

## Luke 18:15-30 A Call to Follow

### Introduction

Paul and Maida Contento were Italian-American Christian missionaries who had served in Inner Mongolia between 1929 and 1936. Three years away for studies in the Islamic faith, to assist their work amongst Muslim people, led to them returning to China in 1939. It was a most difficult time with the Japanese having invaded and occupied significant parts of eastern China and the majority of the people living in the great cities of Peking, Tientsin, Shanghai and Nanking had fled to western parts of the country to evade the horrors of living under their occupier's rule. For Paul and his wife, who had re-entered south-west China and were staying in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, there was a prayerful concern about how they could get back to their mission station. Yet their prayers to return were declined –why? into their city came thousands of Chinese university students who had fled from the invading army. For the past three decades Chinese students had been very hostile to what they saw as the imperialistic Christian message, linking the missionaries with the colonial aspirations of Western powers. Yet God did answer their prayers in a most unexpected way. One day, shortly after their arrival in Kunming there was a knock at the door –a group of student refugees asking to be taught English. At first the missionaries declined because they had no textbooks and were not qualified to be language teachers. 'Use your English Bible, we know that it is better [for this purpose] than Shakespeare'. Classes were formed and as one finished another group of students appeared to take their place. This work led to a remarkable number of conversions and the start of Christian work amongst university students in China organised by Intersarsity Fellowship (International Federation of Evangelical Students today). Under the leadership of Calvin Chao (1906-1996), a Christian medical student, the work spread across the country and resulted not only in university work, but many churches also being planted in the next few years before the Communist crackdown began [taken from Bob Davey, *Power to Save-A History of the Gospel in China*]. All over the country the seeds of the future phenomenal growth began at that remarkable time. Yet it was a remarkable set of circumstances that God arranged or permitted that led to these blessings. Sometimes it is not what we are doing for the Lord but our openness and availability to Him that is most important. Like Paul and Maida we too may be surprised at which doors of service the Lord opens. Pray that the Lord will bring people across your pathway, even this week, with whom you can share your faith. It may be a small step or one of significance in someone's life- what matters is that like Jesus here in Luke 18 we are willing to be His witnesses when He invites us to follow Him in witness and service.

### 1. A Particular Context (Luke 18:15-17)

(a)An unsought opportunity (Luke 18:15) *People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them...* In first century Judea it was a popular custom for parents of children to ask a rabbi for a blessing on their child around the time of their first birthday. It was not a formal religious requirement, more of a cultural tradition that some people chose to follow. However, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. His ordeal there that will result in His crucifixion, death and resurrection is clearly on His mind. The disciples are conscious of the pressures He is facing and want to shield their master from any additional engagements that might add to His load. Their motivation then was honourable and fair, though it may not have looked that way to the parents who were rebuked by them (Luke 18:15). Jesus knew His followers on this occasion meant well, but He wanted to take the opportunity to share something of the love of God and His grace with the people who had

sought His advice or blessing. In Luke 18:15-30 Jesus revealed something of the urgency of proclaiming God's kingdom and the shortness of time at our disposal to communicate the greatest news in the world to people around us. He calls us to follow His example and be open to taking the opportunities that will cross our pathway, over time, if only we are willing to be available to Him. (b) **A God-given opportunity** (Luke 18:16-17)<sup>16</sup> *But Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.* <sup>17</sup> *I tell you the truth; anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.* Apart from the obvious message of being friendly to children which is taken for granted today, though not in most previous centuries, what teaching was Jesus seeking to declare through this meeting with young children? **In what ways are we as adults to be like children?** (i) A sense of wonder Little children get excited at sometimes quite minor things, but to them an adventure beckons. In this world, sometimes, as adults we can be so tired and flat that we lose the sense of anticipation and expectancy of what a new day may bring or a new situation may result in; when most of us became Christians a whole new world opened up to us which thrilled our hearts; do you still have real joy at meeting with God's people; do you come with expectancy to read His Word and to seek His presence and blessing in prayer? Do we need to recapture our first-love for the Lord Jesus? A church where its people are passionate about Him will attract other people, because so many in our land have their basic material needs met, but it fails to give them a sense of fulfilment or purpose. (ii) A depth of trust in God and people Little people are convinced that their parents know everything, can do everything... we all know the story that by the time you have reached your teens you have become aware of the gaps in your parents knowledge and abilities; as the years pass by many of us have been hurt, even sometimes deeply wounded by people we trusted; some to the extent that they struggle to place their trust in anyone at all on the deepest level. Most of us have become quite cynical at times by the claims of adverts; the call to declare for the umpteenth time that you have won... or the endless e-mails telling you that someone in West Africa wants to share their family millions with you in return for the most modest of favours. Do you need to stop and reflect on how you trust the Lord at the present time? Our wariness may be justified in some human interactions, but sadly it can transfer over into our relationship with Him. Do we trust more in a bank balance, a secure career or something else instead of Him? Jesus will very soon meet a rich official in that place, but the point is as applicable to penniless disciples as well as to a wealthy administrator. (iii) A willingness to follow Children can play a host of games in the playground using their imagination. Their leader may be an adult associated with the school or another child, but so quickly their minds are in another world as they follow the instructions and play the game. Our commander-in-chief, the Lord Jesus Christ, has a vision for us to follow also that is out of this world. He calls us to follow Him. Now the joys will likely be greater; the difficulties deeper; the challenges faith-stretching, but the blessings will last for eternity. He says will you come and follow me? It is no surprise that the majority of people who come to faith in Jesus do so as a child or young adult; praise God for the smaller proportion who are converted later in life, but they are a minority of the total number; We will be as a church reflecting on our mission statement in the coming months and hopefully recommitting ourselves to complete the work He has entrusted to us in this community we serve. Together, I trust we will say, Yes Lord I will follow You, wherever You lead me. (iv) An ability to forgive and be forgiven An alarming number of congregations have their fellowship damaged and weakened by unforgiveness; both by people who are unwilling to put right mistakes they made in the past and others unwilling to accept their need to apologise for failings in the past. In the kingdom of God we are called to keep short accounts with each other and with God. Is that an issue you need to settle at the present time? Is there a slate that can be wiped clean once something is dealt with, maybe even something that has been buried

for years but never truly resolved? Here Jesus invited His followers to reflect on the approach and mindset of the children that approached Him as a key to their attempts to follow Him. Have you entered God's kingdom? Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? Are you currently following Him as you know you should?

## 2. A most important question (Luke 18:18)

<sup>18</sup> *A certain ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* (a) **The Form of Address Good Teacher** A short while after that encounter with the parents and their children a man approaches Jesus and asks a question that relates directly to the teaching Jesus has given. The man was unaware of what Jesus had said, but His disciples would learn a lot from that encounter. The form of address to Jesus was most unusual in that religious context. In the Jewish literature of that period there is no record of any rabbi being addressed in that way. The likely response to such a statement would have been: 'there is nothing that is good but the law [of God]' (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 237). Jesus' focus was in honouring and glorifying God the father. What is the main focus of your life? If you had to put it into a sentence what words and thoughts would be central in your composition? Now in his favour the man had recognised that he was not living in a way that would guarantee eternal life. He had come to Jesus, assuming correctly, that this was the key person to assist him resolve this matter. Have you come to trust Jesus? Have you put your faith in Him? This young man would make some big mistakes, but he had begun in the right place with Jesus. Have you come to Jesus and put your faith in Him? (b) **The means whereby salvation is gained what must I do to inherit eternal life?** All credit to this man for being honest enough to admit that he needed to make changes in his life in order for God to save him. Do you need to take some steps of faith in order to be the person God wants you to be? However, what this young man had yet to learn was that entering God's family comes about not through us becoming good enough, rather through God the Father accepting the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in our place. Salvation is all of God's grace not where our good deeds outweigh our bad ones. Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 2:8-10; verses that illuminate what Jesus was explaining to this man. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith— and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no-one can boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Have you grasped the extraordinary nature of the gospel, good news to the undeserving? The focus of some people who want to follow Jesus is what can I do to be good enough for heaven, despite all the warnings on that subject in the New Testament. The true child of God comes more and more to grasp the nature of God's grace, His unmerited favour. Hallelujah what a Saviour! 'Died Him for me who caused His pain; for me who Him to death pursued, amazing love, how can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?' (Charles Wesley hymn, 'And can it be' verse one, CMP 33). Eternity will be insufficient to wonder how God could go to the lengths He did to save undeserving sinners such as you and me –but He did! The difference between risking eternal ruin and receiving an eternal reward is only two letters of the alphabet: **done vs do**. Either *it is finished* (Psalm 22:31; John 19:30) or we are still working on it, with no certainty of the outcome. I know which kind of salvation I want to have! Yet this young man had not even begun to grasp it- have you?

## 3. An Unexpected Answer (Luke 18:19-22)

(a) **The Central Importance of glorifying God** (Luke 18:19) *Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No-one is good— except God alone.* In Luke 17:11-19, there is the record of an event that must have happened in the recent past, and also on the journey of Jesus towards Jerusalem for the last time. In that context Jesus healed ten men who were lepers. However, only one of the nine bothered to come back and say ‘thank-you’ once their healing was confirmed. The only one with the appropriate manners was a foreigner, a Samaritan. Yet Jesus’ concern here was not the ingratitude of the nine, though it would have been legitimate to have had such thoughts; rather Luke 17:17-19 indicates that the motivating force behind the life and ministry of Jesus was honouring His Father in Heaven. *Jesus asked: Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?* <sup>18</sup> *Was no-one found to return and **give praise to God** except this foreigner?* <sup>19</sup> *Then he said to him, Rise and go; your faith has made you well.* However, Jesus may not have been rebuking this seeker as he actually had told the truth, even if flattery had been a more likely motivation for his choice of words. Could Jesus have been pushing him to reflect on what he had been saying and continue to their logical conclusion –that is, that He is God in human flesh and acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Saviour? Is your chief ambition and mine to glorify our great God and Saviour and to be inspired by the thought of honouring Him in the way that we live? Or is there something or someone who is hindering that development in your life? When this principle is clear in our lives it becomes easier to know how we ought to prioritise certain choices in our lives –if we are living the way we should as Christians. Of course we can have all kinds of pressures upon us to fit in with people around us who may have other priorities or make other lifestyle choices. The success of Jesus on earth, and that of His most effective followers has been significantly down to their ability to discern the difference between the good and the best choices in life. May God help us to do this also; (b) **The Cost of glorifying God** (Luke 18:20-22) *You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother.’* <sup>21</sup> *All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said.* <sup>22</sup> *When Jesus heard this, He said to him, 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.* How many commandments are there? Easy question –ten! Did Jesus ask this young man if he had kept all ten? Strangely enough there is a careful selection of five of them that relate to our interaction with other people. There is no mention here of the four that relate to our relationship with God or the last one: *You shall not covet...* (Exodus 20:17). It is always a risk to make something of arguments from silence or to interpret why someone omitted to say something expected in a given conversation. There are, though, times when our intuition is correct. All of us, at different times, have picked things up from someone’s body language or speech that was not communicated directly to us or other people. We must remember the context here. Jesus, prior to the arrival of this man, had been explaining about living in God’s kingdom. Luke 18:17 stated: *I tell you the truth; anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.* We are never to be childish, immature, but what attributes of a child was this man lacking, despite all his qualities? Is there something you or me need to learn from the children in our church in the way they follow Jesus? We always assume it is the children who have things to learn from us as adults, and normally that is fair, but it is not all a one-way street. The values of God’s kingdom are challenging and humbling and contrary to the ways of the world. During his recent visit to the church Brian Irvine mentioned one of his moves to another football team and an awkward moment in contract negotiations. The manager in question had offered a particular financial package for Brian to accept. There was a long silence while Brian reflected on the offer. The manager broke the silence asking if the offer was not seen as adequate. On the contrary, Brian replied, I was thinking it was far too much I would have signed for half that amount. The manager had never encountered a footballer player hesitating to accept a contract on such grounds. God’s kingdom values are sometimes a real contrast to

those held by the majority in our culture. May God help us to be child-like in our trust of Him, but never childish and immature, and therefore excited about what He can potentially do through you and me and with a willingness to exercise the patience required to see this take place over the medium to longer term.

#### 4. **An Unpalatable Choice** (Luke 18:23)

<sup>23</sup> *When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.* Jesus has been emphasising total trust and dependence on God. The practical advice He gave to each person who sought to follow Him was often different, dependent on their particular circumstances. To this man, bearing in mind his excessive love of material possessions, Jesus asked if he was willing to let go of those things that mattered most to him in order to follow Him? It is very clear that Jesus knew this man could not have said he had kept the tenth commandment: *You shall not covet...* because it was a problem with which he struggled. If that was true for him in that culture, how much more is it the case for us in a western materialistic culture. Retail therapy, until very recently had become almost an end in itself, rather than a means to an end for a growing proportion of the population. About fifteen years ago, Donald Macleod, Principal of the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh, wrote an article in their monthly magazine comparing the financial giving of Presbyterians to overseas missionary work, as a proportion of their incomes at the beginning of the twentieth century compared with its end. He noted that living standards had increased beyond recognition over the century, but that mission giving whether in terms of numbers of missionaries or the finances to support their work had not kept pace in real terms. In fact it had declined significantly. He wanted to give a wake-up call to his denomination to consider whether the materialist culture was not only a problem in the world, but also in the church? A person can be living on benefits and have a materialist mindset as bad as someone who might be a millionaire. Or in both cases a person with very limited finances and another who was wealthy might not suffer from this limitation. In the latter case, I was aware of a Christian businessman, who was unusually successful in his line of work. With the exception of a rather nice car he appeared to live very simply. Behind the scenes he had an understanding with a number of Christian missions that if at the end of a financial year their finances were in the red, he would take care of the shortfall. I know from a man involved in more than one of these causes that the promise was honoured time and again. The point Jesus was seeking to communicate to this young man was not about how much he owned, but how tightly he held onto it. A Christian couple I knew some years ago in Glasgow had very little in the way of material possessions, but the careful and planned financial giving they carried out will have touched many lives. Do you own the things you possess or do they control you? It is a constant challenge for us in this culture to be a counter-cultural people who live by God's values rather than by those of the majority in our Western materialistic and secular culture.

#### 5. **An Unbelievable Reward** (Luke 18:24-30)

<sup>24</sup> *Jesus looked at him and said, How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!* <sup>25</sup> *Indeed, 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.* <sup>26</sup> *Those who heard this asked, Who then can be saved?* <sup>27</sup> *Jesus replied, What is impossible with men is possible with God.* <sup>28</sup> *Peter said to Him, We have left all we had to follow You!* <sup>29</sup> *I tell you the truth, Jesus said to them, no-one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God* <sup>30</sup> *will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.* The message Jesus wished to communicate here was about priorities. What is most important in your life and mine? We will all find the time and the money for our top priorities, even if that means cutting back severely if necessary on other things. It was

reported once that a visitor to David Livingstone in Africa expressed sadness at the hardships he had endured, including the loss of his wife and his own health problems on that continent and included the words: 'what sacrifices you have made'. Livingstone's reply 'Sacrifices, I have never made a sacrifice in my whole life. For a man who walks the Christian way, there may be things that the world calls hard, but, beyond them all and through them all, there is a peace which the world cannot give and cannot take away, and a joy that no man can take from him.' Our lives will inevitably be different to his, lived a century earlier, but I trust in principle our motivation can be the same. Jesus challenged His followers to have a child-like trust in their heavenly Father, something with which this rich young man struggled. It was part of the spiritual secret of King David in the Old Testament, with his many flaws. In Psalm 131:1-2, David wrote: *My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. <sup>2</sup> But I have stilled and quietened my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, **like a weaned child is my soul within me.*** May God help us both individually and as a church that we will have such a trust in Him that we will follow Him willingly wherever He leads us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.