



CHRISTIANITY|EXPLORED

WHAT'S THE BEST NEWS
YOU'VE EVER HEARD?

Episode 6: Grace

Dad: You can open your eyes now. *[Girl opens gift.]*

Mum: So? What do you think?

Girl: How much do I owe you?

If God were to say to you, "Why should I give you eternal life?", what would you say?

[Series of images of people on screen holding cards saying things like, "I'm a good person", "I don't steal", etc]

... And that's why you should give me eter-nal life.

The man we read about in Mark chapter 10 is very much like that. He's what you might call "a good person".

Two other writers in the Bible tell us about the same event, and together with Mark

they help us build up a picture of what this man was like. Matthew tells us the man was young, Luke adds the detail that he was a “ruler” of some kind. And it’s clear from Mark that he was rich, morally upright, spiritually-minded, and very religious.

So he has everything going for him: he’s young, he’s rich and he’s powerful. And those who know him think of him as a good man: he would have been very well respected. He’s exactly the sort of person many of us would like to be.

But there’s also a vulnerability about him: he runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees – which in my experience is typically not something rich people do – and asks Jesus a question.

And it’s the most important question anyone could ask.

“As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Mark 10:17)

“Inherit eternal life” is another way of saying “enter the kingdom of God” or “have treasure in heaven” or “be saved”. All these phrases are used in Mark 10 to mean a similar thing: the overwhelming joy of being forgiven and accepted by God himself, free to enjoy him forever – in this life, and the life to come. “What must I do,” says the man, “to get that? How can I be good enough?”

Jesus asks a question straight back.

“Why do you call me good?’ Jesus answered. ‘No one is good – except God alone.’” (Mark 10:18)

Jesus offers the man a reality check: how good is good enough for God?

We tend to think of ourselves as basically good because we usually only compare ourselves to other people. It’s easy to puff ourselves up like a balloon if we only see ourselves in relation to certain people on TV, or people we don’t like.

But Jesus is saying, “If you want to know who really deserves to be called good, who really deserves to inherit eternal life, try comparing yourself to God – who alone is perfectly just, perfectly wise, perfectly pure and perfectly loving. Then you’ll get a sense of how good you really are.”

But the man doesn’t get it. So Jesus continues.

“You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.’”

“Teacher,’ he declared, ‘all these I have kept since I was a boy.’” (Mark 10:19-20)

If God were to say to this man, “Why should I give you eternal life?”, that’s the answer the man would give:

“I’ve kept all your commands since I was a boy.”

But has he? Jesus, gently and lovingly, gives this man a second reality check:

“Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21)

Has the man really kept all the commands? Is he even keeping what Jesus calls the first and most important command, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? To see if he really does

love God like that, Jesus tests the man with a challenge:

Give your money away.

It reminds me of the famous story. A robber goes up to a rich man, points a gun at him and says, "Your money or your life". But the rich man says nothing. So the robber shouts louder: "I'm not kidding – your money or your life!" And the man says, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!"

Money or life. It should be a no-brainer. But what will the rich man choose?

"At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth." (Mark 10:22)

Faced with the choice between keeping his money or gaining eternal life, this man chooses money. The fact that he walks away from Jesus at this point shows that – although he thinks of himself as a good person – in reality, money is more important to him than God.

It also shows that he didn't see the danger he was in. If the building you're in is on fire, you don't stop to fill your hands with your valuables. Your life is more important than that.

I wonder what it would be for us. What is the one thing you would not be willing to let go of, in order to gain the eternal life that Jesus offers? Our answer to that question reveals how far we are from good, and how far we are from God.

"Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'"

"The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard

it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.'" (Mark 10:23-25)

In other words, it's impossible. The disciples were amazed because money was seen as a blessing from God; they understood it to mean that God was pleased with a person. But Jesus is saying that even a morally upright, thoroughly religious, politically powerful, exceedingly wealthy young man can never do enough good things to get to heaven. Those good deeds are all just a lot of hot air. Why?

Because nothing we do, nothing we are, can change the fact that deep down, all of us have a serious heart problem that separates us from God.

As we've already seen, Jesus exposes the real state of our hearts when he says:

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" (Mark 7:20-23)

It is what we are. Deep down at the very core of our being.

When I was young, I went on a rugby tour, and while we were travelling I got this awful skin disease which made my face look not unlike a cheese and tomato pizza. So I started putting Band-Aids on my face, little sticky plasters to cover up these horrible sores that made people sick at the sight of me. Now, the plasters helped to cover up the fact that something was wrong with me, but of course they were powerless to cure the disease. For that, the doctor had

to prescribe some industrial strength antibiotics to get at the infection deep in my blood stream.

In the same way, the things we do to try and make ourselves good enough are like sticking plasters or Band-Aids. They may cover up the fact that there's a problem deep down in our hearts. They may make other people think we're pretty good people. We may even fool ourselves.

But the things we do are completely powerless to cure the problem of our sin. Any answer that begins, "God, you should give me eternal life because I..." – any answer which places confidence in anything you are or anything you have done – will not be of any use. Again, let me say as clearly as I can that according to Jesus, these things will do you no good at all when it comes to inheriting eternal life. If you're putting your trust in any of these things, please don't, because you've been misled.

Now, it's not that these are bad things to do. They're very good things to do.

But they become bad if we're trusting in them to earn eternal life for us; if we're using them to try and justify ourselves in God's eyes.

Jesus' words quickly bring the rich young man down to earth. Regardless of how moral or good we think we are, we fail to obey even the very first command, the most important command: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Like the man, our hearts love other things more – and that is what separates us from God.

The disciples understand immediately that this leaves all of us in a desperate situation. If a rich man can't make it into the kingdom of God, then who on earth can?

"The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?'" (Mark 10:26)

And Jesus' answer is devastating.

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible...'"

In other words, there are some things we will never deserve, can never earn, and should never even try to pay for.

But that doesn't mean we can't receive it as a gift from God. Jesus continues:

"With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:27)

So how can anyone inherit eternal life if there is nothing we can do to inherit it? Strangely enough, if the rich young man had arrived only a short while earlier, he would have heard Jesus answer exactly that question.

Immediately before this encounter, Jesus meets some people who are the opposite of the rich young man. Where he has material things, they have nothing. Where he is well respected, they are overlooked. He has power, but they are so weak they have to be brought to Jesus. And where he walks away sadly from Jesus, they cling to him.

"People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms,

put his hands on them and blessed them.”
(Mark 10:13-16)

By speaking of little children, Jesus isn't saying we have to be naive or gullible to inherit the kingdom of God. And he isn't talking about innocence or purity here. Having been one myself, innocence is not a quality I'd associate with a little child.

The quality that little children have that Jesus commends is their dependency. They depend on someone else to do everything for them, because they know they can do nothing for themselves. All they can do is throw out their arms and cry for help.

Small children don't try and pay for their meals, or a place to sleep, or the love that their parents show them, because they can't. They have no way of paying. They are totally dependent, so they receive all of it as a gift.

Now all this makes the message of Jesus very different from other religions. Other faiths say if you do certain things, and don't do other things, then God will accept you.

But Jesus tells us that that is simply not true. Because the problem of the human heart is so serious, the only way we can ever hope to be accepted by God is if he reaches out to us, pays the price for our sin himself, and then offers us forgiveness as a gift. And that is exactly what happened when he sent Jesus to die on the cross in our place.

We can't earn it and we don't deserve it. In fact, we deserve the opposite – God's punishment. And yet Jesus took that punishment on our behalf, so that all those who put their trust in him would be freely forgiven.

If you want to enter the kingdom of God, says Jesus, if you want to experience the

overwhelming joy of being forgiven and accepted by God himself, welcomed into the intimacy of his own family, free to enjoy him forever – in this life, and the life to come – if you want that, the only way to do it is to accept it as a child would accept it: knowing you have no way of earning it or deserving it, content simply to receive it joyfully as a gift.

All we can do is come to him – not with hands filled with all the things we have done, but with empty hands, ready to receive what God has done.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

In other words, Jesus took upon himself all our sin, so that we might take upon ourselves his righteousness. When God looks at us – if we've put our trust in Jesus – he sees the perfect obedience, the perfect righteousness of his Son.

And that is grace: God offering us a righteousness we don't deserve, cannot earn, and shouldn't try to pay for. It's something that must simply be received. It's not a reward, it's a gift – paid for by God himself.

When someone who doesn't know you tells you you're valuable, it might be nice, but that feeling won't last very long. When a spouse or a best friend who knows you well tells you how precious you are to them, it means the world. But when the Creator of the universe, who knows your heart inside-out, shows you that he would die for you, it changes everything.

It shows that although we're more sinful than we ever realized, we're more loved than we ever dreamed. It means we no longer need to pretend we're something

we're not, because God knows all about our hearts, and still loves us anyway.

It also means we are freed from the slavery of constantly trying to get our sense of value from all the places we usually try to get it: money or power, religiousness or career, good looks or the approval of others. The reason we look to those things for our sense of self-worth is because we are not receiving it from God.

But when you come to Jesus, you understand just how valuable you are to God. When you look at the cross it's as if Jesus is saying, "This is what it costs to earn that gift for you. This is how serious your sin really is. And this is how much I love you anyway." We are more sinful than we ever realized, but more loved than we ever dreamed.

And that is the gift your Creator is holding out to you now.

"Come to me with empty hands," says Jesus. "There's something I want you to have."