

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #28 To Have and to Hold? Wealth or God?

Scripture Luke 18:18-30

In the message last week we thought about the contrasts in the spiritual understanding of the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus. Because of their spiritual blindness, the Pharisees did not recognize that Jesus was the Messiah nor did they understand that God was doing His supernatural kingdom work through Jesus by means of many kinds of miracles. The disciples, on the other hand, recognized that Jesus was the Messiah. Their understanding was limited and incomplete, but they had experienced the power and authority of the kingdom, they were open to the truth about the kingdom that Jesus was revealing, and they were loyal to Jesus.

In the passage today we have another comparison, this time between a Jewish leader and the disciples. In studying these comparisons, I want us to recognize the similarities between the attitudes of people of 2000 years ago and those of many modern day religious people. The skepticism and presumptions of people then, which prevented them from accepting Jesus as Messiah, are similar to the doubts and presuppositions of many people in the Christianized western world, which prevent them from accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord of the world.

Too many so-called Christians do not recognize that God is at work here on planet earth. They do not know that the kingdom is established in the hearts and lives of the true followers of Jesus through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the understanding of believers today is often as limited as the disciples who were with Jesus. There is a lot of spiritual immaturity, so much so that some believers are not very good witnesses and examples of their faith. However, God's grace and mercy is evident in the lives of those who are faithful. The Apostle Paul described the lives of believers as letters which can be known and read by everybody. He wrote that we are "a letter from Christ ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (*II Corinthians 3:2-3*). Scripture encourages us to make the quality of our lives to be seen in bold print with a large font!

In the passage today we will read about a young man who, from the standpoint of worldly endeavors, was a success, and from the practice of the Jewish religion, was without fault. From the perspective of everyone in his culture, he had “it all together.” However, Jesus quickly identified the spiritual deficiency in his life.

Read Luke 18:18-30

This episode is also included in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (*cf. Matthew 19:16-29 and Mark 10:17-30*), which suggests that all three gospel writers considered it an important teaching. Luke mentions that the man was a ruler and rich; Matthew and Mark inform us that he was young. We don't know what kind of position he had. The term “ruler” is a very general one which simply describes an official with some kind of influence.

From the Gospel of Mark we learn that this young rich ruler ran to Jesus and fell on his knees before Him (*Mark 10:17*). He was not like the Pharisees who did not show such respect to Jesus. The ruler addressed Jesus as “good teacher,” which was an unusual way to address a Jewish teacher. It was the young ruler's way of acknowledging the reputation of Jesus as a popular teacher.

Jesus immediately challenged the use of the adjective “good,” pointing out that only God alone was “good” in an absolute sense. This was Jesus' way to get the man to consider a standard of goodness which was higher than that of humanity. Jesus' response was the beginning of a process to help the man understand that righteousness obtained by human effort would not get him into the “good God's” kingdom of heaven (*See Matthew 5:20*).

The young man was very eager and sincere in wanting to know what he had do to inherit eternal life. His question, and the answer which Jesus gave, were from the perspective of the Old Testament law. The law required that people do things which God had commanded. Theoretically, a person who lived his/her entire life keeping the law perfectly, without any failure or deviation, would inherit eternal life. However, in reality, the law only proved that no person could keep the law consistency and perfectly, and whoever failed in even one point of the law stood condemned before God (*see James 2:10*). It can be no other way than this because God is so holy that only those with total sinless perfection can abide in His presence.

The rich young ruler did not realize that he was guilty before God, so Jesus first had to establish the fact of his guilt before He could present to the man the answer to the question. The ruler is typical of people who put their trust in their own goodness. Such people cannot recognize their guilt nor are they able to understand the goodness of God.

Because the ruler's frame of reference was the Old Testament law, Jesus responded to his question by calling attention to the Ten Commandments, specifically the prohibitions against adultery, murder, stealing, false testimony, and the requirement to honor father and mother. These were the fifth through the ninth commandments.

I'm sure you know that the Ten Commandments are divided into two parts. Numbers one through four are concerned with mankind's relationship with God — "You shall have no other gods before me," "you shall not make or worship any idol," "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God," and "you shall keep the LORD's day holy" (*Exodus 20:3-8*). Jesus did not call attention to these first four commandments. He concentrated on the other commandments which deal with how people relate to others.

The man responded, with sincerity, that he had kept the commandments mentioned by Jesus from his boyhood. He probably was referring to his bar mitzvah, which is the ceremony denoting a boy's coming of age, when he becomes morally responsible for his actions. Before the bar mitzvah, which usually occurs in the 13th year, Jewish boys are considered exempt from Jewish law.

It was the opinion of this young ruler that he had kept the requirements of the law. He assumed, therefore, that he could stand before God on his own merit. This was what all the Pharisees believed. They assumed that they would be the first to enter heaven because of their zeal for the law. They were confident in their self-righteous efforts. This young ruler also kept the law according to the standards of the Jews, and yet, he still wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. It seems that keeping the law did not give him any assurance of his salvation, no peace of mind about his relationship with God.

The lack of assurance of this man is typical of individuals who seek salvation through their own efforts. Self-efforts, no matter how sincere and zealous, cannot provide a basis of confidence that they have gained God's favor and acceptance. We have to give this man credit for his honesty. He had approached Jesus with his personal concern. He had come to learn whether there was perhaps something special, some additional activity, that would give him assurance of eternal life.

Jesus did not get into an immediate discussion of the truth of the man's claim that he had faithfully kept the law. Jesus knew that the man was not as perfect as he thought, but instead of a protracted conversation about the law, Jesus "cut to the chase." He recognized that there was one huge barrier which stood between this man and eternal life. This rich young ruler was too attached to his earthly possessions. This became evident when Jesus brought up the tenth commandment, which had not been previously mentioned in the conversation.

The tenth commandment concerns covetousness. Covetousness is the desire for possessions. Close synonyms are "greed" and "materialism." A covetous person never has enough. Jesus knew that this man had to deal with his problem of covetousness before he would be acceptable to God. This man's desire for things had to be removed from his life. How would this happen? Notice what Jesus said in verse 22, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor." Instead of being a person who was focused on what he was going to "get," Jesus wanted him to focus on how to "give."

The man had been building up his treasure on earth, not in heaven. Without realizing it, the man had been breaking several of the commandments. Earthly possessions were his god. His earthly possessions were his idol. His accumulation of possessions revealed how selfish and self-indulgent he was. Instead of keeping the law, he stood condemned before God.

Jesus recommended a drastic course of action. If the man was to become qualified for heaven, if his attitude and behavior was to change, he had to divest himself of his possessions. In place of covetousness, there had to be generosity. Then he would accumulate treasure in heaven.

Let me digress for a moment. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus mentioned another kind of drastic action, what can be called "spiritual surgery." He said, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is

better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (*Mark 9:43-47*).

Jesus was, of course, using hyperbole, the form of speech which uses exaggeration to illustrate a point. The point was very serious — anything which prevents a person from gaining eternal life must be removed. Jesus made the same point when He said, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (*Matthew 16:26*).

Jesus was not asking this man to do something He expected everyone to do. All of us have our particular issues that Jesus will deal with, and He will do this on an individual by individual basis. In the case of this rich young ruler, it was necessary for him to prove the sincerity and wholeheartedness of his desire for eternal life by giving up all the earthly possessions he held dear. Love for God had to take over first place in his life.

There was one more crucial step the man must also take. After He gave away all his possessions, Jesus expected him to “Come and be one of His followers.” This was a general invitation to become Jesus’ disciple. Jesus had extended this invitation to numerous other people. Repentance, turning away from sin, change of lifestyle, all are required before a person can be a genuine follower of Jesus Messiah. After he became a genuine follower of Jesus, the ruler could be assured of eternal life. That was Jesus’ ultimate answer to the man’s question. “What must I do?” “Be My disciple.”

After hearing Jesus’ words, the man went away “very sad.” His response to Jesus’ words was an indication of the strong grip that worldly riches had on his life. The choice he had to make was painful, and, as Jesus commented in verse 24, it is very “hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The choice facing this man can be simply stated: Which would have first place in his life? Love for earthly possessions or love for God? As Jesus said in chapter 16, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (*Luke 16:13*).

“Indeed,” said Jesus, 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.” Again, this is an example of hyperbole, pointing to the impossibility of humans, on their own, to reform their attitudes and behaviors. Individuals who are gripped and dominated by their possessions, cannot, in their own strength, overcome the power of evil. They cannot be servants of both God and money no matter how hard they try.

What we all need is a strong dose of truth about the critical issues of life, an awareness of guilt our before God, and a willingness for God the Holy Spirit to bring about supernatural change in our lives.

The disciples were surprised by Jesus’ words. If the rich cannot be saved and experience ultimate divine blessing, “who then can be saved?” they wanted to know. It was the general view among the Jews that wealth was a sign of God’s special favor, and that poverty was a sign of God’s displeasure with sinful behavior. This was the attitude of the Pharisees, who had previously scoffed at Jesus’ teaching about wealth. Even the disciples seemed to be holding on to this attitude — that wealth was an indication of God’s blessing in this life, and a guarantee about the future — so if it was virtually impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, “then who could be saved?”

Jesus reply to His disciples is a truth which must be accepted by faith. “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” God’s work is supernatural. He can completely turn around the hearts and priorities of people. Because people cannot earn their salvation through their own efforts, God, in His love and grace and power provides it to them. This is the message of the gospel. We must remember the Apostle Paul’s description of the gospel: “It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (*Romans 1:16*). God’s power can accomplish what humans cannot. The only requirement for us is faith and repentance, which is the willingness to change.

The most important application of this passage for us is in the last three verses. Peter, speaking for the other disciples and, hopefully, for us, reminds Jesus that they “had left all of their possessions behind and were following Jesus,” thus doing what the rich young ruler was unwilling to do. And what, he wanted to know, would be the benefit in forsaking everything and being a follower of Jesus?

Jesus reassured Peter and the Twelve that God was blessing and would continue to bless their decision to follow Him. They would receive blessings in this life and they were laying up treasures in heaven. Every disciple throughout history who has been willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God has received rich blessings in this life and can look forward to eternal life in the age to come.

When we look at the history of the Church, we quickly recognize that the rich blessings of this age are not primarily material. Rather they are spiritual, with relationship with God, peace of heart and mind, a cause and a purpose worth living for and even dying for if necessary. Yes, there is personal loss when, in obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, believers leave home and separate themselves from family members, but the assurance of Scripture is that they will not fail to receive many times over spiritual blessings in this life, and they will be storing up for themselves treasures in heaven.

Whoever desires to inherit eternal life must be inwardly free from the power of covetousness, as well as all the other entanglements which keep us from kingdom priorities. Jesus does not require everyone to sell his/her belongings or separate from family members, but He does call all His followers to surrender unconditionally to His Lordship.

I want to conclude with these words written by Paul to Timothy:

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (*1 Timothy 6:17-19*).