

Letting Go

1/24/2021

We are going to Luke 18 today.

Luke 18:18-30 “And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **19** And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? 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** And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” **22** When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” **23** But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. **24** Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! **25** For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” **26** Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” **27** But he said, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” **28** And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” **29** And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, **30** who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us this story of the Rich Young Ruler. We know he’s rich and a ruler (some kind of government official or synagogue

official) from this passage in Luke, and Matthew tells us that he's also young.

This is a guy who seems to have it all. He's young, he's rich, he's powerful, he's prominent, AND he is moral, a genuinely high-integrity guy. He knows his bible, he knows the commandments and keeps them from what he can tell.

He's also sincere - not one of the synagogue rulers who are always trying to trap Jesus, he approaches Jesus humbly. In Mark's gospel, this rich young ruler runs up to Jesus and kneels before him.¹

And the question he asks is the main theme of this passage:

Luke 18:18 "And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

They call inheriting eternal life different things. Jesus says in verse 24 that it is hard for the rich to "enter the kingdom of God." The disciples in verse 26 call it being saved.

So the question is how do I get eternal life? Or How do I enter the kingdom of God? Or How can I be saved?

This man wants what everybody wants: life, in both quality and quantity. The full life of God now and life that goes on forever in the everlasting kingdom of God. He wants to know God, he wants to go to heaven and wants to know how.

So in this encounter, Jesus is teaching the rich man, and his disciples, and us, something absolutely vital about being saved - being rescued from our sin and possessing eternal life with God. About gaining everlasting life with God.

¹ Mark 10:17

But it's confusing at first.

Because Jesus answers this man's question in a completely different way than I would answer it and then most of you would answer it.

If someone approached me after service and said, "I want to be forgiven. I want to be saved. I want to go to heaven when I die, how?"

My response would be the same response the apostles gave in acts, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!" We are not saved by doing things, we are saved by grace through faith - turn to him, believe in him. This is Bible 101 and protestantism 101.

But Jesus responds with a couple of really strange answers.

His first response is this:

Luke 18:19 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

Jesus here is not denying that He is good or that He's God. He's exposing that this man doesn't really know who Jesus is. Jesus is saying only God is really good, why do you call me good? (And the answer would be either that Jesus isn't really good, or that Jesus is God.)

Jesus is saying if I'm good than I'm God, and you're missing out on who I really am. Or if I'm not good (and you think I am), you're still missing out on who I really am.

So Jesus, who is good, and who is God, subtly exposes that this man doesn't really know who he's talking to. He is missing out on who Jesus is - this is a key.

And he is also subtly exposing this man - if nobody is good but God, then this man, as good as he is relative to most people, is also not good, and something key is lacking.

So Jesus is exposing something this man lacks.

So Jesus goes on. The man asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, and then Jesus says this:

Luke 18:20 You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'"

Jesus knows what this man thinks. He thinks that his commandment keeping can get him to heaven.

You hear it in his question, "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" He thinks you go to heaven by your doing. So Jesus first throws him some softballs, and quotes 5 of the ten commandments that this man had (on the surface at least) kept.

On the surface he hadn't committed adultery or murdered. He hadn't stolen. He told the truth in court, and he honored his parents. He had probably done those things like he said. On a heart level this isn't doable, but on the surface this is a doable list of commands.

So Jesus throws him these softballs, and his eyes probably light up, and he responds, "I've done that!"

Luke 18:21 And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth."

The man asks what do I need to do to be saved, Jesus says, "Perfectly keep

the commandments, like these 5.” And the guy says, “Done!”

And it’s true in theory, that if any of us perfectly did all that God required of us, He would have nothing to condemn us for, and we would have eternal life. But Jesus made clear in the sermon on the mount and elsewhere that God’s call for perfection applies all the way down to the heart and motive level. Sin is not just what we do, but also includes even thoughts that fall short of the glory of God.

This man doesn’t know that. He thinks, as Jews in his day all would have thought, that God was pleased with surface obedience.

But God wants our heart. So now Jesus is going to expose how this man has not at all been obedient from a heart level:

Luke 18:22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

So Jesus says, “You’ve kept these other commands. There’s just one more thing. Sell everything, give it all to the poor, and follow me.”

There were other commandments. And the first commandment, which Jesus didn’t mention in His list of softballs, was

Exodus 20:2-3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.3 “You shall have no other gods before me.”

The first commandment was to have no Gods before God. Nothing is to come before God.

And here is this man, who maybe has fooled himself into thinking that he

really wants God. He has fooled himself into thinking he's done enough to earn that relationship. And Jesus knows the one thing he is putting before God, the one idol he has, his wealth.

Anything we put before God is an idol. This commandment-keeping guy is actually breaking the first one. On the surface he looks like he's wants to follow God, he wants life, but there's something he won't give up to have it. There's something more important to him than God.

That's the definition of an idol. Something we put before God. Something we would never let go of if God commanded us to. Something that's ultimate that isn't God.

Jesus looks right into his heart and knows that. And Jesus says to truly have God, he must really be your God. There can't be anything above Him. So he calls this man to turn from the thing he is putting above God so He can truly have God.

This is a moment of great opportunity for him. He can have eternal life.

This of what is at stake here. He has it all, but all of his treasure will go away someday. He'll lose his youth, his power, and his money, and eventually his life. But he can live forever in the presence of God if God is truly his God.

He looks in the eyes of Jesus, He is offered life. In Mark's Gospel it says that "Jesus looked at him and loved him." This man says he wants God, he looks into the loving eyes of God, with eternity offered him. And

Verse 23:

Luke 18:23 But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

This man is diseased. Jesus offers him the cure. But he won't take it.

He knows something is missing in his life, he knows his eternity isn't sure, he goes to Jesus who offers him the cure, but he can't take it. He goes away grieved.

He misses out on life, he doesn't take the cure, he comes to Jesus distraught and leaves even more distraught because there's something he won't give up.

He wanted God, but wanted God on his own terms, not on God's terms. And anyone who comes to God and finds God only does so because they do so on God's terms.

So let's look at some of what this guy thought about God, about Jesus, about eternal life that made him miss out on life. Let's look at the lies he believed so that we don't believe the same lies:

1) YOU CAN ADD JESUS TO YOUR EXISTING LIFE TO COMPLETE IT

This guy feels like he is 99% there, and he is looking for that last 1%. He is looking for that one more thing he could do to make this religious thing work and really cut it for him. Its like he was at the top of the ladder and had the sense that there was one more rung that he could climb up. He had heard about Jesus, knew he was a great teacher, so he thinks maybe if he just added Jesus' teaching to his religion he'd be complete.

But Jesus is not a feature that gets added on to your religious life. He's not a plug-in or an add-on.

If you come to Jesus expecting him to add something to your life but not change what's already there, you're in for a surprise. Because he is a king. And when he comes in, he rules, and he spends the rest of your life

exposing the beliefs and thought patterns and actions in your life that don't line up with his rule, and calling for obedience. And it is always more than you think you can give that he calls for.

One of the reasons our Christianity doesn't really cut it for us is because our Christianity is not about following Jesus and allowing him to be the king over our lives, but we have made it an add-on instead of a radical change and a yielding.

We think, "Jesus would be good to have in my life." And Jesus says, "why do you call me good - there is nobody who's good except God alone." Jesus isn't just a good add-on, He's God. He's ultimate - by His very nature He is above all things, so we can't take the real Jesus into our lives and have Him not be above all things in our lives.

If we try to take Jesus in our lives and don't allow him to change us - our beliefs, our actions, our view of the world, our lifestyle, our schedules, our checkbook, we are essentially asking Jesus to pretend to be someone He's not.

Jesus, come into my life and pretend not to be God.

Jesus doesn't get added on to our lives when we become Christians, he takes them over. He exercises his kingship over us.

This rich young ruler was hoping to stay his own king and add Jesus as one of his subjects that exists to make him happy.

So Jesus gives his response to this guy, "Sell all that you have" - and the guy won't do it. He's not about to give up that kind of control over his life to Jesus. So his refusal to do so exposed that he wasn't looking for Jesus to be his master, he was looking for an add-on.

But Jesus the “add-on” is no Jesus at all. He isn’t just an accessory.

Jesus as an accessory **offers no more soul satisfaction and no more eternal life than a Bobblehead Jesus that you stick to your dashboard.** A Jesus that you can comfortably add on to your life without giving up your life isn’t the real guy.

A second lie that he was believing and that we believe is

2) YOU CAN DO SOMETHING TO COMPLETE YOURSELF

This guy wants something he can do to make him complete.

But Christianity is the message that what we need the most, we cannot do. It is the message not that we’re OK and need to do one more thing, but that we’re broken and need a Savior from the outside to come rescue us.

The default mode of thinking for people is that our biggest problems are on the outside of us and the solution is somehow on the inside of us. My problems are out there, but I must be able to do something to save myself and fix myself.

But Christianity reverses that. It says “My biggest problem is on the inside, and the solution comes from the outside.” I can’t fix this by doing, I need a Savior.

This guy wants to earn eternal life by doing something. And Jesus, by exposing the one thing he can never do, is demonstrating to him how helpless he is to save himself.

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

We can't approach Christianity saying, "I need to find something I can do to earn heaven. I need to do good to get eternal life."

At the heart of Christianity is the Gospel - that you have sinned so badly, you are so broken and needy that you need someone to step into your life with a miracle and pick up the pieces. Good works don't cut it, you need the sacrifice of Jesus in your behalf.

Christianity is not something you do to make yourself complete. It is a gift from God, freely given by him, to give you life.

It's not a religion you sign up for. It's not a set of rules you follow or works you do. It is a gift from God, of a relationship with him.

So he thinks he can add Jesus to his life, he thinks the solution is within, he thinks he can do something to get himself eternal life. And Jesus, by pointing out the thing he just can't do, is exposing what he really wants and exposing his utter helplessness to save himself.

Jesus is also doing the things necessary here to bring this man to repentance.

Repentance means turning. And it's the other side of the coin of faith.

To have faith is to turn to Jesus - to open up an empty hand and say I want what only you can give me. I need your cross, I need your mercy, I need your forgiveness.

But you can't turn to something without turning from something. Faith is turning to Jesus, Repentance is turning from the alternatives to Jesus.

You can't face east and west at the same time. To turn to the east, you have to turn from the west. You can't face west and just add facing east to the directions you're facing.

So when Jesus is calling this man to give up his wealth, he isn't making giving away money the requirement for salvation for all people. (In fact, soon we'll see the story of Zaccheus who comes to faith, and when he does, he says, "half of my possessions I'll give to the poor" and Jesus says, "today salvation has come to this house." So Jesus is not laying out a universal requirement to give everything away, and he isn't saying we are saved by the work of giving.

He knows that for us to turn to Jesus we must turn from everything that takes His place in our lives. This man had to turn from his wealth-god to turn to Jesus.

To turn to Jesus and be saved, we must turn from all idols.

And Jesus, with one fell swoop here, exposes two idols in his life.

Remember, this man doesn't really know who Jesus is. He thinks Jesus is just a good teacher who can add the final ingredient to his life. He thinks he can perfect himself, and just needs one more law, one more piece of advice, and that will put him over the top and give him life. Because he is a good guy.

1) But the first idol that's keeping him from Jesus is his own goodness.

This guy thinks he can be good enough on his own. So Jesus exposes that he doesn't even keep the first commandment.

You can see in this guy a classic and common, though rarely talked about maneuver for avoiding the kingship of Jesus. And that is that he thinks he is good enough on his own, and needs no savior. He doesn't come to Jesus asking for mercy from Jesus, he just wants some advice on how he can be his own savior.

And Jesus looks at him and loves him. He loves him enough to show him that his idol is failing him. That he's not as good as he has convinced himself that he is.

Jesus knows his wealth holds sway over him, and uses this command for him to give it all away to expose that he isn't really good.

His problem is not that he needs a little more goodness. His problem is that even as a moral person, he can't be good, no matter how hard he tries. He is not as together as he thinks he is.

He has built this religion where if he keeps the commands on the surface, he is in good shape. And his morality is his way of avoiding Jesus' Lordship.

If you think you're a pretty good person, you're OK on your own, you don't need a Lord. You can stay in control of your life because you don't need anyone to save you from anything.

So you can avoid yielding to Jesus by being good! We always talk about people who avoid God by numbing themselves by getting drunk and high and having sex outside of marriage - the "bad" life is a way to avoid God. But the good life is every bit as much a way of avoiding God if its a good life lived on your own without yielding to Jesus.

You might ask, "Well how do I repent of that idol?" If my problem is my morality, should I become immoral? Should I go out and get plastered just to repent of being so sober all of these years? "I'm drunk for Jesus!"

No. Paul says, **“Shall we sin more that grace may abound? By no means.” (Romans 6:1)** That’s not how to make grace abound.

Come back to the cross. Confess, “God, I’ve been satisfied with serving you and haven’t tried to know you! I repent of my service, I repent of being convinced that anything I can do can connect me with you. I repent of thinking I’ll be complete and satisfied when I’m a good husband, a good churchman, a good evangelist, a good tither. Those things are all nothing compared to knowing you, God, and I have replaced a real and vital relationship with you with all of the good things I do! I have done good, not out of overflow, but as an act of looking for my peace somewhere other than in you, Jesus.

If your hope, confidence and satisfaction is in being a good husband, being a good wife, being a good father, being a good mother, being a good provider, a good worker, being a good churchman, a good server in ministry, then you’ve severely misplaced your hope in something that can never and will never save you.

And your goodness might be a way you avoid Jesus, because if you can be good on your own, you can stay in control, and not have to yield to a king.

2) So the first idol is his goodness, and the second is his wealth.

Luke 18:24 Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 25 For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

Some people tell stories about the gate called a needle eye that a camel had to bow down to get through, so it was hard but possible. But there’s no evidence that that gate existed. I think he’s talking about a needle here.

He is saying that wealth has a powerful effect on you that keeps you from true life.

Money does for us in a small and insufficient way what Jesus can do for us. It is a substitute for Jesus in many ways:

Money makes us feel secure, so we don't need the security Jesus offers.

It puts us in control, so we don't yield to Jesus' control.

Money gives us options, so we can be the master of our destinies instead of Jesus.

Money gets us food and homes so we don't need a provider.

Money buys us stuff that gives us temporary highs - we can get short term happiness from money. Money doesn't buy happiness, but it does rent it sometimes, and that can be enough so that we think we don't need anything else right now.

So Jesus tells this guy to get rid of it!

Jesus says, "This idol is killing you. You can't face east and west at the same time. You gotta turn from this to turn to me. You can't serve two masters."

You will worship money or worship Jesus, and it can't be both.

So Jesus calls for the one thing the man can never give up.

The disciples see this and say, "Then we're all in trouble:"

Luke 18:26 Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"

Doesn't everybody have something that holds sway over their heart?

Some plan, some dream, some source of security, some source of pleasure, something they'd never give up? Isn't every heart like the heart of this man that can't give up his idol?

We've probably all sensed this hopelessness before. I've tried so hard to change and I keep reverting to the mean.

God's people in the old testament sensed this when Jeremiah wrote:

**Jeremiah 13:23 "Can the Ethiopian change his skin
or the leopard his spots?
Then also you can do good
who are accustomed to do evil.**

Turning to idols becomes a well-worn path in our lives.

And we sense that we are as hopeless to change it.

Luke 18:27 But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

Jesus says, "God can do this."

Ezekiel 36:26 "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

God can do that. God can give you eyes to see his superior worth to all of your treasures and idols. In fact, in scripture, every single person who asks

Jesus for mercy, Jesus gives mercy to. He does the miraculous to give them repentance and faith.

But that is the only hope. It really is impossible to get us to drop our addictions to idols unless the solution comes from the outside. Unless God does it. Unless God opens our eyes to the beauty of Jesus, the goodness of Jesus, the security Jesus offers, to how much better it is to have Jesus in control than to be in control ourselves.

In fact, everyone who actually turns to Jesus does turn from idols:

28 And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." 29 And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, 30 who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."

So Jesus leaves us with this promise: yes, following Jesus means giving up a lot. We can't turn to him by faith without turning from all other ultimates.

But at the end of the day, we'll find that we didn't lose anything.

We gain more in this life and the life to come.

Maybe not the same form - there was no promise that the rich man would get much more material wealth, but he would have something better in the security he would have in Christ.

And the call for all of us is to examine our hearts for idols:

Is there something I would not give up for Jesus?

Is there something his word says that I would never believe?

Some status I could never sacrifice?

Some plan or dream I could never part with?

Let go and find Jesus is so much better.

Sermon Discussion Guide

Rich Young Ruler - Luke 18:18-30

I. What Must I do to Inherit Eternal Life (Luke 18:18)

How does Jesus answer this question. How would you answer it? How do you explain the difference?

II. Why Do You Call Me Good? (Luke 18:19)

How do you explain this response of Jesus in this context?

III. Keep the Commandments (Luke 18:20-21)

Why do you think Jesus mentions these five commandments here?

IV. Sell All You Have (Luke 18:22-23)

Why does Jesus tell the rich young ruler to do this?

What does he ask us to do that is similar?

V. The Camel and the Needle (Luke 18:24-30)

Why is it hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven?