

A Shattered Illusion,
The Rich, Young, Ruler
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A Shattered Illusion, The Rich, Young Ruler

We are looking today at the story of the rich, young ruler. Looking at the story, we might look at greed versus generosity. Or we might be reminded of other biblical characters such as Achan who hoarded for himself forbidden treasure (Joshua 7). Or like Gehazi, the servant of the Prophet Elijah, who lied to get a gift for himself (I Kings 5). Or like Ananias and Sapphira who lied about money that they claimed to give away (Acts 5:1-11). Certainly, there is a theme of greed in this passage, but I believe the Holy Spirit has something more to teach us today as we dive into this text. Let's read the passage:

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’ 20 “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” 21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” 22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. 23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is[e] 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 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” Mark 10:17-27

A Curious Encounter

Let's set the scene. Jesus is walking around town; it's daytime. There are a lot of people around, including his disciples, and a young man starts running after him, trying to catch up to him because he really wants to talk to him. Who is this young man? Well, if we put the three gospel accounts together, we find that he is rich, he is young, and he's a ruler of some kind. And as we just read, we can see that this guy thinks he's a pretty big deal.

He's rich and successful—the kind of person who seems to have it all together. You ever meet those people? It sometimes seems they can do no wrong. It seems this guy has the most perfect resume. I mean, you'd want him as an employee. To the ancient world, this man was the picture of God's favor. Imagine the disciples nudging each other, saying, "Hey, look at that guy. He's rich. He's successful. He's got the right image and vibe. Maybe he can be the 13th disciple. We could really use him! Just imagine the good he can do with his money and influence."

What's very telling about this young man is that he's seen running to Jesus. People like this—they don't run. It is beneath them. He could easily have sent a servant to get Jesus. But he's so determined to have an encounter with Jesus that he risks his own reputation and starts running to him. Not even Nicodemus did that. Nicodemus had to meet with Jesus in secret at night. The young man catches up to Jesus and bows down, and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

You might expect that Jesus would say something like, "Believe in me and you shall be saved." But Jesus has a really off the wall response. He says, "Why do you call me Good? No one is good except God alone." I can just see the guy, *Wait, what? Where did this come from? Why would Jesus say something like this?* Jesus is getting this young man to think about, "What is goodness?"

In Matthew's account of the same story, the ruler calls himself good. He says it by saying, "What *good* thing must I do to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16)?" In doing so he equates himself with Jesus, using the same terminology. But he doesn't know what goodness is, he has no clue. Jesus though, directly addresses his question and brings up the law. He says, "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" Jesus is listing the social commandments—the ones about human relationships. But he adds this extra one "do not defraud." There are several interpretations among commentators over what Jesus means by "do not defraud."

What is Good?

We know that the young man was certainly in a position to defraud people because he was very rich. But I think Jesus is trying to get more personal with this young man. Jesus gets to the heart of who he is with a commandment directed straight at him. Initially though, the command flies over his head. He says, "I have kept all of this since my youth." I can just see him checking them off one by one. Bam, bam, bam. *Oh, yeah! I'm on a roll here.* But Matthew adds the man's follow up question, "What do I still lack (Matt. 19:20)?" He knows he's not perfect, that he's missing something.

But this also gives us a further glimpse into how the man defines goodness. He defines it as if it's a step-by-step process and he just needs one more piece. I was talking to a friend of mine who has a goal of visiting all 50 states. He told me he was taking a trip and would soon check the last two states off his list. This is how the rich, young, ruler approaches eternal life! *One more step and I'm there.*

His definition of goodness resembles the popular definition today. Choose a random person at, say, a grocery store and ask them if they are good. They might say something like, "Well, I'm not perfect, but who is? I try to be nice person. I round up to the next dollar at Harris Teeter, and I give to charities. I try to treat people the way I want to be treated. I think I'm doing pretty good." A popular criticism of Christianity is often, "Why would a loving God send *good* people to hell?" There's a big problem in the use of the word good. We cannot come up with a unit of measure to contain the goodness of God.

If you know my wife, you know she is a "kitchen geek." She's like the James Bond of the kitchen with all her gadgets. But she's got one particularly important tool—a small digital scale. I can use it to weigh a cup of flour or a tiny pinch of salt. It's very accurate. But let's say I run a semi-truck over this scale. The scale will be crushed, incapable of distinguishing between flour and salt. That's what happens when we measure our goodness against the goodness of God. It cannot be done.

Jesus understands the man's naivete. The young man is in way over his head. And Jesus could have challenged him and said, "Okay, you think you've kept the law? Let's go through it, shall we?" And Jesus could have shown him every single time he had broken the law. We might pity him. In the South, we might say "Oh, bless your heart."

For God so Loved the World

But Jesus doesn't do that. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and *loved* him—looked and *loved!* Jesus saw into the very depths of the young man's soul. Man, that just hits me every time I read that. Mark uses a word for love not used anywhere else

in his gospel. The same word is used in, “God so *loved* the world.” Or “we love because he first *loved* us.” Jesus *saw into him* with genuine affection and compassion. Jesus cared about his eternal destiny. It's as if Jesus wanted to wrap his arms around him and say, *I know you're afraid of what you might lose, but I have an infinite amount that you will gain, if you'll just come and follow me.* Oh, what a loving God of mercy we have. Even toward those he knows will turn him away.

Jesus Two-Fold Challenge

1. *Jesus challenges the young man's perception of goodness.*

Jesus issues him a challenge, “One thing you still lack. Go and sell all your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven. Then come follow me.” Can't you just picture the look on this guy's face? Mark tells us the man's face fell. I can just see the light going out of his eyes, his jaw dropping. This was a shocking answer! I can see him thinking, *I just can't do this.* And he walks away.

Why does Jesus issue such an outrageous challenge? Has God really required that we empty our bank accounts and give it all to the poor before we can follow Him? Riches are not inherently evil, and poverty is not inherently virtuous. That's not what Jesus is saying. God does not require us to give away our monetary possessions. There are many examples of faithful followers of God throughout scripture and throughout history. But, before you breathe a sigh of relief, hear what Robert Gundry has to say in his commentary, “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.” Wow! If that doesn't wake us up.

In challenging the young man to give away all that he has, Jesus reveals to him that, in fact, he has not kept the law. He shows the young man that he does not love his neighbors enough to bless them with his riches. So now, he has broken the second commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

2. *Jesus reveals the young man's lack of goodness.*

Jesus shows the man that he does not love God enough to forsake everything and follow him. Now he has broken the first commandment “You shall love the LORD, your God with all your heart, your soul, your strength, your mind.” He has broken the whole law. And now he is left with nothing except for his greed and covetousness, which is his master.

Shattered Illusion

The illusion is shattered. His true state is revealed. He walks away. What's interesting is not so much his rejection of Jesus, but that he walks away sad. Why sad and not

angry? He doesn't dispute what Jesus says. He doesn't even walk away apathetic. But he walks away sad. Because while he found Jesus attractive and appealing, he found the cost to be too great." It's like he was saying, *Jesus has some good stuff. I wouldn't mind having that, but I love my stuff too much. Jesus, I'm going to have to turn you down and hold onto my stuff.* But as he leaves, it stings, and he is sad.

The young man came with courage, sincerity, and excitement. He came with moral excellence. He even came with a posture of worship, and respect. But he came with neither true desire, nor love. It is possible to desire the benefits of Jesus without desiring Jesus himself. We can enjoy being in Christian community. We can love singing worship songs and love devouring good, sound, theology. But it's all for nothing if Jesus is not our first love. We can be more in love with the idea of God than God Himself.

The disciples watching all this go down, are dumbfounded. And Jesus uses this opportunity to teach them. He says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." They're amazed! But Jesus reiterates and adds, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." Now, this is an illustration that has been butchered many times, myself included. I remember reading this as a little kid and thinking it was talking about a camel putting his eye through a needle. Ouch! But that's not the correct interpretation. A popular interpretation references a gate on a wall in Jerusalem. The gate was so small that if you could just get the camel to kind of squat, and push, push, push, then you could get them through the other side, like Winnie the Pooh in the Honey Tree.

But these explanations take away from what Jesus is saying here. He's not saying, "It's really difficult but you've got to try, and try, and then it's possible." He's saying it is impossible! In what universe can a camel just walk through the eye of a needle? It's ludicrous. Completely impossible. Jesus is saying, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)." He's saying, "No one is righteous, No, not even one (Romans 3:10)." The Prophet Isaiah said, "All of our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6), and the Hebrew word literally translates to menstrual rags. That's a really repulsive image, but how much more repulsed should we be by our own sin and our own feeble attempts at righteousness without the power of the Holy Spirit? We can put all our good deeds on the line, and God's says, "I don't want that. That is filthy to me."

The Disciples Response

The disciples then ask a very good question, "Who then can be saved?" If not this guy, Then, who? To answer that, we need to backtrack a little bit. Each of the three Gospel accounts of this story are preceded by the story of Jesus and the little children. Recall that the children are coming up to Jesus to be blessed by Him. The disciples are trying

to rebuke them and try to shoo the children away. But Jesus becomes indignant and says, “Let the little children come to me.” Now, why would Jesus become indignant? Hear what he has to say, “The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, will never enter it.” Jesus is indignant because this is a life and death situation. Eternity is at stake! You may not enter the kingdom unless you receive it like a child. How do you do that? Kids are innocent, they're pure; honest. But it's not because of what a child has, but rather because of what he does not have.

My daughter just turned ten this past month—I may or may not have shed a man tear over that—but I remember how little she was, I probably drove five miles an hour on the way home from the hospital because I was afraid of breaking her precious little bones. And I remember holding her in my arms. She was just so little; so helpless. She was wrapped in those swaddle blankets, and I held her close and dared not let go. She was dependent, not on anything that she could claim as her own, but by being in the arms of a loving guardian.

That's how we are to be. We need to drop the pretenses we have created. Our good stuff is not good enough. We need to be like a little child and come to him and say, “I confess that I have nothing. All these things. They're filthy. All I can bring you is the nothingness that I am. And all I can do is bow before you and submit myself to you, depend on you, and love you.” This is the idea that Jesus is getting at when he tells us in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).”

That's the answer to who can be saved—the poor in spirit. But Jesus goes on to say, “With man, this is impossible.” With riches, dreams, aspirations, good deeds—this is impossible. But now, with God—*with God*—“all things are possible.” From the most squeaky clean to the most repulsive sinner—both can be saved and serve.

Jesus Gave it All

Later in this same chapter we see Jesus predicting his death for the third and final time. Jesus has left behind his throne in heaven. He has veiled his glory and splendor in human flesh. He has given his service to those around, and now he's about to give up his very life. When God saw that Adam and Eve were clothed in garments of leaves that could not last, he put to death an innocent animal for a lasting physical covering. In the same way, God saw that we could not save ourselves, so He sent his only Son to become the Lamb slain for our transgressions to be our permanent covering, and to absorb his righteous wrath. We are spared what we deserve and receive treasure in heaven that we do not deserve.

You see, unlike the rich, young ruler, Jesus gave everything so that we would have infinitely more than what the young man had. Jesus emptied himself so that we might be filled. He desired us so that we might desire him. He loved us so that we might love him. I love how David Platt puts it, “Jesus was not calling the rich man away from treasure, but to treasure. The question for us is whether we will live for short term pleasures we cannot keep or long-term treasures we cannot lose.”

In the Book of Philippians, Paul says he is the ultimate Hebrew, the ultimate Pharisee. He was zealous. He was faultless. As he describes himself, he basically says, “If you thought you were all that, I was better.” As Paul lays out his resume, we see that in many ways he is similar to that rich, young ruler. But Paul’s response after meeting Jesus could not be more different. In Philippians three we read, “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:7-10). Oh, that we would know Christ, that our heart's desire would be Christ alone.

Three Truths

1. *Despite our greatest efforts, we will fall short.* You might understand that salvation is through faith alone and not by works, but how often do we find ourselves relying on our own strength rather than the power of the Holy Spirit?
2. *If Jesus is not your heart's desire, then you are walking away,* just like that rich, young, ruler. Of course, God wants us to enjoy the blessings He's given us. But the error is that we allow these things to become Lord of our life. Jesus becomes one of many things rather than the only thing. Jesus told us, “no man can serve two masters. Either you'll love one and hate the other or You'll be devoted to one and despise the other.
3. *Come to Jesus with nothing; He will give you everything.* We cannot fathom the riches that Jesus has in store for us. Remember Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

Let me close with a story of Joni Erikson Tada. I got to see her speak at a conference two years ago. She was born in a family of athletes, a believing family. She loved to play sports, go horseback riding, swimming, and had a promising future ahead of her.

But one fateful day, she dove into what she thought was deep water. It was not and she broke her neck in the dive. The injury left her paralyzed from the neck down.

As you can imagine, during her rehabilitation she suffered through anger and depression. She cried out to God to be healed. She even tried so-called faith healers, all to no avail. Finally, she remembered First Thessalonians 5:18, “In all things, give thanks.” She begrudgingly began to look for things to be thankful for in her situation. At first the list was very sporadic, but then it started to grow, and her perspective began to change. And one day, she realized that her paralysis was not the worst thing she had ever been through! She realized that once she was completely dead in her transgressions but brought to life by a loving Savior. She learned, from that point on, to depend on God. I’ll never forget what she said, “Even though God took away my arms and my legs, He gave me Himself.”

Oh, Lord, God, teach us to desire you more than all these other things. May we not be like the rich, young ruler who came with everything, but left with nothing. Show us how to come to you with the complete dependency of a child. Humble our hearts to reveal to us that we are nothing, but you are everything. Teach us to consider everything else as loss for the sake of knowing you. Amen.

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