Luke tells of a certain man who had an encounter with the Savior. At the time Jesus was interacting with a group of parents and their young ones; obviously taking great delight in holding the small children and blessing them. He nuzzles their tiny little faces with his beard and responds to his disciples trying to shoo the families away by saying, “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 not enter it” (Luke 18: 16, 17).

In their wide-eyed innocence and in their trusting, contented response to his touch, Jesus sees in these tiny persons the secret to how we are all to enter fully into the brand new reality he was bringing upon the earth. So easy, so simple, just a bit of trusting faith is all that is required and then a glorious new life of walking besides Jesus for all time and eternity. Simple child’s play, really. But is it really that easy?

A certain young man watching Jesus interacting with the children is intrigued. Maybe he is simply curious, or more likely he is really serious about pursuing the spiritual life. Jesus obviously sees something in the young man, a certain quality of character, a willingness to learn that made him an ideal candidate to be an apprentice disciple. The guy has all the right stuff.

So in response to the man’s earnest inquiry, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus probes his intentions by asking him if he had a basic understanding of religious faith. “Do you know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false witness, honor your father and mother.” The man said he had lived according to these rules all of his life.

Fine. This man is a good man. He is a conscientious man. He is a good decent “Tom Hanks” kind of guy. He is the kind of man we would like to have live next door to us; a man we would want our daughters to date; a man we would like to work next to at our place of employment. This is the kind of guy who would stop to help an elderly woman change her flat tire; shoo a puppy out of the road; put a generous donation in the Salvation Army red kettles at
Christmas time. This is the model of the people we would like to populate our churches with. Jesus agrees. People like him would be great assets to his kingdom.

Except for one thing. This man was putting something ahead of his commitment to Jesus. For all we know perhaps Jesus could see what it was by the subtle references the young man made in his conversation, in the way he was dressed, oh, let’s say for the sake of illustration, by the fact he was wearing a Rolex watch and had arrived on the scene in a BMW luxury sports car and by the way he kept glancing distractedly at his mobile device while he was addressing Jesus.

At any rate, it was not hard for Jesus to figure out what it was about this man that would be a stumbling block for him and prohibit him from being able to follow hard after the Savior. For this man the fatal impediment was his wealth, the love of money. “No one can serve two gods, either he will hate the one and love the other or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and riches” (Matt. 6:24).

And so with the greatest of compassion and with the tenderest concern, Jesus looks at this man and says, “You still lack one thing. For you, this one thing is absolutely essential: Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me” (v22).

The young man was thunderstruck. With unerring accuracy Jesus asked of him the one thing he could not or would not do. His wealth was his stumbling block, the one thing that would deny him the true wealth of the Kingdom of Heaven. And so he sadly walks back to his BMW and drives off. This causes Jesus to turn to his disciples and say with a sigh, “How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle then for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

What is keeping you from fully entering the Kingdom of God? Certainly it cannot be because you don’t understand Jesus’ instructions. Commitment to Christ, or the spiritual walk, is just not that complicated. Sure it calls for discipline, accountability, study and prayer. Spiritual formation has to be pursued with diligence. But what Jesus asks us to do is so simple a child can comprehend it. In fact he had just got done saying that all you need
to fully enter the Kingdom of God is the simple faith of a child.

What Jesus means by this is that once we embrace just a few basic things, we are ready to advance far and fast in the spiritual quest. And what are these things? Why, exactly what he asked of his disciples: that they stay close to him, trust him with everything in their lives, and obey his summation of all the laws of God - loving the Lord your God with all of your mind, heart and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. Do these basic simple things, just these, and you will be amazed and what God will be able to do in your life and how you will avoid so much trouble that comes to those who insist on doing it their own way.

There is a lovely scene in one of the earlier Star War movies. The apprentice Luke Skywalker has crashed his space ship into a swamp and it sinks out of sight. He has come to this particular place to take lessons on how to be a Jedi Knight from little Master Yoda. One of the first lessons seemingly is one of the hardest. Yoda asks Luke to lift his ship out of the swamp by faith alone. Luke is doubtful, but he says that he will try. Yoda shoots back: “Do or do not, there is no try.” And sure enough, try as he might, young Skywalker can’t get the ship to move. Then Yoda shows how easy it is to raise the ship out of the muck and place it on dry land. Child’s play, just child’s play. Luke gasps, “I don’t believe it.” Yoda only comments sadly, “That is why you fail.”

In that moment the little green Yoda is a perfect Christ figure. Because that is exactly what Jesus is asking of us, “Do or do not, there is no try. Either you find me trustworthy or you do not, either you will obey me or you will not, either you will stay with me or you will wander away.” That is the sum total of the entirety of kingdom theology. All the rest in commentary.

We are the ones who insist on making the spiritual life so complicated and hard to grasp. What happens is that we give in time and again to the tempter who subtly sows the seeds of doubt and compromise. He whispers in our ear just like the serpent did to Eve suggesting that God’s ways will somehow deny us something we would really like to have instead.

“Has God truly said you should not eat the fruit of this tree? Now, let’s just think about that for a while. Why would he say that? That fruit looks awfully good to me. I think you will
really gain something if you just try one itsy, bitsy, bite. How can something that looks so good be so bad? Go ahead try it. It will bring you pleasure. It will make you feel loved. I’ll even throw in a money back guarantee. If you don’t like the fruit you can always deny you ever tried it. Before long, you will even believe those denials yourself. Nobody will get hurt and besides, you’re an adult now, free to make your own choices.”

Goodness is simple. But evil is complicated.

The rich young man was very, very good at outwardly giving the impression that he had it all—together with God, that his priorities were in order. He looked good, he felt good, goodness gracious, he probably even smelled good. But spirituality is not about outward conformity to a code of ethics, it is about an inward relationship with a living Lord. And Jesus knows that one sure indicator of whether spirituality is going to work for you or not is your willingness to trust him and stop making excuses for yourself.

And I tell you truthfully we all wrestle with this, every last one of us. We so easily fool ourselves into believing we can have Jesus and still cling to our sin at the same time. We come to think of our particular sins as no big deal. There is a serious error in many contemporary churches today; churches who want to make their peace with modern values and modern pleasures. They suffer from the illusion that people only have to confess their sins and repent at the time of their conversion or re-commitment to Christ; that somehow once we are Christians we can just go easy on our sins and indulge them from time to time because what the hey, we are already forgiven!

Consequently there is little need for constant repentance and frequent prayers of confession. We say we don’ like confessions because they are old-fashioned and because modern worship it is all about style over substance. But in reality the problem goes much, much deeper.

The older I get in my faith the more I see the deeper motives, the games I have played with myself and my God, the twisted rationalizations, the more subtle temptations to declare myself independent of God. I have taken something so simple as Jesus’ invitation to come follow him and made it so complicated. The more self-aware I become, I find that I am in need more grace, not less. The mature Christian, the mature church,
realizes that confession and repentance are at the heart of worship, not something to be chopped out of worship.

William Wilberforce a committed Christian, during his long battle to end slavery in the British Empire, was forced to confront his own false self and his own unnamed desire to sin. He sought the counsel of John Newton, the ex-slave ship captain who had a profound conversion and later became the composer of “Amazing Grace.” Even many years later, as a grizzled old man, Newton was still doing penance by being a church janitor. He set down his mop and bucket and looked at Wilberforce and said: I have made two great discoveries, I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior.

Ah, if only we keep our eyes on the simplicity of Jesus’ invitation. Think what we would gain. World War 2 fighter pilot John Gillespie Magee captures the wild freedom and exhilarating feeling, the simple easy grace of following Christ in his poem “High Flight”:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter silvered wings.
Sunward I’ve climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth

Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High on the sunlit silence,
Hov’ring there,
I’ve chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.

“Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue,
I’ve topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew-
And, while with silent, lifting mind I’ve trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the hand of God.

It is just so easy to learn how to fly. We Christian are to seek the things above, to seek them as the needle seeks the pole, as the sunflower seeks the sun, as the river seeks the sea. That is why Paul pleaded with the Christians of his day to set their affections on things above, high things, lofty concepts and “not the things of the earth.”

Once and for all we must put out of our minds the purpose that we are on
this earth is for our own pleasure and our own self fulfillment. Christ is not interested in giving you a little bit of inspiration to get you through your week. He wants to take you to places you never imagined existed. He wants you to become a man or woman, boy or girl, you never thought possible.

Christ is not interested in helping you achieve your goals. He wants to share with you his goals. He wants nothing less than to make you a citizen of his kingdom, not the kingdom of this world with all of its lusts, corruptions, and hollow promises.

Take Christ at his word when he says, “I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come, eternal life” (6:29). Follow him, follow him!