

Luke 18:18-30 — The Rich Young Ruler

(Matthew 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31)

18 Then a **certain** ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, **what must I do** to inherit eternal life?”

19 **“Why do you call me good?”** Jesus replied. “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 **“All these I have kept from my youth,”** he said.

22 On hearing this, Jesus told him, “You still lack one thing: **Sell everything**¹ you own and **give to the poor**², and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, **follow me**³.”

23 But when the ruler heard this, he became **very sad, because he was extremely wealthy**.

24 Seeing the man’s sadness, Jesus said, “How **hard** it is for **the rich** to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is **easier for a camel** to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be **saved?**”

27 But Jesus said, **“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”**

28 “Look,” said Peter, **“we have left all** we had to follow you.”

29 “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has **left** home or **wife** or brothers or parents or **children** for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will fail to receive **many times more** in **this age** – and in the age to come, eternal life.”

Footnotes

20 Exodus 20:12-16; Deuteronomy 5:16-20

24 Literally “Seeing that he had become sorrowful.” SBL, NE, and WH “Seeing him”

28 Literally “left our own.” BYZ and TR “left all.”

This story continues the theme of the previous two (the tax collector and blessing the children) in laying out heart-conditions required for entering the Kingdom. W. Robertson Nicoll identifies the three as “self-abasement, childlikeness, and single-mindedness.”

v.18

“A certain ruler” — This might imply that Luke knew the ruler’s identity but chose not to reveal it. A little digging turns up a lot of speculation about his identity, from Joseph of Arimathea to Lazarus of Bethany (whom Jesus raised from the dead). There simply is no evidence in the Text for any specific identification.

“Good teacher” — Addressing Jesus like this was improper, almost impertinent, and bordered on patronizing. We’ll give this man the benefit of the doubt because he seems to be asking in earnest.

“What must I do?” — If we grant the ruler was a man of noble heart, phrasing the question this way indicates a Pharisee mindset. He was a rule-follower. Yet, despite his assiduous rule-keeping, he still sensed something was missing and yearned for it. Mark’s account (10:17) alludes to the man’s sincerity by pointing out that he came running to Jesus and knelt before him.

“Eternal life” — This aspect of his question rules out any possibility the man was a Sadducee, because that group did not believe in the hereafter.

v.19

“Why call me good? Only God is good.” — A multi-layered reply, considering it came from the one who, in fact, was God in the flesh. Is Jesus giving him an opportunity to confess the truth? “Am I merely a rabbi or am I *maschiach*? It seems to be a version of the question Jesus had put to the Twelve: “Who do you say I am?” (9:18-20) Peter gave the right answer: ““You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)

v.20

Jesus quotes from the “horizontal” commandments of the Decalogue, not mentioning either #1 (no other gods) or #2 (no idols), which is where the man’s problem actually lay: His love of his wealth was greater than his love for God and constituted an idol in his life. We recall Jesus’ earlier teaching: “You cannot serve both God and money.” (16:13)

v.21

You can imagine several different emotions in the man’s response to Jesus’ quoting the Decalogue, which he knew only too well. He could have been simultaneously earnest, surprised, impatient, and indignant. The Pulpit Commentary observes: “He listens to the Master with something like impatient surprise. There is a ring of concealed indignation in his [response]. Kept these! How little the poor questioner knew the secrets of his own heart!”

That he insisted he had kept the commandments from an early age reveals the mindset of a good Pharisee.

The Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary notes this story gives us a glimpse into the ruler’s heart: “Doubtless he was perfectly sincere; but something within whispered to him that his keeping of the commandments was too easy a way of getting to heaven. He felt something beyond this to be necessary; after keeping all the commandments he was at a loss to know what that could be; and he came to Jesus just upon that point.” Mark’s account (10:21) observes that Jesus felt love for him. JFB continues: “His sincerity, frankness, and nearness to the kingdom of God, in themselves most winning qualities, won our Lord’s regard even though he turned his back upon him – a lesson to those who can see nothing lovable save in the regenerate.”

F.D. Huntington presses in on the issue of the man’s idolatry: “Till that darling sin is brought under the practical law of Christ, you are shut out from Christ’s kingdom. I have no right to love anything so well that I cannot give it up for God. God knows where the trial must be applied. And we are to know that wherever it is applied, there is the one thing lacking, unless we can say ‘Thy will be done,’ and bear it.”

vv.22-23

“Sell everything and give it to the poor” — We should not see this as a requirement but a test: “What do you love most?” Jesus slyly gave him a very Pharisee kind of test: adding a must-do rule to the Decalogue. The inquirer did not understand that we can follow rules yet still not have God’s heart which, as the Prophets and Jesus pointed out, boils down to loving your neighbor.

Even as followers of Jesus, something in our hearts rebels at Jesus’ strong words here. We exempt ourselves from “sell everything you have” and wind up also exempting ourselves from all the rest. And because we don’t do the second part — “give everything to the poor” — we wind up not doing the third, following Jesus. If we do not help “the least of these” (Matthew 25:34-36,45-46), we wind up not receiving ourselves what the young man was seeking: life in the eternal Kingdom.

Jesus replied to this way to the young man because he needed to understand that inheriting eternal life required more than sincerity and earnestness. We must yield everything to the Lord. F. D. Huntington preached: “If you single out some one chosen indulgence, however secret — a dubious custom in business, a fault of the tongue or temper — and, placing your hand over that, reply to the all-searching commandment of the Most High, ‘This I cannot let go; this is too sweet to me, or too profitable to me, or too tightly interwoven with my constitutional predilections, or too hard to be put off’ — then the quality of a disciple is not in you. ... It practically rejects the heavenly rule when that rule crosses the private inclination. And that is the essence of rebellion.”

vv.24-25

Notice the tension between ‘hard’ in v.24 and ‘impossible’ in v.27. A rich man can enter heaven, of course. It’s not impossible, but it is hard because wealth always poses serious challenges to discipleship. Money constitutes a temptation and a trap. It’s not “the rich” in general Jesus is talking about but those who trust in their riches.

Jesus had warned the crowd: “Guard yourselves against every form of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (12:15) And the apostle Paul warned his young protégé that “those who want to get rich fall into

temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.” (1 Timothy 6.8-9)

R.M. Edgar preached: “Money is such a barrier that we might well despair of the salvation of any rich men. Poor men have a chance. They have so little that they dare not trust in it, but in God only. But the rich man is tempted to trust in the uncertain riches, and leave God out of the account.”

Just a quick aside about camels and the eye of a needle: Jesus often employed hyperbole. Some people feel a need to dilute the image here by speculating this might refer to a small city gate or mountain pass that camels would only be able to pass through if their cargo was offloaded and/or they crawled through on their knees. But Doctor Luke uses a different word for ‘needle’ than Matthew and Mark use. Vincent’s Word Studies explains that Luke’s *belonēs* [S956] “is the peculiar word for the surgical needle. The other word [*rhapsidos* S4476] is condemned by the Greek grammarians as barbarous.”

vv.26-27

The people’s reaction to Jesus’ comment reflected the common belief that possessing wealth was a sign of God’s approval. How can someone not be saved (*sōthēnai* S4982: heal, preserve, rescue) when God’s approval so obviously rested on them? Jesus didn’t quibble (“I didn’t say it was impossible”) but leveraged their mistaken belief to reinforce a deeper truth: “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

vv.28-29

Impulsive Peter always seems to lead the way by blurting out the first thing that comes to his mind: “We have left all we had to follow you.” Matthew’s account portrays it even more selfishly: “What will there be for us?” (19:27) Perhaps we can hear James and John’s mother asking Jesus to promise that in his kingdom they will sit at his left and right hand. (20:21) The Pulpit Commentary calls it “a worldly but natural thought.”

Jesus’ reply focuses on the people left behind, not possessions, which is especially appropriate in the context of his conversation with the wealthy ruler. Indeed, the

apostles did leave homes and family because Jesus said, "Follow me." We must, however, reject any suggestion that their leaving abandoned families to destitution. Many others who followed Jesus into "this new sect" were disowned, and that can be no less true today, especially in Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and even nominal Christian contexts.

Even the Lord experienced this. At one point, his family decided he was out of his mind and came to take custody of him. (Mark 3:21) He noted: "Only in his hometown and in his own household is a prophet without honor." (Matthew 13:57) He softened the blow his disciples would experience by explaining that those who hated them for following him were just transferring to the disciples their hatred of him. (John 15:18)

M.F. Sadler preached: "A man's conversion to the faith of Christ, though it at times, perhaps almost always, estranged him from a heathen home and family, gave him another home, and a far wider family, attached to him in far firmer and closer, and withal more holy bonds, and these were brethren and sisters, fathers and mothers in Christ."

v.30

Jesus promised that the loss of relationships would be replaced exponentially "in this age" (*kairo* S2540 – at the proper time). The treasure of "this age" is not wealth but community. In a larger family of faith, loving relationships are multiplied far beyond what one would experience as a member of a single family.

"And, in the age to come, eternal life" — 'Eternal' renders *aiōnion* (S166, perpetual) and 'life' translates *zōēn* (S2222, both physical and spiritual existence, present and future).

W. Clarkson unpacks the context: This eternity is "not the lingering and lasting shadows into which Greek and Roman shrank from descending; not the uninviting *sheol* of the Hebrews; but everlasting day, eternal life – life in its fulness, its freedom, its blessedness, its glory, life never ceasing but enlarging and unfolding evermore."

Abundant life, perpetually – here and hereafter.