

This morning, we are in the 26th week of a sermon series that I have entitled “Meeting Jesus.” I have been making my way this year through Luke’s account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, I will looking at Luke 18:18-30, looking at an interaction between Jesus and a rich young ruler.

Luke 18:18–30 - A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.⁰ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”²¹ “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ Indeed, 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 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”²⁷ Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”²⁸ Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!”²⁹ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

The individual that Jesus meets in Luke 18 is commonly known as the rich young ruler. Although this passage only describes him as a wealthy ruler, Matthew’s account of this interaction describes him as a young man. Now, I would imagine that for many of you who truly want to follow God or who are trying to figure out what it means to follow God, this can be a frightening passage. After all, Jesus calls the young man to sell all he has, give to the poor, and then come follow Him, which raises the logical question of whether or not Jesus would say the same thing to us today, or if this command to sell all we have and give to the poor applies to us today. Let me say three things about the heart of this passage:

1) Give up your idols and come follow me

The answer to the question of whether this command is for us today is not a simple yes or no. Although Jesus says that a rich man trying to enter the kingdom is harder to pull off than a camel, the largest animal in Jesus’ region, trying to enter through the eye of a needle, the smallest manmade object in his day, clearly there were

wealthy people in the Bible, like Abraham or King David, who are certainly in the kingdom of God despite their great wealth. So it can't be impossible for a wealthy person to be saved. And secondly, although Jesus tells this young man to sell all he has, he does not require this of everyone he meets. In fact, in the next chapter, Jesus will meet a tax collector named Zacchaeus who has been defrauding people until his life is changed by his interaction with Jesus. See Zacchaeus' response in Luke 19:8-9:

Luke 19:8–9 - But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”

Wait, so the rich young ruler was told to give it all away if he wanted to have eternal life, but here Zacchaeus gives only half of his possessions to the poor and vows to pay back four times the amount of anything he has cheated, and Jesus says that's good enough to save him? What is going on here?

Throughout Jesus' ministry, we see him interacting with people in different ways, but there is one pattern that seems to happen regularly. **That pattern is that Jesus has the uncommon ability to put his finger on that one thing that a person is trusting in for their salvation, their comfort, their security, the one thing they are hoping in and looking to for hope.** Jesus has the knack of pointing that thing out and calling people to exchange it for what He has to offer. Let me give you a couple of examples, beginning in John 3 with a religious man named Nicodemus.

John 3:1–3 - Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Now, the phrase “born again” has come to mean specific things in our culture, but the reason Jesus uses this phrase is because Nicodemus was a man who trusted that because he was a descendant of Abraham, he was right with God. And Jesus tells him that his physical birth counts for nothing with God; He must be born again:

John 3:5–8 - Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but

you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

In other words, Jesus would not be like the modern day preacher who goes around telling everyone “you must be born again.” He used that phrase specifically for individuals who trusted in their lineage, their heritage, their physical birth, believing that they were right with God because of that.

Secondly, think of the Samaritan woman that Jesus meets at the well in John 4. He asks her for water, and she questions why, a Jew, would ask for water from her, a Samaritan, and in response Jesus says:

John 4:10,13-14 - Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water... Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

And when she asks for that living water, this happens:

John 4:16–18 - He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” ¹⁷ “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

This woman does not need to be challenged to sell all she has and come follow Jesus, nor does she need to be told that she must be born again because her physical lineage counts for nothing. No, this woman needs to be confronted with how she has sought to fill her emptiness with men, and to exchange that pursuit for the living water that Jesus has to offer.

In the same way, in today’s passage, the rich young ruler doesn’t need to be offered living water, or told that he must be born again. He is not looking to relationships for his salvation, or trusting in his lineage to ensure that he is right with God. The thing that he is trusting in, that his hope is set on, that gives him security and comfort, is his money, and so that is the thing that Jesus will put his finger on.

The Biblical word for what I am talking about is idolatry. An idol is something or someone other than God that you look to as your savior, something you spend your money and effort on, that you live for, that defines you. It is what you hope in,

what you dream about, that which gives your life security and meaning, the thing that you are most anxious about losing. Anything can be an idol, even good things. Worldly success and reputation. The love of another person. Your family. Your ability as a husband, wife, mother or father. Money. Comfort. Luxury. **It is the thing that you say, maybe subconsciously, to God “You can have everything, God – but just don’t touch that.”** If there is a “but” in there anywhere, whatever is on the other side of that “but” is an idol, your functional savior, your true god. And remember the first two commandments:

Exodus 20:3–4 - “You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

This is why we see Jesus interacting differently with different people, because he knows that whatever it is that we are trusting in, whatever we are looking to for our security and salvation, that will in the end let us down. He knows that He is the only Savior who will never let us down, the only God who can truly give our hearts what we are longing for. And so, you will find that he will regularly put his finger on that thing in your life, and ask you to surrender it to him unconditionally, trusting him and not your idol as your Lord and Savior. **Sometimes we may have to actually give it up, like the rich young ruler and his money. Sometimes we may end up keeping it, but he will change our relationship to it,** like Zacchaeus and his money, or the woman at the well and her relationships with men, or Nicodemus and his heritage. But the point is, God will not let you put your trust and hope in something or someone that in the end can not carry the burden that you are placing on it. Like Abraham with his son Isaac, he will ask you to lay it on the altar, not knowing whether or not you will get it back.

If Jesus were to say to you, “one thing you lack – leave ____ and come follow me,” what would that be?

2) Money is a particularly dangerous idol

Although we all have different idols, money is a particularly dangerous and subtle one, because it promises us so much: security, comfort, personal value and status, power and freedom. Many of you feel more important or less important because of your financial situation in life, or more or less security and peace because of the money in your bank account. To people like this, Paul writes:

1 Timothy 6:6–11 - But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and

clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹ Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. ¹¹ But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

And so, he says:

1 Timothy 6:17-19 - 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. ¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ 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.

And as Jesus said in **Luke 12:15** - Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Greed is subtle. Like an addiction, there is a tolerance effect, as those things that once were luxuries become necessities. You want finer food, fancier cars, better clothes, vacations, etc. It fills you with envy of others who have more and fills you with dissatisfaction for what you have. It can make you arrogant, looking down on those who have less than you.

Money can open the doors to many things, but the truth is that having more money means you have more to protect, and that does not necessarily make you feel more secure. You can become a slave to your possessions. **Money can not buy happiness, and it can't make people love you more. It doesn't make your problems go away. And in the end, it can't save you from relational issues, or from rebellious children, or from sickness and death. It can't save you from a meaningless life.** Money makes a terrible Savior. As the author of Proverbs says:

Proverbs 18:10-11 - The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. ¹¹ The **wealth** of the rich is their fortified city; they **imagine** it an unscalable wall.

Money is not your Savior. It is not an unscalable wall. Only the Lord will save you.

And your self-worth, your value in life, does not depend upon the size of your bank accounts or what you own. It is because you are God's child and Jesus gave His life for you.

So, back to the original question: is Jesus' command to the rich young ruler for everyone? Yes and no. No – not everyone will be called to give up everything and live in poverty. But yes – we are all called to submit all of our finances to Jesus. The Old Testament principle was the tithe; the New Testament calls us to be stewards – not owners – of all we own, recognizing that it belongs to God, and He calls us to be sacrificially generous.

2 Corinthians 9:6–11 - Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Money is a particularly dangerous idol, so do not cling to it as your Savior, but share it generously as one who trusts in God.

3) The call is not to follow principles, but Jesus

Go back to the beginning:

Luke 18:18–22 - A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ⁰ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’” ²¹ “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said. ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

As I read this passage, it appears that this young man comes to Jesus, the good teacher, for a theological pronouncement on what he must do to inherit eternal life.

And watch what happens: Jesus turns the conversation from a theological discussion about salvation to a yes or no decision that this young man must make. It moves from the ruler seeking out a spiritual way of living that he could work into his life into a simple command to “give up all you have and follow Jesus wherever he leads.”

And notice that Jesus’ first response is, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” It’s like Jesus is saying, “Either I am God, in which case my words are binding on you, or I am just a teacher whose advice you can take or leave.” Instead of the young ruler being the judge of what Jesus has to say, Jesus reveals himself to be the judge, and the young ruler is faced with a decision to obey or to disobey.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship* puts it this way:

“What he expects from the good master and great teacher is a weighty pronouncement, but certainly not a direction from God which would make an absolute claim on his obedience... The answer to the young man’s problem is – Jesus Christ... It is now a question of yes or no, of obedience or disobedience. The answer is no.”

So why are you here? Or why do you read the Bible, or pray, or seek to learn more about God? There are some of you who are comfortable with hearing inspirational sermons, or singing uplifting music, or having opportunities to do good works and serve others. You’re comfortable making religion a part of your life, fitting God in so that you can feel better about your life. **But you’re able to keep Jesus at just enough of a safe distance that he can not speak those words of obedience to you – put everything else second to me, and come and follow me wherever and however I might lead you.** You treat Jesus like a “good teacher,” and the first thing he wants to say to you is, “why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Either I am God, and the words I speak are from that authority, or I am not, and you can pick and choose what you want to follow. So is He truly your God or not? If He is, then the only right response is to follow Him. As Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 5:14–15 - For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Remember Jesus’ answer to what he must do – he gives him five commandments, the ones that have to do with performance. He leaves out “have no other gods

before me”, “don’t make an idol of anything in earth below”, “don’t misuse the name of the Lord,” Remember the Sabbath”, and “don’t covet.” Why does he leave those out? Jesus is showing this man that although he **had the moral behavior, he did not have a relationship with God.** And that is what Jesus was after.

The ruler asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The answer, as Jesus will point out, is that he can not DO anything. **You can never do enough to earn your salvation.** That is religion – do these things and you will be rewarded. But God is after a relationship.

Luke 18:24-27 - Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, 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 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

This is not religion, where you earn reward, blessing, salvation. It is a relationship with God. This is a relationship where you follow him, wherever he leads you, not where you decide whether or not to take his advice.

In the end, the rich young ruler did not choose to follow Jesus, because he was unwilling to part with his wealth and trust that following Jesus would be better. What this rich young ruler did not know, but that we can know this side of the cross, is that Jesus is the true rich young ruler. He is the one who had all the riches of heaven, but chose to give them all up to come down and live among us, poor and suffering, to perfectly love God and love us, to lay down his life on the cross, that we might be saved.

2 Corinthians 8:9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

When we see the love of Jesus as displayed on the cross, we can trust that there is no idol that we can lay down, nothing we can give up, that He won’t replace with something better.

Luke 18:28-30 - Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!” ²⁹ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

There is nothing you can give up that He won't replace with something better, with more of Himself, with eternal life. You may not have all the treasures of earth, but that's okay, because they will not save you, they can not deliver on what they have promised you. You will have treasure in heaven.

Luke 12:32–34 - “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The story goes that there once was a little girl who had a necklace made of plastic pearls that she loved to wear. One night, her father came and kindly asked her, “would you please give me your pearls?” The little girl refused, because she did not want to give them up. Night after night, her father would say good night, tuck her in, and then ask “would you please give me your pearls?” And night after night, the little girl would say no.

Finally, one night, after her father asked, she reluctantly agreed to give her father the pearl necklace. She knew that he was her father and that she probably needed to do what her father asked her to do. But what happened next, she did not expect. Her father took her plastic pearl necklace, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a genuine pearl necklace and gave it to his daughter.

There is nothing that you can not give up that God will not replace with something better, with something of eternal value. As Jim Elliot said: “**he is no fool who gives what he can not keep to gain what he can not lose.**”

And as CS Lewis put it: “If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

As Jonah put it:

Jonah 2:8–9 - “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them. ⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’”

And as Paul put it:

Romans 8:31–32 - What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Look to Him and trust that He will care for you. Surrender not only your money but everything to Him, and He will care for you.