

The Rich and the Kingdom of God

¹⁶ Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

¹⁷ "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."

¹⁸ "Which ones?" he inquired.

Jesus replied, " 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honour your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbour as yourself.'"

²⁰ "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

²¹ Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, "With human beings this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

²⁷ Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

-- Matthew 19:16-30

Statistically speaking, I am ridiculously rich. As such, I always read this passage in fear that Jesus might leap up and ask me to sell my books, clothes, and Toyota Corolla so that I can follow him. Throughout the long history of the Church, countless Christians have heard the personal call of God to shed their wealth for a life of poverty. Origen of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, and perhaps the most famous, Francis of Assisi, all were called to renounce their worldly possessions for the sake of their discipleship to Christ. Does the challenge of this passage now mean that we, like Francis, should strip off our clothing and walk away from our privileged lives?

There have been times when some would teach that outward renunciation of riches was the path for *every* follower of Christ, yet such an interpretation is untenable. However, this does not leave us off the hook. What Jesus teaches here does not mean that we are free to pursue wealth, status, and comfort. Some of us may be called to leave our wealth, but as is often the case with Jesus, the bar is raised even higher. The question is not one of what we shall *do* to get eternal life. Rather, there are two questions we need to keep in mind as we go into this text: what are we enslaved by, and how are we to live so that we will be free to follow Christ?

This is, of course, how the young man sees life. He approaches Jesus and asks “*what good thing must I do to get¹ eternal life?*” He has reduced the Godly life to a matter of function, a matter of doing. When Jesus tells him what he must do, he says “*All these I have kept*”, as though counting his trophies on the wall. Good works are not

¹ Gk: εχω: I have, hold, grasp, attain → vs. Jesus' use of εισερχομαι: I enter into, come into

to be disparaged, but a proper perspective is to see them as fruit of a transformed character. To put good deeds before righteousness of the heart is to put the cart before the horse.

Yet the rich young man has an earnest heart. None of the Gospels ever show an ounce of cynicism when it comes to this man's sincerity. He is not trying to test Jesus or make himself look better, he is only misguided into believing that he can acquire eternal life with a little elbow grease.

This is why Jesus does not immediately seek to strip away the man's illusions, but subtly steers him into the center of righteousness—to what takes place in the heart. All of the commands that Jesus lists in v.18 are "neighbour-love" commands from the Ten Commandments given at Sinai. If this is not enough, Jesus underlines the necessity of loving others when he follows this short list with "love your neighbour as yourself"². However, Jesus leaves out the first four because these commandments are all to do with loving God. The rich man loves his neighbour, but does not truly love God. When the man asks Jesus "*what do I lack?*", the short answer is "*everything, for you have neglected to love God.*" The rich man has scrupulously observed an outwardly righteous life, but his heart is still not given over to God—it is given to Money. He has all the trappings of a blessed life, but none of the core, none of the love.

I have to wonder whether Jesus knew all along that the rich young man couldn't make the turn. Mark says that Jesus looked at the man and loved him, one of the few

² v.18

times that Jesus is said to have loved any one person in the New Testament. God does not hate rich people—rather, the sense I often get is that he pities us because of our frequent blindness and ignorance. Nor does God does not want the ruin of the rich. He wants them to live, and moreover, to thrive. When Jesus dangles the idea of perfection in front of the man, he is not saying that the man can achieve a sinless state by selling his possessions. Instead, the Greek term Jesus uses for perfection connotes the idea of maturity and ripeness³. What Jesus is saying, then, is that as long as the man holds tight to his comfort and security, he will always remain immature and incomplete. Yet the young man’s unripeness does not mean Jesus loves him any less. Indeed, it is *for* love that Jesus urges him to let go of what keeps him from entering into real life.

The young man’s question is an honest one: what must I do to get this life? Jesus replies: *“you do not get this life, you enter in. And the one thing you must do that you have not done is to hold yourself and your things lightly.”*

The man walks away, grieving his incompleteness. The text tells us that he walks away because his wealth was great—and he walks away in sorrow because he finally realizes that his entire religious life is an empty sham. He did everything he was supposed to do to gain righteousness, but in the end, he found he wanted comfort and security more than the uncertainties of discipleship to Christ. He only wants eternal life, not the difficult process of entering into the Kingdom of God where this life is to be had.

³ Gk: τελειος

Jesus turns to his disciples, probably saddened by the way he was proven right about the man's emptiness. *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!"*

The disciples don't get it. They're still working on the theological view that wealth is a sure sign of a blessing from God. And it is! Yet even though wealth is a blessing, the blessing of God does not necessarily mean that that person is wholeheartedly pursuing God and will drop everything at a moment's notice to further follow Him. For the disciples, wealth is how you keep score—the richer you were, the more likely you were to be justified with God. In their minds, they're justified in asking *"Who is more blessed by God than the beautiful and the rich? Who is more righteous than the Pharisees?⁴ If the blessed people can't get in, who can?"*

I wonder if Jesus shook his head before replying. I wonder if he thought *"No, the Blessed ones are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. The Blessed ones are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."⁵* The Kingdom of God belongs to the little ones, the inconsequential ones, the ones that are swept aside and left out. The Kingdom of God belongs to the empty-handed, the humble, the broken and afflicted. We do not do any good thing to get eternal life, but rather, we inherit⁶ and enter into the life ransomed for us by Christ. This is because the Kingdom of God does not operate according to merit—that we could earn our way in—but according to grace.

⁴ Matt 5:20

⁵ Matt 5:1-10

⁶ Gk: κληρονομεω: I inherit, enjoy allotment

The foundation of this new Kingdom is the grace of God, which we seen when Jesus replies to Peter’s question of “*what will there be for us*”. Jesus does not say that we will acquire eternal life if we do every good thing, but rather, if we leave everything behind we will inherit it. An inheritance is different from a possession because by definition, an inheritance is earned by someone else and then given away. The rich young man had it wrong: you cannot earn your life. Rather, the way of the Kingdom is to open your empty hands and receive it as it passes down to us through Christ.

However, there is one matter remaining—that of how we, the rich, are to deal with our wealth. Is the answer to sell everything and give it to the poor so that we can follow Jesus? I was once asked whether it was wrong for us to have costly things. For some of us, the answer may be “yes. Those of us who pour our lives into acquiring one thing after another are in deadly peril. The question you must ask yourselves is whether your wealth has mastered you to the point that you cannot, at a moment’s notice from the Master, leave it all to follow Him. This is not an easy teaching, yet if anything hinders us from entering into life, there again is Jesus saying, “cut it off and throw it away.”⁷

I would be remiss if I stopped only at those who struggle with undue affection for their wealth. The sad truth is that we all are mastered by one thing or another. Perhaps you have no car and no mortgage and can wander the world at will—but is your heart set on a relationship to fulfill you? Or if you are not interested in a relationship and can

⁷ Matt 5:30

freely spend your time with whomever you like, is maintaining your freedom and avoidance of commitment becoming an obsession?

So even though we may not all be laden with wealth such that we cannot leave it for love of God, we all hold to things so tightly that we are prevented from walking on in obedience to Christ. Yet herein is the key: *we* hold on. It is *our* grip on the millstone that drags us under, for Christ has severed the leash and set us free to follow Him. And it is not wealth or marriage or friends or significance or experience that separates us from God—it is the love of these things that cuts us off at the knees.⁸ There is no sin in money or possessions or security or indeed in anything in the world—yet there is an alarming amount of evil in being controlled by it.

Clement of Alexandria⁹ says it best when he says that we must develop a “holy indifference” to anything we might count as ours. It is not that we cease to be good stewards of the things we have been given, but whether we have them or not, they must not be our masters. We accept what God gives us with an open hand, but never close our fingers around it as though it is ours to keep. One thing we all lack—the ability to hold ourselves so lightly that the balance of our lives only rests on our palms. This is the secret of Kingdom life: that we never grasp so tightly to one thing that we fail to leave our hands open to receive better from God. Whether today we are wealthy and well-fed or tomorrow we die in poverty, we live lightly. Though this sounds dangerously

⁸ 1 Tim 6:10, 2 Tim 3:1-4

⁹ C.150-215

naïve, there are times when we must look down, and in looking down realize that all along, we are held in the strong, sure hand of God.

- 1.) If Jesus were to ask you to give up something and follow Him, what do you think it would be?