

Too Rich for the Kingdom

Matthew 19: 16-26

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Have you ever met someone that you liked almost immediately? The way they presented themselves, what they said, their appearance, something about them that immediately captured your undivided attention. If you have ever experienced that sensation, you are not alone. On His way to Jerusalem, Jesus met just such a person and he is the focus of this Sunday's sermon. Let's meet him.

This individual is described in the Scripture that was read this morning as well as in similar accounts in the tenth chapter of Mark and the eighteenth chapter of Luke. Combined together, this is what they tell us about the man that Jesus met. First, he was young. Matthew 19:22 describes him as a young man. In that day and time it meant a man who was between the ages of twenty and forty. In other words, he was a contemporary of Jesus. Luke 18:18 tells us this young man was also a ruler. Since he described himself as having kept the commandments, we can probably assume that he was a Jewish elder, the leader of a local synagogue. In fact, he may even have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the high court of Judaism. Finally, he was rich. All three Gospels describe him as being wealthy, perhaps the beneficiary of his family's good fortune. Having heard what Jesus had just said about children and them being in possession of the kingdom of heaven, this young man wanted to know how he could also be included in that number. So he ran up to Jesus, knelt before Him and asked, "Good Teacher, what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus wasn't too sure if this young man was really serious. Was his flattery genuine or insincere? Jesus decided to test his intentions. He replied, "Why do you call Me good? There is no one good except God alone." Bestowing upon Jesus a character trait reserved for His heavenly Father, was inappropriate, at least until this young man came to a better understanding of who Jesus truly was. Then Jesus proceeded to check out if this young man was truly fit to be a candidate for eternal life. He answered the man's question in the same way every Jewish teacher would respond to this kind of

question. Keeping the Law of Moses was the way that you entered into a blessed life both here on earth and beyond. For that reason Jesus told the young man, "If you want to enter into life, obey the commandments." In response, the man asked which ones Jesus was referring to? Obviously, he knew them all, so Jesus described those which had to do with the way we should treat one another, like "do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, honor your father and your mother." "Teacher," the man replied, "all of these I have kept since I was a boy." This pleased Jesus and He began to think that perhaps this young man had potential, perhaps even as one of His own disciples. He was a moral individual who knew the difference between right and wrong and had done his best to live by those standards. He was even more pleased when the young man sensed that perhaps something more was required. He asked Jesus, "What do I still lack?" The time had come to get down to business.

Without hesitating for a moment, Jesus raised a second requirement for eternity. He told him, "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." In other words, if you want to be complete, do everything that is required for eternal life, then leave all of the worldly stuff behind and come follow me. Become one of my disciples. Sadly this was beyond the young man's expectations of what would be required for both discipleship and eternity. His great wealth got in the way of his devotion to Jesus and with downcast countenance he turned and walked away. What had begun with such enthusiasm had turned into despair for everyone involved, even for Jesus. In response Jesus immediately uttered those famous words, "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, harder, in fact, than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle." It was observation tinged with both humor and regret.

The disciples were flabbergasted. Contemporary Jewish thought stated that keeping the Law qualified a person for heaven and a sure sign of God's approval was prosperity here on earth. God blessed those who obeyed the Lord's commandments. If this young, devout religious teacher did not qualify for heaven, then who in the world could? They turned to Jesus and asked, "Who then can be saved?" It's a question that has echoed down through the ages and one which deserves to be answered this morning.

You may, of course, be already aware of what Jesus said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." But before we go there, let's

take a look at what Jesus said about rich people inheriting the kingdom of God. If what He said is correct, all of us are in big trouble. Compared to the rest of the world, there is not a person here this morning who is not incredibly wealthy. I could present all kinds of statistics to prove my point, but there's no need. Let's be honest, with a possible few exceptions we're all doing pretty good financially. Furthermore, down through the ages some of God's most profound servants have taken this passage of Scripture quite literally. Saint Antony, the founder of monasticism, gave everything he owned to his sister and took up residence in an Egyptian graveyard. Later, Saint Francis of Assisi turned his back on his family's wealth and became a country friar gathering around himself a group of like-minded Christians. He died in the only garment he possessed, a tattered robe that he had been given when he became a monk. Do we have but two alternatives, give all our wealth away or depart from the Lord?

Reviewing this passage of Scripture, I gave that considerable thought, and wondered, "Okay Jesus, what are you saying to me and to the people I serve in this church family? Here is what I believe He said in response, "Who owns your wealth, Philip? Does it belong to you or to me? Make up your mind. You cannot serve two masters, your money and Me. For you will love one and despise the other. Which is it going to be?" It's the same question I believe He is asking all of us and I believe it's the same question He was asking the rich young ruler. Who owns your wealth? Are you holding it in trust as a gift of God to be used under His direction and guidance, or is it yours to be disbursed according to your own wishes and desires?

R. G. Letourneau, who invented and built heavy duty construction equipment, huge bulldozers and earth movers, was a dedicated Christian who set aside 10% of his earnings for the Lord. An opportunity arose whereby he could reap a huge financial reward, but it would require withholding his tithe and investing everything he had in this new venture. He promised the Lord that he would make up the difference in his tithing once the funds began pouring back into his company. Well as you might guess, things didn't work out so well. In fact, he almost went bankrupt. Was it because he stopped tithing? I don't think so. It was because he was investing his wealth. He was investing what he had earned without realizing that as a Christian all of his holdings belonged to the Lord. How did God want him to utilize the wealth that had been entrusted into his care? Let's be honest, we entered this world with nothing and that's the way we will be leaving. Fortunately, Mr. Letourneau learned his lesson. He not only started

tithing again but was instrumental in founding a university for those who wanted to consider a career in the earth moving industry. Additionally at the end of his life he had turned that tithing thing upside down. He was keeping 10% and giving 90% to the work of God's Kingdom.

All of this brings me back to that last statement by Jesus, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Even the most godly and righteous among us will never qualify for heaven. God is perfect and requires perfection. None of us will qualify based upon how we live. None of us are perfect. Furthermore, no matter how much we give to God, it will never be enough to buy our way into heaven. The price is too steep for any of us to pay. In other words, we are not good enough and wealthy enough to get into heaven on our own. During Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, He knew what the future held in store for Him. Over and over again He told His disciples what was going to happen. He, the perfect Son of God, would pay the price for our salvation. He would be the One who would make the impossible possible. That is what the season of Lent is about—Christ's journey to Jerusalem and the cross, so that you and I might gain that which we could never acquire on our own.

The rich young ruler asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" If that young man were standing before us right now, what would we say to him. I hope that each of us would respond in the same way that Paul addressed the Philippian jailor so long ago, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).