

Lent 1 2017 – Matthew 19:16-30

I wonder what your Lent looks like this year. What, if any, sorts of resolutions have you made?

- Perhaps some of you will be committing to extra study – hope Lent groups on your radar
- Perhaps some to extra prayer
- Perhaps some to fasting
- Perhaps for many of you, you've decided to give something up. Maybe it's one of the usual suspects: chocolate, cakes, TV, Facebook. Daughter given up crisps (NOT poppadoms or baked rice ones. Expect that list to grow over next few weeks – Kettle Chips don't really count, Quavers and Skips are basically air etc)

People do give up some funny things: news this week, one chap gave up his girlfriend for Lent "I like her a lot and well you know you gotta give up something you like a lot".

I remember when I was having doubts about Lent a few years ago, when people used to ask me I said 'third helpings' – then next year I gave up insincerity for Lent. (Don't copy me by the way.)

But it does raise a serious question: what is the point of Lent? What do we do all this *for*? When you give up these things, is it a real blessing or because you feel a social pressure to do so? Or maybe a church pressure – because that's what *proper* Christians do?

Perhaps even muddier now that we have all these secular sacrificial seasons in a modern year now: Stoptober (smoking), Movember (men's health), Dry January (post-Christmas bingeing). But mostly it's a fad and people go dry for a few weeks and then start bingeing again. Is that the Lent thing too? ([Mate who gave up alcohol for Lent, miserable the whole time and went to pub with dad on Easter Saturday and drank 7 pints](#)).

Today we begin our Lent series, based largely in Matthew's gospel (chs 19-21). It's called 'On the Way Up to Jerusalem' and does exactly what it says on the tin. It focuses on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his encounters with various people along the way. Through these encounters we get profound teaching about both God's priorities and ours. We also see the radical love and grace of God in action, and the promise of life to all who take this grace seriously. Above all, we fix our eyes on Jesus, journeying with him as he journeys to Jerusalem and to the events of Easter.

But we begin today with a famous passage, one which is preached on many times –and also one which I'm sure many of you groaned inwardly about when it was read just now. It's just awkward, isn't it? The great John Stott once wrote a book in his early ministry called 'Christ the Controversialist', and this is one of those passages. It haunts us, doesn't it?

Does Jesus really mean that we literally have to give away all our excess wealth and possessions or is he using a figure of speech? Does he really mean that it's almost impossible for the rich to get into heaven (and most of us are when you apply a wealth index across the world – average Brit is 8, even a poor Brit is in the top 15-20%)? Or is he joking about a small gate in Jerusalem, so it's only hard for the rich, not impossible?

Perhaps most of all we wonder, if it was us asking him, whether Jesus would put his finger on something we would find it very hard to give up? What would he ask us?

In short, if I was to ask you what you thought of this passage, I imagine many of you would say – it makes me feel guilty. Is that a good thing?

When we get a challenging passage how do we respond? Brief detour – think about two words, with very different outcomes – guilt and conviction i.e. difference between feeling guilty and being convicted. Bear with me, this is very important. Guilt has two meanings – legal one and emotional one. Legal is a concrete, factual thing – ‘establish someone’s guilt’. Then we have phrase ‘feel guilty’ to refer to a sense of shame or unease, sometimes for a good reason but often vague (e.g. mate JB when saw a police car – QUOTE).

Bible only ever uses word guilt in legal sense, never emotional one. In fact the only time it describes an emotional response much like we would translate as ‘feeling guilty’, St. Paul says it’s pointless. Reason is that feeling guilty doesn’t produce any positive change. If we do something it’s for wrong reasons, and usually we don’t do anything at all – it’s a vague feeling which goes away again when we think about something else.

Much better word we find in bible is word ‘conviction’ – what this means is a deep prod from God’s Holy Spirit about something important, which actually produces a positive outcome in our lives. In fact when Paul refers to it, he says that this kind of response ‘leads to repentance and leaves no regret’. It draws us closer to God and changes our lives for the better. (PAUSE)

Lent is all about conviction not guilt. This passage is all about conviction not guilt. What Jesus is interested in here is our heart, not our outward expressions of religious observance, however well-intentioned. Which is why this passage is such a good one to look at in Lent, it goes to the heart of what the season is really all about.

You know the story well – this guy comes to Jesus and says what’s the minimum I can get away with to get into heaven? Or rather, what’s the *average*? Motive of his question in v18 – which laws do I have to obey – what’s the norm?

Jesus changes the question entirely: not interested in lowest common denominator religion, in pass marks and bare minimum obedience – **the only thing that matters is your heart**. He effectively asks the man: is anything in your life more important than me?

That’s the question for us too, isn’t it? That’s not just the point of this story, it’s the point of Lent too: is anything in our life more important than following Jesus with our whole heart? Is anything getting in the way?

Ultimate purpose of any and all religious activity, at Lent or any other time of year, is to draw us closer to Jesus – if it’s not doing that, it’s a waste of time – you could even call it false religion. Jesus seeks our hearts, and in response we seek more of his heart – his love, his grace, his compassion, his perspective on the world. True all the time, but especially so in Lent.

So as I draw things together today, my main application for us to think about today is this: have a look at what you're planning to do for Lent and ask yourself honestly: **is it going to help you get closer to Jesus?** That's the only measure that matters.

But how can we evaluate that question helpfully, how can we know if it's going to draw us closer to Jesus? Here's some pointers:

Key thing is really about **your motives: why are you doing it in the first place?**

If it's guilt, I would strongly advise you to stop. Never ends well. Jesus came to set you free from guilt, and by his grace to lead us to a place where we do things out of freedom and gratitude.

If it's so you can fit in at church or because you feel pressure from 'The Church' or because you think that's what proper Christians do, then again, please don't do it. If here on Ash Wed, you'll have heard the gospel reading from Matthew 6 where Jesus says, if it's to be seen by other people, it's of no value to God. You'll be putting all that effort in for nothing, spiritually speaking.

If it's to prove to God that you're good enough, you should definitely stop. God never deals with us on the basis of whether we're good enough, because none of us are. He deals with us on the basis of his love and grace. We have to have the courage to stop trying to be good enough for God and simply receive his love, forgiveness and blessing in humility. Trying to prove yourself to God is a disaster both ways – if you think you manage it, it produces pride. If you don't, it produces condemnation. Either way, it never ends well. And as Jesus said, it's utterly useless spiritually as it doesn't bring you closer to God.

Being quite blunt today because I've had this message on my heart for some weeks leading up to Lent. I think we've got so much of Lent wrong, and I fear that many, perhaps even most Christians, actually get further away from God in Lent because they're told to give something up but they don't know why and if they do it's because of guilt or fear or pride or social conformity – basically all the things that are spiritual poison. We become little Pharisees for 6 weeks.

Being a Christian, following Jesus, is all about grace. That's the heart of the message of the New Testament: works-based religion gets you nowhere. Easter especially is all about grace: Jesus' undeserved love for us, his sacrifice for us all. So any preparation for Easter must be founded on grace, not works. If we challenge ourselves this Lent, may it be a response to God's wonderful grace, may it spring from a desire to know more of his grace, may it flow from a deep gratitude for what he has done for us. Jesus asks us today, as he does at the start of every Lent: 'forget your works, do I have your heart? And if I do have your heart, do you desire more of my heart, my love, my way of being and doing?' The practices of Lent are one way of saying yes to that – but only if they flow from the right place.

I'd much rather use Lent to choose something positive, or replace the things you deny yourself with something positive. So if you fast, use the time you would have spent preparing or eating food to pray. If you give up naughty food, give the money you save away, and the time you would spend snacking praying instead. Even if you're not giving something up, much more useful to put effort into more study or bible reading, or more time to pray, or more acts of kindness for others.

Why banging on about Lent groups. Not for my benefit, but as a way of saying: yes, I'm investing positively in growing closer to Jesus. (Groups every night of week, 2 in morning, 1 in afternoon.)

And don't get me wrong, there is great value in discipline – but again only if we're learning what it means to rely on God's grace. Fasting (no matter how big or small) is about growing in gratitude for our blessings, growing in awareness of what Jesus gave up for us and learning to be fed by him spiritually even when we're missing things physically – all of those things grow us closer to Jesus.

So a simple plea today – let's not get sucked into lowest common denominator lent, secular guilt lent or Pharisee pride lent, or any other corruption of this season. All that Jesus asks of us is: do I have your heart? It's freedom! It's grace! It's undeserved love and generosity from God. And whatever we choose to give back this season, may it *only* draw us closer to him. Amen.