the condition of his nature, then our natures must be changed that our wills will respond freely to the grace of God, otherwise that won’t happen. So for that we are totally dependent upon God. We’re helpless to change ourselves, but we can be changed by the grace of God. And that’s not only true at conversion, that’s true throughout our lives. We are at all times dependent upon the grace of God, and in that sense a child likeness always characterizes those who will inherit the Kingdom of God.

I’d like to underline that because there is never a point in our life as Christians when we can come to that state in which we say right now I’m okay. I’m fine. I can handle any situation and begin to act in the flesh because when we do that, then we will fall. That’s what happened to David, remember, at the peak of his power. In the spring when kings go out to battle, David decided I’m doing pretty well. I’ll stay home this spring. I’ve fought enough battles and I’m gonna relax and I’m fine. That was the worst decision that he made and that’s when he fell. We’re never at a point when we can consider ourselves to not be children, not be totally dependent upon the Lord. Now of course in saying that we must also say that we’re to grow and to mature. That’s the goal of the Christian life. Both Paul and the author of Hebrews makes that very clear with some of the severe criticism that they give to those to whom they write.

Paul said to the Corinthians in chapter 3: “I could not speak to you as spiritual men but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ.” They were not able to handle what he calls the solid food, the deeper things of the Lord, because they were still fleshly. They hadn’t been growing. They hadn’t been maturing. The same problem with the Hebrew Christians to whom the author of Hebrews writes in chapter 5. He makes that same point, almost identical kinds of words. That’s a problem with Christian people. They cannot progress as they ought to. We need to be maturing in our knowledge and in our conduct, always advancing in the faith. But at the same time – and perhaps this is the irony of it – but at the same time we will always be children. We will always be babes in that we will always be dependent upon the Lord, always be helpless apart from him. There are numerous passages we could cite, John 15, the vine in the branches, but this is the point the Lord’s making. The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these, people like this who are helpless to see themselves as helpless and turn themselves completely and wholly to the Lord for his help.

Then in a gesture of affection, and maybe even in a sense of illustration to show how we are dependent upon him, the Lord receives these children. Verse 16: “And he took them in his arms and began blessing them, laying his hands upon them.” Well in a sense that’s what we are. We’re held in his arms and we’re supported by him. But what a contrast that picture of being held in his arms makes to the attitude of the disciples. They couldn’t be bothered with children, but he was delighted with them. And what a contrast to the callous age in which he lived. In fact the loving attention that he gives to these children by taking them in his arms and blessing them through prayer can only be appreciated, I think, against the attitude toward children that was so common in that day, particularly among the gentiles. That’s illustrated rather graphically by an Alexandrian

papyrus, in which we get a rather famous correspondence out of the first century B.C. It contains a letter of instruction from a husband to an expectant wife who he supposed may have had the child. He writes, “If it was a male child, let it live. If it was a female, cast it out.” A very casual response. If it’s a male, let’s keep it. If it’s not, get rid of it.

That was an all-too-common practice among the ancients, that of exposing children, leaving them out on some desolate hillside to die by exposure to the elements. It was an easy way of relieving oneself of an inconvenient burden like a child. Christianity changed all that. In fact, one of the early fathers writes of that very practice and how as Christians they couldn’t do that. And it had an affect upon society. It didn’t eliminate it all together, but it had a major affect upon the very character of society. That’s the affect of common grace that comes through the cross of Christ. But spiritually, this example of our Lord should leave us with a sense of a value of each child’s soul and a concern for their salvation. I think that’s what the Lord is showing here. It should enlist each of us in prayer for our children and for the children of one another. But more to the point, our Lord’s actions of blessing children illustrates that the Kingdom is freely given to the helpless, to those who simply receive it because they can’t earn it, because they can’t deserve it. They’re like children. They’re helpless.

Now all of that sets the stage for what follows. Just after holding up children as an example of who enters the Kingdom, a man approaches with a desire to do just that – to inherit eternal life. If anyone could have earned his right to the Kingdom, it was this man. Mark doesn’t identify him, but Matthew describes him as young, and Luke states that he was a ruler. We know him as the rich young ruler. What a contrast he was to the children. He was a man of privilege and advantage. Warfield writes he was young, he was rich, he was highly placed, he was clean. He was accustomed to desire good things and desiring them, he was accustomed to obtain them for himself. With the resources at his command, resources of youthful energy, wealth, position, moral earnestness, he was accustomed to obtain them without much difficulty. I can imagine Warfield, who was a professor at Princeton seminary, saw many young men like that passing through Princeton University, men of privilege, men of high education, who went onto make their way in the world.

Well this was a man like that. It was a man who had much, but for all that he had he still felt a longing for something. Something was lacking in his heart – the assurance of eternal life. He was anxious about that and so he brings the matter to the Lord. Mark writes in verse 17 that he ran up to him and knelt before him asking, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Now the question itself betrays something about the man. I think it shows us the very nature of his theology, which was a merit theology, a theology of legalism. The belief that is so common among the Jews in that day, that of works righteousness. What could he do? He wanted to do something to earn eternal life.

At the same time, having said that – and we’ll see in a moment that can’t be done, because we’ve already said – at the same time there seems to be a real earnestness, a sincerity about him. He’s a man of wealth and position, yet he forgets all of that – forgets all of the dignity of his station in life and he throws himself in the dust. He throws himself at the feet of Jesus, who from the human standpoint, appeared to be nothing but a humble, penniless carpenter from Nazareth and yet this man of position throws himself at his feet. He had great respect for the Lord; not like the Pharisees who came with questions that were designed to trick and to trap the Lord. This man is not doing that at all. He comes with a desire to learn what he might be lacking; what might be keeping him from entering into the Kingdom and obtaining eternal life. He calls Jesus “good teacher.” That’s a very unusual form of address. One of the commentators on the gospels, Alfred Plummer,

writes “There is no instance in the holy Talmud of a rabbi being addressed as good master.” The title was absolutely unknown among the Jews.

So he comes with a great deal of respect for the Lord and a sincere question. He seems like a prime candidate for evangelism. Just think of this. The Lord’s not out there buttonholing men and trying to give them the gospel like so many people do today. This man comes to him. He comes with the right question. He wants to know what he can do to obtain eternal life, and you think this is a great opportunity. What a catch this is. Here is a rich man, a young man with lots of energy and lots of position and power and all of that, but what does the Lord say? He asks, “Why do you call me good?” That is a rather abrupt response, one that might put the young man off. Not the response that we would give. Not the response, at least, that I would give if someone came to me and asked that question. I’d say believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

But the Lord doesn’t do that, not because such a response is incorrect, it’s not. It’s the correct thing to say. But because he knew for all of the flattery, the man really didn’t understand who he was. And to understand our Lord’s identity, he needed to consider more carefully the meaning of that word good. So it’s necessary to define the term. It’s always necessary to do that. We shouldn’t presume that everything we say is understood. It goes about, now, the task of defining terms. He asks him what do you think the word good means? No one is good except God alone. Only God is good in the absolute sense of the term of being perfect, so is that what you mean when you call me good? Do you consider me God? If that’s what he meant, then of course he was correct and he used the word properly, but that isn’t what he meant. He was using good the way it’s normally used, the way we so often use it. He was using it in that relative sense in terms of achievement, in terms of being basically moral, basically a good person that lives within the confines of the law. Sure, he has his peccadilloes and doesn’t do things perfectly, but basically is a law-abiding citizen who looks out for other people. And he regarded himself as basically good, probably better than most.

And so he would go to this really good man with a question that had been bothering him and speak to him as one good man to another. So the Lord was saying no, no. If you want to talk about good in the context of eternal life, then let’s put that term up there where it belongs, in the absolute sense. And in so doing, he was not only inviting this young man to reconsider who he thought the Lord was – something more than a good teacher, a great rabbi – to think of him in terms of what that word good really means, but also in so doing reflecting upon the perfect goodness and holiness of God, to think about himself in that light and realize just how far short of really good he felt and in so doing see himself as a helpless child. And to make very clear the standard that he was driving at, the Lord reminds him of the Ten Commandments; God’s standard of goodness. Actually not even all of the commandments. He’s very easy on this young man and he only asks him about some of the commandments that are in the second table of the law – the man-ward part of the law, verse 19: “You know the commandments. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.”

The young man wanted to know what to do and the law is about doing. If I man can keep a perfectly – not only outwardly, but inwardly, and in fact chiefly inwardly; the things that we do really are the product of our heart – but if he can do that, then he would live forever. Of course that can’t be done. Paul says in Galatians 2:21, if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly. We see his point. If we can actually obtain righteousness through the works of the law, then why would Christ have been sent? The fact that Christ was sent, the fact that the Father sent his son shows that men cannot achieve their righteousness. Otherwise he wouldn’t have sent his only begotten son to die such a terrible death. We can’t obtain salvation through works of the law,

but the law wasn’t given for that purpose. It can’t produce righteousness within us. It was given for the sole purpose of exposing sin, showing us how needy we are. Romans 3:20: “Through the law comes the knowledge of sin.” It exposes our helplessness. It doesn’t help us overcome it. It exposes our helplessness in order to lead us to Christ.

But the young ruler missed the point and responds with amazing confidence. “Teacher,” he says in verse 20, “I have kept all those things from my youth up.” A statement about his youth up probably refers to the age of 13 when every Jewish boy has a bar mitzvah, a son of the commandment. From then on they’re responsible to live by God’s commandments. And he was speaking sincerely, I believe. We know from Paul’s statement in Philippians 3:6 that the Jewish people felt that keeping a law was simply a matter of outward conformity to the law. Paul says of his own life as a Pharisee that he was found blameless in regard to righteousness, that outwardly he was blameless. Now in Romans 7 he gives a different description of the law and its effect upon him and there he shows us how the law had its eye-opening effect, how it had its intended effect. The tenth commandment that you shall not covet, it made him covet. As he reflected upon that he began to covet. It brought sin to life and as a result of that it killed him. That’s what he says, but it hadn’t had that affect on this young ruler. With complete confidence he sincerely answers that he had kept the commandments faithfully. So the explanation of the word good, the reference to the commandments had not enlightened him to his superficial knowledge of righteousness and to his need.

But the Lord was patient. You might think he’d become angry at this point. I’m sure some of us who’ve read this have become a little annoyed with his statement that the Lord doesn’t do that. He wasn’t angry with him. In fact verse 21, Mark writes that looking at him, Jesus felt love for him perhaps because he recognized that he was a sincere man, that he’s earnest. He wasn’t like the Pharisees. Whatever the reason, the Lord had a genuine concern for this young man who was so close to the Kingdom. And so in an act of love, the Lord does what he does so well. He puts his finger right on the problem. He tells the man, in verse 21, “One thing you lack, go and sell all you possess and give it to the poor and you shall have treasure in Heaven. Come follow me.” Now that command by the Lord – sell all you possess – has disturbed a lot of people and led to some strange conclusions. Is the Lord endorsing salvation by works? Make a great sacrifice. Believe in me, but make a great sacrifice and you’ll be saved. He’s saying you can earn your salvation – that this man will earn his salvation by doing that.

Is he denouncing wealth and advocating vows of poverty? Some have taken it that way. It’s the foundation for almost all monastic institutions and the disposition that regards wealth as sinful. It influenced St. Francis of Assisi give away his wealth and become a monk, and it’s done that for others as well. That, of course, is a complete misunderstanding of the Lord’s command. The Lord was not opposed to wealth. Read the Bible and you can see that. He gave it to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. He made them the envy of their neighbors. The Lord didn’t require that when the disciples came after him that they first sell their fishing nets and boats and give the money to the poor. Paul didn’t tell Philemon to give away his wealth. In fact, as Calvin points out, common sense tells us that the Lord was not making poverty a virtue or a requirement of salvation. He says a farmer who must live by his labor and support his children would sin by selling his little farm unless he had to. He points out to hold what God has placed in our hands is more virtuous than to destroy it as long as we support our families simply and give something to the poor. The man who gave away everything he had and was destitute I think would fall under the condemnation of Paul, that not providing for his family he’s worse than an unbeliever. It doesn’t mean that. He’s not saying to give away the things that we have and become poor, as though there’s some virtue in that. The Lord is not adding a work to fully grace. Salvation is a gift that can’t be earned. We haven’t

the ability to earn it anyway. If that was his point then we’re hopeless lost because we cannot do one virtuous act that’s pleasing to God. We are rusty cups, as it were. We’re fallen creatures who are unable to do that.

What our Lord was doing was uncovering a hidden vice in this man’s heart – something he didn’t see, something that he had to see himself over. He was exposing an idol. It was a unique command for a special purpose to address a specific problem. It’s not a universal command, although it does express a universal principal and that universal principal is this: whatever is an obstacle to following the Lord must be put away. That was his concern. He says in Matthew 6:24: “You cannot serve God and man.” A man cannot divide his loyalties between God and things any more than he can be married to two different women. And so in effect, the Lord says to this man what Joshua said to Israel: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” the Lord or false gods? So the Lord is saying to him, choose today whom you will follow, man or me. That was the challenge that the Lord laid down to this man with his wealth and his privilege and his youth, but for this man the challenge was too great. He couldn’t and wouldn’t. Mark writes in verse 22 that when he heard this, his face fell and he went away grieved for he was one who owned much property.

Bishop Ryle calls his love of money his master sin. It’s the sin that unmasked his sinfulness and showed that he was actually weak in all points of the law. The law is summed up in two great commands – to love the Lord our God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. He certainly didn’t love his neighbor as himself and if he had loved God with all his heart he would have preferred to obey and serve him rather than hold onto his riches. So he broke the first table of the law – the God-work part – because he loved wealth more than he loved God. And he broke the second table of the law – the man-work part of it – because he loved himself more than his neighbor. For all of his eagerness and his respectability, he was really a selfish, covetous man; an idolater. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:5, that covetousness is idolatry. But how many men, how many women are like this young man? Their idol may not be money; it may be sex, it may be prestige, position. With Herod it may have been Herodias. Mark tells us back in chapter 6 and verse 20 that Herod used to enjoy listening to John, so he had some spiritual inclination about him. There was some interest in those things at one point in his life, but he couldn’t part with Herodias and it cost him his soul.

With the Pharisees it may have been the honor of men because they love the cheap seats in the synagogues and respectful readings in the marketplaces. With the Sadducees or Pilate it may have been power. There are vices which are idols that men cannot or will not part with and the result is, holding onto these things, by holding onto this world, they lose the next. We must become like children to enter the Kingdom of God, realizing that we are stripped and naked as Warfield said, not relying on our works, not loving our wealth, but trusting in the Lord as dependent, helpful people. This man could not see that he was that and he went away disappointed. The Lord wasn’t trying to deprive him of good things and take his wealth away from him. He never deprives us of that which is good. Whatever he takes from us is for our best and will result in the greatest reward.

C.S. Lewis tells a story in his book *The Great Divorce* that illustrates the point well. I’ve referred to it before, so forgive me for repeating this. Maybe some of you weren’t here when I did or maybe some of you who were here were sleeping. I’m sure you weren’t sleeping. But if you’re awake now you’ll catch it. It illustrates the point that – you are perhaps familiar with his book. It’s an allegory about a bus trip from Hell to Heaven and in one well-known scene a ghost, whom he describes as being like an oily vapor, approaches carrying a little red lizard on its shoulder that was whispering in the ghost’s ear and embarrassing him. He tried to get it to stop but it wouldn’t stop.

It keeps chattering away in his ear. So an angel offered to kill it, but the ghost resisted and recoiled from that. He wasn’t it silenced, but killing it was too extreme. You see he wanted the vice, he just wanted it controlled, but the angel said that wouldn’t do. You can’t control vice, you have to kill vice and he had to give it up. Well, they discuss it and after great resistance from the ghost the angel kills the lizard. The ghost shrieks in pain and falls back and then a change occurs. The ghost begins to grow solid and bright with hands and feet taking shape and becomes an immense man.

The lizard itself changes into a great stallion. Then the new man leaps on the horse’s back, waves farewell, gallops like a shooting star across the plains and up the foothills, scaling the cliffs of the mountains higher and higher until they vanish. Lewis writes: “Into the rose brightness of that everlasting morning.” So what that man or that ghost was deprived of became a great blessing to him and whatever we give up in this life of Christ is more than rewarded in the next. “Eye hath not seen nor ear heard the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” Whatever the rich young ruler enjoyed with property and wealth that he held onto was short-lived. Thirty, 40 years later when he departed this world he left it all behind to the Romans to ravage and he entered into eternity without Christ, without riches into the outer darkness. Unless he changed, unless he thought things through at a later date, he missed the treasure in Heaven promised by our Lord. We don’t know what happened to him. We don’t know if he did make that change and if this did have an effect upon him that registered later. But as it stands, he becomes something of a proverb for us, a reminder that sincerity and morality won’t get you into the Kingdom of God. Education, wealth, hard work – all good things that we value – won’t get a person into the Kingdom.

He can be religious and respectable and die peacefully, confidently, only to be turned away from Heaven’s gate like Ignorance was in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He didn’t go by the way of the cross. He didn’t enter at the Wicked Gate. And it’s only by the cross and faith in what Christ has done that a person can enter into the Kingdom. Of ourselves, we’re helpless and we must see ourselves as that. We must see ourselves as babes who enter the world stripped and naked for whom all must be done and Christ as done it and we’re to look to him. We haven’t the capability of it ourselves. Our destinies are not in our own hands. They’re not. We’re incapable. They are in the hands of God and knowing that we must look to him if we’re to be saved and receive by faith what Christ has done. If you’re here this morning without Christ, look to him. Trust in him and nothing but him. Ask for grace and mercy and you will receive it. Shall we stand now for the benediction?

Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for what you have provided in your son, a sacrifice that has purchased people for yourself; people who cannot obtain mercy, but not attain merit, can do nothing for themselves, but must have everything done for them. We confess that’s what we are. Someday all will confess that. Thank you, Father, for sending your son to die for sinners to remind us daily that we are helpless and we need your strength and your enablement to live lives that are pleasing to you. We pray these things in our Savior’s name. Amen.