

October 25, 2009/ Mark 10:17-31/ The Rich Young Ruler (ESV¹)

Read Matt 19:13-30, Mark 10:13-31, Luke 18:15-30

Mark 10:17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

the Matt passage says "... what good thing must I do to inherit?" ... the guy thinks that God's approval, and particularly life beyond death, is based on racking up sufficient good marks ... every religion in the world outside of true Christianity is premised on the same wrong notion ... this guy wants to know more accurately what the requirements are ... and probably not because he wants to do only the bare minimum ... I think he's honorable and wants to know exactly what the good is ... thinking of it in terms of a list to be followed ... he's surely eager, he's run and knelt ... but he's wrong in head and heart ...

J.C. Ryle nails this one ... he points out how terribly blind this fellow is to himself and his own condition ... he's standing here in the presence of the only Son of God, the very definition of goodness, asking what he can do to complete his goodness portfolio and have enough invested at the end to purchase entrance to a pleasant afterlife ... it's a far cry from Isaiah's response to seeing God: **Isaiah 6:5** And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" ... looked at from this perspective, it is an obscene question this fellow has asked ... but Jesus treats him gently, as He treats the rest of us

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

Jesus challenges the man's concept of good as a list of rules to be followed ... Jesus isn't denying that He, Jesus, is good ... He's not denying that He, Jesus, does good things ... but He isn't good because He's followed the rules!!! ... He is good by nature, because He is God ... God alone is completely good, and it's not a list of rules that defines good, but rather the character and nature of God ... the guy has an inadequate understanding of "goodness" when he addresses Jesus in this way ...

the man has asked for something beyond the Scripture that he might *do* in order to be accepted by God ... Jesus shows him that what is written is sufficient to show him that *doing* isn't going to get the job done ... the man believes that salvation is something to be earned ... but until he sees that there is no way that it can be so, that salvation can only be a gift freely received and undeserved, he's not even got the right picture ...

19You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.' "

these are the commandments 5 through 9 ... the first 4 deal with man's relationship to God ... these are ones that deal with his relationship to his fellow man ... (see **Exodus 20:12-15**, **Deut 5:16-21**) ... they are ones that can be more or less verified in the external ... they might be

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mistaken for a list that can be followed ... however, conspicuous by their absence are the first 4 and the 10th ... those are not so easily checked off as rules that have been kept ...

20And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

I've kept the rules ... as far as I can see, that makes me good ... but Jesus doesn't leave the guy in his error ... He essentially brings him to the 1st, 2nd and 10th commandments, shows him that the intent of the law is internal, and that we are thereby condemned ...

21And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Jesus loved this guy, but He never wants an easy convert ... He wants the hearts of those who are to be His ... **Mark 8:34 And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** ... this guy was not ready to unreservedly commit himself to following Jesus ... instead, his stuff was a matter of big importance to him ... bigger than salvation and bigger than the honor of God ... the guy wanted some list beyond the scripture that he could check off and then revert to doing as he pleased ... Jesus has shown him the internal intent of the commandments ... and that when that internal intent is translated into a specific thing to do, one close to his particular situation, he won't follow through and obey ... this was, for him, a straight up choice of riches or the kingdom ... the call was to turn his back on his wealth and follow ... he chose wrongly ... his possessions were a snare and hindrance ...

22Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

the real implications of the commandments go way beyond a list to be kept ... when faced with one of them in his own circumstances, the man finds that he doesn't really want to please God that much after all ... ESV says he was "disheartened"... he was more literally "shocked" ... this has caught him completely by surprise ... he's stunned ... Jesus says "you are interested in the age to come and the next world? ... good, then give up your preoccupation with the present one" ... and the guy balks ...

his reaction is like many of our own ... but totally crazy ... what is wealth against eternity? ... what is wealth in comparison to the glory of the God of the universe? ... unless, of course, we don't really reckon that eternity is real or care that much for the glory of God ...

23And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

this needs to be heard against the backdrop of the popular understanding of the day ... that was that wealth was God's reward for right living ... Jesus turns this understanding on its ear ... instead of being a sign of right living and God's approval, He says that in fact, wealth is a very serious impediment to obtaining real righteousness ... the people of this time and place (and us with them) would say "wealth is no problem in and of itself ... people get into trouble when they do evil, and that's completely independent of wealth ... a wealthy person is in no special danger" ... but Jesus says that thinking is wrong ... wealth IS in and of itself a serious danger to one's soul, a real hindrance ...

we must soberly ask ourselves if we really believe this ... or does it just apply to those out there who have more than we do? ... after all, no human being is willing to admit that he is wealthy ... it's the other guy who has more that needs to look out for the warning here ... not me ... I can go after more and more wealth, and it won't affect me, because, after all, I'm not rich ... in this regard, it may be of interest to realize that a more literal translation of what Jesus said is "How difficult it will be for those who have things" ... not "wealth" or "riches" but "things" ... the issue here is Jesus and His call ... this episode has demonstrated with crystal clarity that "stuff" can get in the way and prevent people from answering that call and finding eternal life ... this is no glorifying of socialist redistribution of wealth ... it is far more serious ... this is dire warning ...

24And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!"

children ... see how tenderly Jesus speaks to the disciples and us with them, dim though we are ... but he even sharpens the message of the episode they have just witnessed ... not only is it hard for the rich, it's just plain hard! ...

25It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

the camel was the largest beast in Palestine ... the eye of a needle the smallest opening ... this is as strong a statement that Jesus could possibly make ... the language He uses was common language of the time, indicating impossibility ... for those of you that have heard the interpretation regarding some gate into Jerusalem being called the eye of the needle and being only big enough for a camel kneeling and unloaded, there is absolutely no evidence that such a gate existed in Jesus' time ... it seems to be more something having to do with modern tourists to Jerusalem than anything authentic to Scripture ... Jesus is saying that it's an impossibility ... if your material standing is going to be important to you, if you're not willing to gladly give it up in the service of Christ, you have no place in the kingdom ... hard words, but true ... it is our covetousness that doesn't want this to be so ... it is our idolatry that doesn't want it to be so ... it is our failure to begin where the commandments begin, with God as in the center ... in our fallenness, we hope to be rich some day, and don't want this to be true when we finally make it ...

26And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"

the disciples too are shocked ... remember, they considered material possessions a mark of God's approval for right living ... so indeed, if even the ones that look to us humans like they have met with God's approval, what about everybody else? ...

27Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

the fact is that no man can merit God's favor ... no man can argue that he is good and deserving of God's approval ... salvation is impossible if the route to "goodness" is perfect behavior ... but it is possible that God will provide a way to righteousness through faith, trust, reliance on Christ and His sacrifice on our behalf ...

Hurtado: There is no happy ending to this story, and the stark reality of the warning is the greater for it.

²⁸Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you."

Peter chimes in and reveals that he too has missed the point ... he essentially says, "look Jesus, we have done what you asked the other guy to do ... is that good enough to merit God's favor? ..." ... Jesus returns to His "you may try to have it here, or you may have it there" theme from the Sermon on the Plain ...

²⁹Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,

³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

chances are there is a bit of humor and irony intended here ... those who were here with Jesus and were to give up a settled existence to carry the Gospel through the known world, would find themselves going from house to house, living here and living there, with all sorts of families, whoever would take them in for the sake of the message ... this is indeed what they get in this life ... and with persecutions! ... the good that replaces what is forgone for the sake of Christ isn't necessarily entirely pleasant in this life ... but there is "in the age to come eternal life" and THAT is what this episode is about, whole-hearted putting first of Jesus and His "follow me!" ...

³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

the naïve expectation that the rich and mighty are have the inside land for the kingdom is just wrong ... what seems to be first is last ... those that to the natural mind have the advantage in fact face face bigger obstacles in terms of what ultimately matters ... Matt and Mark follow the promise of eternal life with this statement that nevertheless, the first shall be last and the last first ... Matt then follows up with the parable of the man who hires workers for the day and pays all equally, despite the fact that some have worked longer than others ... it is not right to think of serving God in terms of some kind of heavenly bank account where chits here are exchanged one-to-one for chits there ... that simply isn't the point of life in the kingdom of God, and things in that kingdom don't operate according to our worldly expectations ...