

Eternal Life and Wealth

Jesus is on his journey to the cross, and meets a wealthy young man, the one we usually refer to as the rich young ruler. All three Synoptic Gospels refer to him as rich, while Luke refers to him as a ruler (18:18) and Matthew says he was young (19:22).

Our New Testament Scripture is **Mark 10:17-31**:

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This conversation between Jesus and this young man has always challenged me about my willingness to forsake all to follow Jesus; but I've always justified myself because I'm not rich, have never been a ruler, and now am no longer young. So Jesus, I assume, wouldn't make the same demand of me to follow him. But still, Jesus' words are disturbingly challenging to me.

All of us have indulged in the rather harmless activity of window-shopping. Usually we go gawking after things we would like to have but cannot afford to buy. So this rich young man, a "yuppie" of his day, was out "window shopping." He'd heard about Jesus' teaching about the arrival and availability of the Kingdom of God. As a "window shopper," he went inside and inquired about this

new product line that was being offered by the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. He even was prepared to make an offer, but discovered eternal life isn't for sale (17-22).

This young man had wealth, and according to Luke's version, he was a ruler (Luke 18:18). Thus along with his wealth, he had power and influence. Yet, there was in his heart a sense of need that his wealth and influence couldn't buy. So, he came seeking after Jesus, whom he had heard was able to give him something that perhaps was the missing ingredient in his life.

The young man came to Jesus asking, "Good teacher, what must *I do* to inherit eternal life?" I think it's significant that he asked what he needed to *do*, and not what he needed to receive. This was a man who was perhaps self-made, and had fought his way to the top in the business and/or political world. He may at the same time have been privileged, since he used the word "inherit," which might have been the way he came about his wealth. In any case, he was wealthy, and he was influential, but also he was not satisfied with his life. Something was still missing.

He was religious and moral. He may have been a synagogue ruler. In the Jewish world, wealth was a sign of God's favor, and no doubt his wealth had given this young man a notion that he was a prime candidate for eternal life. He vowed that he had kept the 2nd table of the Moral Law. He had kept the Ten Commandments in his relationships, at least outwardly, with others. If he were to present himself for membership in our church, we likely would welcome him. We might even nominate him, in short order, to serve as an elder!

The rich young man came to Jesus, who told him there was something lacking (21). I suppose no one knew this any more than the young man himself. His emptiness is what drove him to Jesus in the first place. *Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."*

Does Jesus ask us all to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him? Godly people like Saint Francis of Assisi took this verse 21 as applying to themselves. I don't believe Jesus gives this command to all, yet we should not quickly dismiss the possible literal application of these words to our lives. We have our ways of softening this passage by thinking automatically that this man's wealth was in another category from ours, and that Jesus would never ask us to do such a radical thing. We manage to keep ourselves below an "imaginary riches danger line" (D Garland). But Jesus warns all of us about the danger of riches. By most of the world's standard of living, just about every one of us here today is rich.

This narrative contains one of the saddest verses in the Bible: "...*he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*" I wonder if after

this encounter with Jesus this young man ever enjoyed his wealth again. Either we control wealth or are controlled by it, which was obviously the case with this man. Jesus says, *"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"*. (Matt. 6:24). "Mammon, translated "wealth" is more than simply inanimate, neutral currency. There is an inherent power within wealth that Satan uses to capture and corrupt the human heart.

The Bible doesn't say that money's the root of evil, but rather, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." (1Timothy 6:10). So, we don't have to be wealthy to contend with the spiritual dangers of money. We can simply want to be wealthy at the peril and neglect of our soul. Wealth can give a false sense of security and lessen our sense of dependence on God.

Obviously, this young man had a desire for eternal life, but was in the grip of his love for his wealth. Rather than controlling his wealth, he was controlled by it. And, what a terrible master his wealth proved to be, causing him to turn away from following Jesus! He was willing to gain a part of this world at the expense of his soul, which is a bad bargain (Mark 8:36). Riches perilously keep us too attached to this fallen world and unprepared for eternity. The rich young man had great wealth, but he left Jesus a pathetic man, without hope and without God.

Although wealth can't save us, Jesus teaches that the wealthy can be saved. But he begins on a note of irony, saying that it is hard for the rich to be saved. In fact, he says, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved!

This was amazing for the disciples. Many of the great religious leaders were from the wealthier classes, and their Old Testament background led them to believe that worldly blessing was a sign of God's favor, and even evidence of eternal life. This mindset they had would fit well with the "Name-it-and-claim-it" theology of some TV evangelists of today. These false teachers say that especially if you contribute a big gift to their kingdom enterprise, God will bless you with material wealth.

Jesus says the wealthy can receive eternal life, but only by a miracle, like a camel going through the eye of a needle. It takes a miracle for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of heaven. But that's what it takes for anyone to enter the Kingdom—a miracle. The disciples, who thought the wealthy might have an advantage in getting into the Kingdom, show how little they understood grace and the power of God. They thought the wealthy had an advantage because they could give more to the Kingdom, and their wealth showed some measure of deserving. After all, didn't the fact that they were blessed with wealth show they

had done something to earn God's favor? But Jesus says it's totally impossible for anybody to have eternal life apart from the grace of God. We depend absolutely on what Jesus did for us on the cross.

The rich young man came to Jesus wishing to add eternal life to his fortune. And why not? He had everything else. But it would be hard for him to understand that to have the Kingdom he would have to let go of his fortune, those things he had earned and all that represented his hard work and success. To receive grace means admitting a need. It means you have to let God "pay the tab."

Peter seems to pat himself on the back, as if to say, "I'm not like those wealthy people you've been talking about. In fact, "We've left everything to follow you." Maybe Peter was saying, "This wealthy guy was not willing to pay the price, but look at us. We've left everything to follow you." Maybe also in his statement of loyalty, he was also implying this question: "What's in it for me?"

How gracious is Jesus in his reply! Instead of rebuking Peter, he assures him that his followers can be wealthy, but not necessarily in the way pursued by the rich young man and even by many in the church of today. Jesus implies that the poor and the wealthy can receive eternal life and be kingdom wealthy. Jesus says that he'll repay what we sacrifice for him. If we leave home, family, vocation and livelihood for him, he'll see to it that we're included in the kingdom family.

Mark, who wrote his gospel to a persecuted church in Rome, remembered that Jesus included in our provisions the element of persecution (verse 30), something I wish he'd omitted! There are believers living in lands of persecution who have had to say "no" to family, jobs, and financial security for the sake of the Kingdom. Jesus gives them extended family in the suffering church. He's meeting their needs through the Body of Christ. As part of God's family, we're to share our wealth with the needy and speak out for economic justice for all, so we'll all share kingdom wealth, a different kind of wealth than the world's. Jesus taught us not to ask "*How rich* am I?" but rather, "*How* am I rich?"

In my boyhood, I often traveled with my father when he would be the guest preacher in an Ohio church on a given Sunday. (My beleaguered mother would usually suggest he take me for the day, thus giving her a more peaceful Sunday) Usually he'd be given an envelope at the end of the Sunday evening service prior to our getting in his car for the trip back to our home in Columbus. I'd regularly ask if I could open the envelope to see what the church had given him for his travel expenses and honorarium. One evening, I asked him if I could look in the envelope, and he said, "Son, there isn't an envelope this time. We didn't get paid for this one, son, so I guess this is one we can put in the heavenly bank."

Since that experience I've had many occasions to think about this heavenly bank. This is the deferred wealth we'll not see till the New Heaven and Earth.

And then there is what AW Tozer called “the transmutation of wealth.” He said, “As base a thing as money often is, it yet can be transmuted into everlasting treasure. It can be converted into food for the hungry and clothing for the poor.” Our money can be transmuted into lives being changed through the gospel witness of those serving in needy lands.

What a mood shift there is in this narrative! The rich man left sad, having forfeited kingdom riches; but Jesus promises a glorious eternal life to his followers. Peter’s remark, which Luke’s account gives us, is one we as Christians continued to carry in the backs of our minds: “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” (Luke 19:27). *The Message* says it this way: “What do we get out of it?”

I recall a Black preacher who spoke in our seminary’s chapel. He said that people today are asking “What’s in it for me?” when in fact we should as followers of Jesus ask, “What’s *in me for it?*”

Well, even when our motives are tainted, Jesus says he’ll see to it we get what we need in this life and true riches in eternity. Occasionally and perhaps always we’ll have to stop and hear Jesus say, “You lack one thing.” One thing stands in the way of freely and fully following Jesus. I have to ask myself, “Is it my desire for security in my retirement? Is it living close to family and surrounded by friends?” Or am I free to pay the price to follow Jesus?