

“THE RICH YOUNG MAN.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Mark 10:17-31

Introduction.

The past two sermons considered the teaching of Jesus that to receive the kingdom we must be like children. This morning's text is an illustration of that principle. A man who fails to gain a child-like trust in Jesus and a child-like indifference to worldly things misses the kingdom of heaven.

This story is so important the Holy Spirit inspired it to be included in the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew is the one who tells us the man was young and Luke is the one who tells us the man was a ruler.

There's so much detail here that needs our careful attention and reflection so let's be open to learn from the Holy Spirit and apply it to our lives.

Mark 10:17-22

Our text says that this man ran after Jesus to catch up with Him. He does not appear to be a man of guile like the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus. Furthermore, unlike Nicodemus, he's unafraid to come publicly in broad daylight. Finally, He shows reverence to Jesus by kneeling and asking an honest question. He's a man in earnest, he's serious about this, perhaps wrestling with spiritual and eternal things, thinking about life after death.

This young man should be commended for his concern about spiritual things. First of all, most people give too little thought to such matters, and especially young people. Most people are careless and indifferent. Lots of people had come to Jesus concerned over some sickness or perhaps concerned about a child or a friend. No one else had ever asked Jesus this question. He was asking the right question and he asked the right person.

The young man asks the most important question any human being can ever ask. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What must I do to be saved from an eternal death?” Great question, best question ever. The question every one of us should ask and with equal earnestness.

Jesus replies, “If you are going to call me good then accept what I say as from God.”

Jesus starts where all good evangelism should start, with the Bible. Jesus doesn't ask him if he would like to pray a quick prayer and ask Jesus into his heart. Instead, He turns to the *Ten Commandments and to the second tablet*, to commandments five through ten. Very interesting. Why does Jesus skip over the first four vertical, God-oriented commandments and list the six horizontal, external, outward action type commandments?

Hypocrites can make an easy show of keeping the first table of the Law. We can fool people about the condition of our hearts by acts of piety, going to church on Sunday, not working on Sunday, not making idols or using God or Jesus as a curse word.

Jesus goes for the real test of the heart, in the duty-toward-others commandments. The true condition of our hearts is quickly seen in the second table of the Law. You say you love God, well let's see it in how you love others. These are the best test of our obedience.

Jesus lists six commandments and this poor soul thinks he is all good. He's completely blind to the fact that he has not kept all the law from his youth. Because of his great wealth he has not loved God first and foremost. Money is his god and he has made it an idol.

He boasts that he has kept all the Law from his youth but he's dead in his understanding both of the Law and of himself. Paul had been the same way in his youth, thinking himself righteous while blind to the power of the Law to expose our sin. One of the purposes of the Law is to show us our sin and unrighteousness and how impossible it is for us to keep the Law and be holy.

Just as when Jesus told the woman at the well to go get her husband, so he tells this man to go get his one idol to smash it, go get that one thing you love more than your soul. Go get that secret sin and confess it and kill it. Go get that thing, that desire that you can't bring yourself to let go of and lay it at the feet of Jesus.

Jesus' remedy is designed for this man's disease. Jesus tells him to do four things. Unhook your heart from your money and possessions; get a heart of compassion for the poor; make God your treasure in heaven; and follow me.

But this man loves his riches so much he can't bring himself to part with them. He would rather love them and keep them than to care about the poor and make God His treasure and follow Jesus.

Why does this man who had come running after Jesus in such earnest and had asked such a great and important question now slowly walk away sorrowful and distressed? As Christ does with each of us, He tested this man's heart at the one place it most needed to be tested and he was unwilling to give up the one thing that stood between him and Christ, between him and eternal life. If he would only sell everything he would possess everything.

If we follow Christ we must believe that He will bless and provide more than we ever could for ourselves.

Mark 10:22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Are there any sadder words in the NT?

Mark 10:23-27

Mark 10:23-24 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were amazed at his words.

If these words of Jesus don't strike a bit of fear into our hearts then we may be like the young man, we may not be self-aware, we may be thinking these words don't apply to us.

Jesus makes His point so strongly and so clearly that the disciples actually get it this time. “Then who can be saved?” Isn’t part of the implication that we are all rich to one degree or another?

I was reminded of this by a little beggar boy in Jerusalem in the summer of 1977. I was a poor starving college student, doing a summer semester of college in Israel. I had to borrow \$500 dollars to even be able to go. I borrowed a friend’s camera since I couldn’t afford one. I even took three pairs of jeans with me because I heard they were a hot item in Israel and I could sell them for a good price. And of the group of friends I traveled with after Israel, I was the first one to fly home because I ran out of what little money I had. Do you feel my pain? I was poor.

So this little dirty beggar boy comes up to me asking for money and I say I don’t have any money to give to him and he says, but you are a rich American. And he stopped me dead in my tracks. I thought I was poor but I was the one from America, I was the one who flew thousands of miles on an airplane, I was the one with a fancy camera around my neck, I was the one in clean clothes staying in a nice dorm with three meals a day, I was the one going to an expensive Christian college, I was the one with a future other than begging on the streets.

You and I are rich by every standard of measurement in our world.

Jesus paints a picture, a very graphic image of something preposterous. A big ugly hairy Middle Eastern dromedary has a better chance of squeezing through the eye of a sewing needle than a rich man has of getting into heaven.

Jesus chose the biggest animal common to the Middle East and the smallest opening common to daily life. Jesus could have said a snowball has a better chance of surviving in hell than a rich man has of getting into heaven, except snowballs weren’t very common in Israel.

The disciples were astonished, shocked, maybe even flabbergasted, as should we.

Do you want me to soften up the text a bit to make it more palatable for our upper middle class affluent American sensitivities?

How many of you have heard the interpretation that the needle was actually a gate in Jerusalem called the ***Needles Gate*** and that in order for a camel to get through it you had to take any burden off its back and get it down on its knees and pull it crawling through the tiny little gate?

How many of you have heard the interpretation that camel meant a kind of ***hemp like rope*** and the needle was a very large needle for making tents, and that it was very hard to get this thick rope through that kind of needles eye, possible, but very difficult? Even Calvin suggested Jesus was referring not to an animal but to a ship’s rope.

I heard a preacher say this very thing two years ago on a Sunday I wasn’t preaching and we attended another church in Whatcom County. Why do we try so hard to make this saying more palatable, less offensive? Why do we try so hard to find ways of getting us and our stuff up the hard and narrow path that leads to life?

Both of these explanations are false interpretations trying to show how a camel can go through the eye of a needle which completely misses the entire point of the text which is its impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

Can we be clear about something here? It's absolutely impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. It's humanly and physically impossible.

Jesus isn't saying it's very difficult, Jesus is saying it's impossible. It cannot be done. A person cannot get into heaven depending on and trusting in his money. Not only will it not help him, it will actually hinder him.

This should make every one of us wealth sinners as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs; or as nervous as a June bug in a henhouse.

Yes, we all know that the Bible doesn't condemn money in and of itself, but the Bible does give so many warnings that it should make all of us nervous. I would guess most of us don't think we have a money and possessions problem, but then neither did the young man.

All of us are rich by the world's standards. Just look at our houses and our cars and our clothes and our vacations and bank accounts and 401Ks and Roth IRAs and SS and Medicare. We are rich. And this net really catches everyone including the poor, because most poor covet riches as well, wishing they had riches to trust in.

“Who then can be saved?” Now that's the right question and Jesus gives it a clear answer.

Jesus says that what He just said about the rich man applies to everyone. No one can save himself. Unless God does it, it can't be done. And God is the God of the impossible. Only God can save a person and deliver him from his idolatry and covetousness and hardheartedness.

Only God can change a hard heart into a heart that has compassion for the poor and treasures God in heaven more than anything on earth and desires to follow Jesus.

Christ means to encourage us by these words, that we will trust and rest only in His saving grace.

God can even save a rich man and give him the grace to no longer trust in his riches, but trust in Christ and follow Christ and use his wealth for the glory of God rather than for himself. Oh how great are the riches of grace. Oh how powerful is His grace to save even the most lost soul.

“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?” (Jesus).

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (Jim Elliott).

Applications and Conclusion.

Two worlds collide in our text. The world of those sincerely seeking eternal life as a reward for their efforts at righteousness. And the world of the One who has come to offer eternal life as a gift of grace for all who receive it and trust and follow Him rather than anything else.

If you wish to have eternal life you must have personal dealings with Jesus concerning the condition of our own souls. You must come to Him in earnest and all seriousness and you must ask Him and then you must do whatever He says and follow Him.

Be warned, you can very much desire to be saved and yet not be saved.

Jesus tells us to love people not money. There is grave spiritual danger in loving money. Money leads to all kinds of evil presents us with all kinds of soul destroying temptations. Money makes us proud and boastful, money makes us independent of God and over confident. Money fills our minds with all kinds of envious and covetous thoughts. Money lays heavy burdens on us. Money is a most perilous possession (J.C. Ryle, *Matthew*, p. 242).

On that great and final day of judgment these words will be proved true beyond our wildest imaginations, when countless millions of hearts are revealed to have shipwrecked their souls on the rocks of money, while ignoring the lighthouse of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who bids us to surrender all as we follow Him.

Don't envy the rich, pray for them, pray for the salvation of their soul. Rich people need special grace and much prayer.

Pray for self-knowledge, pray for self-awareness. Pray for God to expose our hearts so that nothing keeps us from Him.

Revelation 3:17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Prayer: Father, have mercy on us and help us, we have so many adult sins. Lead us to a child-like faith, give us more of a humble reliance on you; wean us from this world and make us more indifferent to worldly treasures; free us from worry and anxiety; increase in us a love for you that shows itself in compassion for the poor and needy, that shows itself in turning from anger and lust and greed and that shows itself in treasuring you more than anything. With us this is impossible but by your power and grace it is possible. Hear and answer for the sake of Jesus and in His name. Amen.