



Matthew 19:18–24

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 honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor 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 someone who is 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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Reflection

Jesus has just taught us, while praying for and blessing little children, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. In sharp contrast, in Matthew’s next story, a rich young ruler comes to Jesus and

asks him a question. If little children held one of the lowliest positions in ancient society then this man held one of the most esteemed. He was young, in his 20's or 30's; he was rich, he had great wealth; and he was a ruler, holding an important lay position in the synagogue. All this was a testament to his high moral standards for which he'd very obviously been blessed by God (or so his culture thought). This man comes to Jesus with a question, in verse 16 of yesterday's passage:

16 And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

In Mark's account we read of Jesus' reaction to him.

21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him,

This man isn't testing Jesus. His heart is in the right place and he's genuinely seeking eternal life. You can almost feel the crowd and Jesus' disciples listening in with eager anticipation. What a wonderful recruit this man would make! Such a moral, upstanding member of Jewish society, so obviously blessed by God with such great wealth at such a young age. He might even become one of Jesus' disciples!

Because Jesus loved him, he answered in this way:

“Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”

You see Jesus picked up the note of uncertainty in this rich young ruler's question. Despite his wealth, despite his position of authority in the synagogue and despite his outstanding religious observance the man sensed that something was lacking.

‘What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?’

Jesus, in answering his question with a question, essentially says, ‘What has ‘good’ got to do with it? No-one is good except God alone. Let me demonstrate. Let's take the Ten Commandments as an example. If you want to enter eternal life, well, it's as simple as keeping the commandments.’

“Which ones?” The rich young ruler replies quickly. Jesus answers him by quoting five of the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ summary commandment of ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ which when added to ‘love the Lord your God’ is for Jesus a summary of not just the Ten Commandments but of the whole Old Testament Law.

Very earnestly the young man replies, “All these I have kept,”

Now in replying in this fashion we might think this young man vain or naive but given his status in society and his earnest approach to Jesus he may well have believed that he had kept the whole Law. Interestingly, the apostle Paul says of himself before he was converted to Christianity that,

‘as to righteousness under the law,
[he was] blameless’ (Phil 3:6)

According to Judaism this man may well have been blameless and yet the young man senses that this is not the case. Because after saying,

“All these I have kept,”... he continues on... “What do I still lack?”

Jesus, who sees right into our hearts, gets right to the heart of what he is lacking. In listing them, Jesus had left out a few key commandments. The first two commandments, out of which all the others and the entire Law flow, are: to have no gods before God and to not worship idols. Although this young man is blind to it, his

wealth has become his identity, his power, purpose and meaning in life. In a very real sense it has become his god, and an idol that he is worshipping in place of God. So Jesus lovingly calls him on it,

“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.”

Reality rushes in on this rich young ruler. He can see clearly now. He knows what issues are at stake. He can see that his many possessions have captivated his heart, and he cannot exchange this god for Jesus. We've seen this before in Matthew 6 when Jesus said very clearly that,

24 “No one can serve two masters.

Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

This man makes his choice, as we all do, and he walks away sad.

Jesus is the king of the pithy saying isn't he? As the crowds part in astonishment, and this man walks away dejected, Jesus says philosophically and truthfully,

“Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is 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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

And we're left with the humorous and highly memorable picture of a 200 kilo beast of burden, hardly known for its grace, trying to squeeze itself through the eye of a sewing needle. Try and picture that for a moment in your mind's eye! Now this may have been a common saying that denotes the impossible; it could have been a play on words with 'camel' and 'charity' sounding very similar in the Aramaic language; or it could simply have been a memorable and actually quite funny punchline to end a very serious matter. But either way Jesus, as usual, is abundantly clear. Great wealth presents almost an impossible barrier to entry into the kingdom of heaven. And this pronouncement would have left both the vast crowds and Jesus' disciples utterly astonished. We'll explore this to-

morrow.

Think & Pray

The bible says that the human heart is deceitful above all things (Jer 17:9) and the great theologian John Calvin has said that our nature is a perpetual factory of idols. And so when we read this passage very quickly we find ourselves back-peddling, especially in our Western contexts, and saying ‘this couldn’t possibly refer to me and the way I think about my money.’ One commentator says quite sharply in response to this line of thinking:

‘That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he would issue that command.’

This rich young ruler wasn't greedy, he likely would have given away much of his income to the poor. His problem is that he loved his wealth more than he loved his Saviour. So please take some time now to be honest with yourself and consider very seriously whether you are worshipping and serving your career or your lifestyle or your material wealth ahead of Jesus. The ultimate test here is that if he were to ask you, would you give it all away for him?

How much time to do you spend thinking (or worrying) about your investments, your financial plan or your financial future in comparison to the time you spend praying and thinking about the kingdom of God? Where does your security really lie? In your

bank balance or in him? Where does your identity really lie? In the title on your business card or in him? Where is your joy? In your possessions? Or in him? What do you need to leave behind so that you can come and follow Jesus with your whole heart? Which master will you choose to serve?

Questions like these, if considered honestly, must drive us to prayer as we all have wayward hearts. So please close now by praying however you are led.