“The Rich Young Ruler,” Luke 18:18-30 (Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024)

And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **19**And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. **20**You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’ ” **21**And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” **22**When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” **23**But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. **24**Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! **25**For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” **26**Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” **27**But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” **28**And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” **29**And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, **30**who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

PRAY

It’s Palm Sunday; the Sunday before Easter. As you’ve heard in the announcements, we have this week we have a lot of extra activities and chances to worship around the Easter holiday this year.

But today we come to what I’m sure is a familiar passage to many of you, the story of the rich young ruler. And verse 25 must be one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible, but especially when it comes to money. That’s the verse where Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Even if this is the first time you’ve ever been in a church service in your life, you’re probably familiar with those words.

Jesus talked about money all the time. He talked about it more than just about any other subject. It seems like he’s always saying, “Be careful about money” and “Give your money away” and “Watch out for the love of money.” That’s true all through the Gospels but especially in the Gospel of Luke. I really believe that if I tried to preach on money as often as Jesus preached on it, I wouldn’t have a church anymore. I’m not sure we could take it.

But we certainly can’t avoid the subject of wealth when we come across it in our study of the Bible. What does Jesus want us to know about money from this text? Two things: *first, the threat of financial wealth.* *Second, the promise of true wealth.*

First, the threat posed by financial wealth. Who is the rich young ruler (by the way, I’m going to refer to him as the young man the rest of the way; “rich young ruler” gets kind of ponderous when you say it three dozen times)? Who is he? We know *he’s a young man.* The passage we’re studying this morning in the gospel of Luke says nothing about his age, but this story is also told in Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels, and in both of them he’s called “young.” He’s probably in his early twenties.

We know *he’s successful*. He’s rich and has great wealth. He’s also a ruler; that means he either leads a synagogue, or it could mean he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the very exclusive group of men who ran things at the temple and constituted what you might call the “supreme court” of Israel. He must have been greatly respected to attain to either position at such a young age.

This guy has it all: he’s young, rich, successful. He’s probably good looking. It’s hard to be young, rich, successful, and not be good-looking, though some people manage to pull it off.

But *third, he’s also a good man*. When Jesus asks him about the commandments (do not steal, do not commit adultery, honor your father and your mother), he replies, “All these I have kept from my youth.” And when Jesus hears that, he doesn’t say, “Liar! You know you slept with that girl last week!” No, Jesus agrees with his self-evaluation. In Mark’s gospel it even says that Jesus “loved” this young man. He is someone with tremendous character.

He even asks Jesus a good question. He wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. In other words, the young man says, “I certainly believe in God. I know he’s holy and loving and just. I want to have a right relationship with him both in this life and the afterlife. And Jesus, I know you’re a good teacher. You teach like no one else I’ve ever heard. I know about the miracles. So, I’m asking you to examine life. I’m an open book. Show me what else I need to do to make sure I’m right with our God.”

And Jesus listens. He takes the young man seriously and he says, “You’re close. You’re very close. There’s just one thing you lack. Sell all that you have, give it to the poor, you will then have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” And the young man couldn’t do it. In Mark’s account, we read that when the young man heard what Jesus had to say, his face fell. His heart was broken.

We should feel for this guy. He’s honored God as best he could all his life. But when Jesus says, “There’s just one more thing, give all your money away” the words went through the young man like a knife. He may have never gotten over it.

What’s going on here? Is Jesus saying, “The only way anyone can be in a right relationship with God is by giving all your money away”? No. Jesus never commands anyone else to do this. Lord willing next week, Easter Sunday, we’ll look at the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus from Luke 19. When Zacchaeus meets Jesus, he says, “Look, Lord, I’m going to give away half of my possessions to the poor.” And Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, that’s not enough Zacchaeus. You’ve got to give it all away.” No, Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

This is something specific to this young man. Jesus is diagnosing him. Jesus is telling him, “Even though you are, by the standards of this world, a good man, an exceptional man, a man of character, you have a stage four spiritual cancer growing inside of you, and the only treatment for this kind of disease is radical, emergency surgery. The cancer is love of money, and as long as you love your wealth more than me, it will be ***impossible*** for you to enter the kingdom of God.” That’s the word Jesus uses in verse 27.

And that’s what Jesus means by that very famous verse 25: “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” In other words, it’s impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Some have tried to downplay the meaning of Jesus’ figure of speech because it’s so shocking to say the rich can’t inherit eternal life. They’ve done it by saying that what Jesus was really talking about was a gate in the wall of Jerusalem called “the needle gate.” It was a tiny gate, much smaller than a normal gate, and a camel could get through the gate, but it was hard: only if it crawled through the gate on its knees could it go through. The idea being that it’s hard for the wealthy to go to heaven, but if they humble themselves (if they get on their knees) they can do it.

There are some problems with this: there never was a gate in Jerusalem called the “needle” gate and camels don’t crawl. Jesus says it’s ***impossible*** and he means ***impossible.*** We have a similar figure of speech: a snowball’s chance in hell. That’s the chance a rich person has to inherit eternal life: zero.

Maybe some of you are thinking, “That’s ok … because I’m not rich. Rich can’t go to heaven? Too bad for them but it’s not my problem.” Yes, it is.

I know it doesn’t feel like it because all it takes is knowing just a few people who have more money than you, spend it more extravagantly than you would, or go on vacations you can’t … I know it doesn’t feel like it, because you think your boss is rich, or your brother-in-law is rich, or the folks who live in that neighborhood or drive those kinds of car are rich, but friends, if you’re in this room, then by any objective measure you are almost certainly wealthy. A few of us in the room might be in the top 1% of all income earners in the United States, some are certainly in the top 5%, a lot of us are in the top 10%, and almost everyone would be in the top 20%. Those are just the facts. And when you pull the camera back and talk about worldwide numbers, very few of us would be outside the top 5% of wealthiest people on planet Earth.

No one ever wants to admit they are rich; we all want to say we are middle class or maybe upper middle class but it’s just not true. Jesus says it’s impossible for the rich to inherit eternal life, and ***he’s talking about you and me.***

Therefore, what Jesus says to this young man he’s saying to us. It is impossible for us to go to heaven. We are trapped by our wealth.

Jesus said to the young man, “I want you to imagine your life without your money: no mutual funds, no extra cars, no lake house, it’s all gone and ***all you have is me***.” He couldn’t do it. He loved his wealth too much to let it go. Or, perhaps more accurately, his wealth had too strong a grip on him for him to get free.

My question is: do you see in your life where money has its hooks in you? Are you looking at money to make you safe? Are you looking at the wealth you have or daydreaming about the wealth you don’t, and say, “If only I had this much money saved, I wouldn’t have to do anything else. I’d be set for life. I’d be safe. Nothing could touch me then.” How many times have I looked at my retirement account and thought, “If I could only get it up to that number, then I could relax”? Do you do that?   
  
Or do you just worry about money a lot? Are you always anxious about it? I know there are seasons where it’s going to be a concern for everyone. But is it a permanent fixture of your thought life?

Finally, do you find that buying new things, nice things, makes you feel better about yourself? They say one of the signs of an alcoholic is that they drink to change their mood; do you shop to change yours? Do you feel powerful when you’re able to say, “I can go out right now and buy that”?

Money blinds us to how rich we really are (we always overestimate how many people are wealthier than we are), then it lies to us by saying, “If you get me, I’ll make you safe. If you get me, I’ll make you powerful.” But all the money in the world can’t stop cancer, can’t prevent car accidents, can’t guarantee your heart won’t get broken, won’t keep your children from going off the rails. Money can’t even guarantee that you won’t tear your life apart with your own two hands (in fact, it often makes it worse). These are the threats posed by wealth.

What can we do? Second, the promise of true wealth. In verse 26 we read that the disciples witnessed this encounter between Jesus and the young man and one of them said to Jesus, “Then who can be saved?” In other words, the disciples agreed the young man had incredible character. They must have known him personally, because they were saying, “My goodness! If he can’t get into heaven, what hope is there for us?”

But in verse 27 Jesus replies, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” Jesus says, “It’s impossible for a rich man to enter heaven … under his own power. According to his own merit. He can’t do it. ***But God can.*** Nothing is impossible with God.”

Here’s what Jesus wants us to see: *that* ***your goodness*** *will never get you anywhere with God.* The story opens with an odd exchange between Jesus and the young man. “And a ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ **19**And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.’” Luke 18:18-19.

That’s seemed kind of weird to a lot of readers over the years, and it has troubled others because they’ve taken it as if Jesus is saying, “I’m not good.” But that’s not what’s going on. Jesus is good, but he’s telling the young man, “You have no business calling someone ***you think*** is only a normal, human teacher ‘good.’ That title is reserved for God alone.” That’s very important.

Listen, it is not a sin to be wealthy. The Bible never teaches that. It’s no more a sin to be wealthy than it is a virtue to be poor. In fact, I think there’s an excellent chance that if when Jesus had said, “Give all your money away,” the man had replied, “OK, because I trust you, Jesus, I will,” that Jesus would have said, “Now I know that you love me, so keep your wealth,” much like what God did with Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac after God commanded him to do so, God said, “Stop! Now I know you love me, so keep your son.”

Therefore, the young man’s problem could not ultimately be his riches. Rather, ***it was that he thought he could be good all on his own.*** He could not even conceive of a scenario where, if he wanted to, he could not keep all his money and, simultaneously, ***put God in his debt.*** He thought he could be so good that God had to love him.

***It is a great temptation to think that your goodness will put God in your debt.***  I’m a pastor, so I’ve known a lot of people over the years who have gone into the ministry thinking, “Now, God has to love me. I’m giving my life to him, doing His work, preaching his Word. He’s got to bless me now.” I’ve known people who have become missionaries to foreign countries, far from home, making great sacrifices, who’ve thought, “Now God has to approve of me. He’s got to think I’m good now.” I’ve seen people adopt children or move to the inner city or some hard place in the Mississippi Delta to work with the poor and the outcasts of society, and years later they’ve said, “I thought my motives were pure and I did it out of love for God. But now I see I was really doing it because I wasn’t sure God loved me.”

But that’s not how you get God’s love. ***He is far too good for you to get his love on your own.***  You want to know who will inherit eternal life? You want to know who is going to heaven? ***Only those who know it’s impossible.*** Only those who know they had nothing to do with it. Only those who know it’s a miracle that God loves them. Only those who know that the only thing they brought to their salvation was their sin. Only those who know the only thing that brought to their forgiveness was their transgressions. Only those who know the only thing they brought to eternal life was the fact that they needed it because they were headed to eternal death.

What comes to mind when you see a cross? I’m sure a lot of us have either a cross or a framed Bible verse or hymn lyrics hanging somewhere in our homes. My family does, and if you hang those things because you want to remind yourself of ***how good God has been to you***, to remind you to worship and be thankful, that’s wonderful. But I fear that some of us hang those things in houses not because we want to remind ourselves of how good God is, but to try and display to others ***how good we are***. We want people to know “this house believes” and we are the kind of people who have gotten religion right and, you know, everyone else who isn’t a Christian is just plain wrong.

Again, there’s nothing wrong with hanging crosses in your home. But if we put crosses on our cars or get tattoos of them or work to get a big one placed at the intersection of two highways somewhere because we want everyone to know we’re on the right team, the winning team, if it’s just virtue signaling to communicate “You need to know what a good person I am,” that’s the same mistake the rich young ruler made.

What comes to mind when you see a cross? For me for a long time it was, “I could never be good enough for this God.” While that’s true, that’s only half the message. If you only get half the message, it crushes you. It’s true, no one is good enough for God, ***but we don’t have to be good enough for God*** because Jesus Christ was good. He was the only good man. On the cross, he earned God’s love, and though it’s kind of risky to put it this way, ***Jesus put God in his debt.***

But Jesus didn’t cash in. Instead, he bankrupted himself on the cross to give us true, eternal wealth. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:9. In the Great Exchange, Jesus, the one good man, lost everything on the cross, he sacrificed himself, so that bad men and women like you and me could be treated by God as if we were good ourselves. That’s how you inherit eternal life, ***and that’s true wealth.***

And let me tell you how this will start to play out in your life. There are three things you can be certain of if you follow Jesus, if you trust in his good, perfect life, and sacrificial death on the cross: *first, you will inherit eternal life.* You are reconciled to God. You are forgiven. You are now God’s child, and he will be your protector and provider forever.

*Second, you probably won’t have as many fine possessions as you could have had without Christ.*

Knowing what Jesus has done for you, how he became poor so that you could be rich, should fill your heart with joy, gratitude, and peace so that when you have wealth, ***you will never desire to lord your money over others or flaunt it.*** Displaying your wealth for the sake of showing off will become extremely distasteful, and you’ll get a kick out of living on far less than your means allow. You will seek to live differently than the people in your neighborhood and income range and you will look for opportunities to be generous with your money.

And when you find that you are poor (or even when you’re just feeling poor, which is going to be the case with all of us at one time or another), you will fight like crazy against envy and jealousy. You won’t assume people with more money than you are snobs and materialistic. You’ll assume the best of them, especially when they spend their money differently than you would, because God in Jesus Christ now assumes the best of you.

*Third, you will certainly be wealthier, because true wealth is measured in friends.* “And Peter said, ‘See, we have left our homes and followed you.’ **29**And he said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, **30**who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.’” Luke 18:28-30.

No one who follows Jesus ever regrets it, no matter what it costs them financially, because following Jesus makes you into the kind of person who fills your life with people: people whom you love and who, in return, love you. Not all of them, not everyone you love and serve in the name of Jesus will love you back, but many of them will.

How many seen the Christmas movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*? Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, and the whole movie he’s sacrificing for his family and his hometown. He wants to be an architect and travel the world and build great big buildings, but he’s stuck in Bedford Falls because he’s tied to the family business, a savings and loan that barely makes any money but provides good housing for the poor people of his community. For years, George and his family just scrape by.

But at the end of the movie there’s a crisis: George is falsely accused of embezzling money, yet word gets out in Bedford Falls and the whole town rushes to help him, because for all these years George has helped them. They take up a collection (which more than makes up for the missing money) and bring it to George’s house and set it on a table, this big pile of cash. A policeman tears up the warrant for George’s arrest. The bank examiner even chips in some money, and then George’s younger brother Harry comes in. Harry is the brother that got to leave town, go to college, and have the exciting life that George wanted.

But now he hears his brother’s in trouble, so Harry, a decorated fighter pilot in World War II, flies home in a blizzard. He goes in George’s house, grabs a drink from someone in the crowd and says, “A toast, to my big brother George: the richest man in town.”

But that’s the movies. What about real life? A few weeks ago, I was in a meeting with some other pastors. Most of the guys in the room were in a different denomination, so they all knew one another but I didn’t know a lot of them. But the man leading this event was a little older than me, probably in his mid-fifties, he’d been in the ministry for about thirty years, and so he’d both invested in a lot of those guys and had a lot of those men invest in him. At one point he referenced these verses, went around the room, and started pointing at different men and saying, “Brother. Father. Brother. Son. Father. Son. Brother.” The Lord had knit their hearts together so that, they were now family, closer to one another than many of them were to the families into which they were born.

No one who follows Jesus ever regrets it. Because he loves you so much, he gives you far more than you could ever give him. Will you trust him? Will you go to him for eternal life? AMEN.