

With Jesus
Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler

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Over the last number of years there has been a wave of reality TV shows. Survivor, Amazing Race, the Bachelor, the Bachelorette, Fixer-Upper. One of the fascinating ones that is on its thirteenth season is Hoarders. How many of you have seen an episode before? It details the lives of people who have an inability to let things go. For them, almost everything in life has a sentimental value, so they insist on keeping it. And their houses usually end up looking something like this [view online sermon to see photo]. Professionals come in and help them dig out of all their stuff and give almost all of it away. If you've even seen the show, you approach it expecting it to be pretty funny and actually comical, but when you watch it, every time it's heartbreaking. These people believed the lie that their lives would be better if they held on to all of their stuff. But in reality, all that stuff has kept them from experiencing real life.

As we continue in our study through the gospel of Luke called "With Jesus," we are wrapping up our focus on Jesus' one-on-one interactions. Today we look at the interaction Jesus had with a man known as the rich young ruler. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Luke 18. In this passage we are going to see that there was a man who had a lot of stuff, and he wanted to know how he could grow in his walk with God and have certainty of salvation, of eternal life. Jesus said that he needed to get rid of all his stuff. Until he gave it away, he couldn't follow Jesus. Just to set expectations, this is a really challenging passage in Scripture.

I was talking to a friend this week who studies and loves the Bible as much as anyone I know. We were talking about this passage of Scripture and he said, "That is one of my least favorite sections in the entire Bible." This passage is a challenging, confrontational, even offensive passage. But it's in the Bible for a reason. No matter how uncomfortable it may make us, it is God's Word, it is true, it is powerful, and God has something extremely important to teach us from it. We can't cherry-pick our favorite passages when we read the Bible, finding the passages we love and discarding the passages we don't. "God is love"—get out the highlighter! "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you"—yes, get out the highlighter! "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength"—get out the pen and the highlighter! But we are tempted to skip over passages like we are about to read. Some of you know this, but Thomas Jefferson used scissors and cut out sections of the Bible he didn't like. Give me the moral teachings, give me the wise sayings, but anything that's costly and sacrificial, let's get that out of there! Again, we can't afford to make that mistake. Even though this is challenging, this is God's eternal truth. God has something to teach us, something to teach you through this.

Let's dive into the passage together. "**A certain ruler asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'**" (Luke 18:18). There are several things to point out right away. First, we learn that he is a **ruler**. Here is a man with serious political power; he's certainly from a family with influence. We know from the other gospels that he was also young and particularly wealthy. That's why he is often referred to as "the rich young ruler." Also take note of how he addressed Jesus. He calls him **good teacher**. You can tell he has respect and admiration for Jesus, but not a posture of submission. He's interested in Jesus' wisdom but stops far short of pledging any sort of allegiance or devotion. This will ultimately play significantly into the rest of his story and ours. If we approach Jesus the way this man did, as a good teacher, a rabbi, a positive moral role model, like him, we'll take Jesus' words as advice that we get to decide if we'll apply or not. If we approach Jesus as Lord, as the Messiah, as God in the flesh, that transforms everything. His words are no longer advice, they're our commands, our marching orders, whether we like it or not. One more thing: he asks, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" It's a good thing that he wants eternal life; who doesn't? Where he's off base is asking, "**What must I do?**" He's approaching eternal life as a reward to be earned rather than a gift to be received, which is strange, because Jesus has just said the kingdom of God belongs to little children. I have little children. I love

them, and they are cute, but when they help, they can't really do much. Last time I preached I told you about my love for planting trees. Hudson has picked up that passion and won't let me plant without helping me. Here's a picture of him helping me last summer [view online sermon to see photo]. He's only wearing a diaper, no shoes. He has a plastic shovel. There is no way he can actually help. He's not there because of what he can contribute; he's there because he's my son and I love him. The same is true for us with God. No matter how mature we get, no matter how many people report to us at work, no matter how many letters come after our name, when it comes to God, it's not like there is anything we can do for him. He's God. But as a loving Father, he still wants us to be with him. If this man had that relational, humble approach, it would have transformed the entire trajectory of this interaction.

Let's keep reading. **“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. ‘No one is good—except God alone. 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”’” (Luke 18:19-20).** He quotes five of the ten commandments, and interestingly he only quotes the ones that have to do with interactions with other people. He omits the command about having no gods before the Lord and about not coveting anything that belongs to your neighbor. For this guy, those would have hit him square between the eyes. But Jesus takes it easy on him at first.

“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said” (Luke 18:21). He's saying that since the time of his bar mitzvah when he turned 13 and became morally responsible for his own actions in Jewish society, he has obeyed all those commands without failure. That's a pretty high view of his moral uprightness. But interestingly, Jesus doesn't challenge him on his ability to keep the rules. Instead, he cuts to the heart of the real issue in this man's life.

“When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘You still lack one thing’” (Luke 18:22a). Hey, it's wonderful that you've lived a good moral life, it's great that you've kept all those commandments, but there is this one thing. This is like a doctor who sends you to do 20 tests, then tells you 19 of them came back looking great, but there's this one image in the MRI—there's no doubt about it, it's cancer. When a doctor identifies cancer in a patient, he or she graciously but directly and promptly makes the patient aware of it and begins a treatment plan to get that cancer out ASAP. That's what a good doctor does. And that's what Jesus is getting ready to do for this man: to identify the one thing that is keeping him from being a fully devoted follower of Jesus. **“Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”” (Luke 18:22b).** Just like a doctor with an X-ray or MRI machine can pinpoint the cancer, Jesus has just pinpointed the central threat to this man's soul: it's his wealth. Like a good doctor, Jesus not only identified the problem, but he also gave him a treatment plan—give everything you have away and you'll have treasure in heaven, God will reward you for your generosity, and then, once you are unencumbered by all your possessions and the distraction of managing all your wealth, you will be freed up to focus entirely on being my disciple. That's Jesus' expert advice. But just like a patient who listens to a doctor and then decides to ignore the counsel, this man listens to Jesus, but decides he isn't willing to pay that price.

“When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy” (Luke 18:23). The word for “sad” here is really interesting. How many of you can remember sometime this summer looking off into the distance and seeing a huge storm begin to build? Right around you the sun is shining and the sky is bright blue, but off in the distance it's dark gray and moving in fast. The word for sad in this passage is the word ancient meteorologists would use to describe that experience. This man's face went from excited and expectant to dejected and disappointed, all in a single sentence, because he didn't want to give up his great wealth. It really is tragic. At that moment this man had to decide between two treasures, his money or his messiah—between the life he always had and the life he always wanted—and he made the wrong choice.

“Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 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’” (Luke 18:24-25). The point that Jesus made to his audience with this word picture was crystal clear. For the people from Palestine who were listening to Jesus, the camel was the largest animal they had ever seen, and the eye of a needle was the smallest hole they could imagine. As hard as it would be for that to happen, that’s how hard it is for the rich to be saved. **“Those who heard this asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’” (Luke 18:26).** If he can’t do it, who can? **“Jesus replied, ‘What is impossible with man is possible with God’” (Luke 18:27).** And we would be wise to realize just how broadly Jesus is talking here. He’s not saying that it’s impossible for rich people to be saved; he’s saying it’s impossible for anybody to be saved. Rich, poor, black, white, male, female, religious, irreligious—salvation is impossible for all of us. But what is impossible with man is possible with God.

And then as he always seems to do, Peter chimes in: **“Peter said to him, ‘We have left all we had to follow you!’” (Luke 18:28).** That guy wasn’t willing to give everything up to follow you, but we have. What are we going to get? **“‘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 will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life’” (Luke 18:29-30).** Jesus says that those who give up everything always find a reward. God will honor them **in in this age**, which means on this side of heaven, and also **in the age to come**, which means they will receive rewards in heaven and will inherit eternal life.

There are two very clear things for us to focus on in this passage.

Don’t let money take the place only Jesus deserves. Of course, if you are a Christian, the obvious response is, “I would never do that!” But it can happen without our ever realizing it. We all live in a world where we go to work, and hopefully we love what we do, but we are significantly motivated by a paycheck. We need to make money to pay for a place to live and a car to drive, and to insure the place where we live and the car we drive; we have to buy food and clothes and pay for kids. In our modern world, we are forced to think about finances not just every day, but multiple times throughout each day. The gravitational pull of money should never be underestimated. These days, it’s as strong as ever.

Two years ago, the world was caught up in a COVID crisis that impacted finances in a major way. The stock market dropped by 30% in a month; people were selling investments left and right. Then the stock market had one of the greatest growth years in history. People were buying investments left and right. The housing market has gone through the roof—people get on Zillow and find that their house is worth 30 or 40% more than they paid for it just a few years ago. They’ve got all this equity and wonder what to do with it. Interest rates are low, inflation is high. My car is worth more than I paid for it two years ago, which is insane. I have sticker shock walking through the grocery store. There are crypto currencies and NFTs. There has been a greater focus on money in the last two years than anytime I can remember in my adult life. And while money might be morally neutral, it is not emotionally or spiritually neutral. It has a power; it has a pull. It was hard on this guy, the Bible says, specifically because “he had great wealth.” Meaning, the more money you have, the more control and focus finances are likely to have on your life. When you graduate from college and all you have is a car your grandma gave to you and \$200 in your bank account, if Jesus said, “You need to give what you have away so you can focus on me,” it wouldn’t be easy! But it would be a lot easier for a person in that situation to get rid of all their stuff than it would be for a person who owns 2 new cars, a house they have paid off, and a retirement account they’ve spent a few decades contributing to. As with the laws of physics, the more you have, the greater the gravitational pull it has on your heart. If not managed with wisdom and humility, and with the help of the Holy Spirit,

money and the stuff that money can buy quickly claims the focus and energy that rightly belongs only to God. That's why Jesus said: "**You cannot serve both God and money**" (Matthew 6:24).

I've wrestled with this in my own life the last few years. Keren and I have owned a small business for the last ten years. We've enjoyed giving time and attention to it, but sometimes I've noticed it takes too much of my time and attention, if that makes sense. Similarly, with the stock market that was in constant fluctuation the last couple years, I found myself at times paying too much attention to it—staying up at night reading about investment opportunities and companies I've never even heard of before! Of course, there is nothing morally wrong about being an investor, but if it starts competing for your mental and emotional energy, or too much of your time, it can be dangerous, even if you turn an enormous profit. You cannot serve both God and money.

Listen to what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in a sermon from 1953:

Daily within our lives, altars smoke with sacrifices to this idol god. We attribute to the almighty dollar an omnipotence equal to that of the eternal God of the universe. We are always on the verge of rewriting the Scriptures to read, "Seek ye first money and its power and all these other things will be added unto you," or "Money is my light and my salvation, what shall I fear"...Choose which you will serve. Will you serve the transitory god of money which is here today and gone tomorrow or will you serve the eternal God of the universe who is the same yesterday, today and forever? Will you serve the god who is with us only in moments of prosperity or will you serve the God who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and causes us to fear no evil? Will you serve the god whose power is limited to stacking up stocks and bonds or will you serve the God whose creative power stacked up the gigantic mountains as if to kiss the skies and set forth the stars to direct the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity? Choose ye this day whom ye shall serve, the god of money or the eternal God of the universe."

You cannot serve both.

That's the first and unavoidable take away. Don't let money take the priority only Jesus deserves. I want you to take a moment right now to ask God to search your heart and show you if that's happened. If so, ask God to give you the wisdom to know what to do, and the courage to do it. Jesus gave this man wisdom, but this man didn't have the strength or resolve to follow through. Ask God for both.

There's a second take away from this passage. Not only do we learn about not letting money take the priority only Jesus deserves, but we also learn: **Don't let anything take the place only Jesus deserves.** Yes, for this man, his idol, the thing he was more committed to than Jesus was wealth, and wealth might be that idol for some of us, but this passage is really about not allowing anything to come between us and Jesus. Wealth is just one example. For some, if Jesus were talking to us personally today he wouldn't focus on money but rather on our career, or our image, or social media, or sexuality, or alcohol, or sports, or one of our hobbies. C.S. Lewis said, "History is the long, terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy." In his book *Not a Fan*, Kyle Idleman talks about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. He says,

Followers are willing to deny themselves and say, "I choose Jesus. I choose Jesus over my family. I choose Jesus over money. I choose Jesus over my career. I am his completely. I choose Jesus over alcohol and partying. I choose Jesus over pornography. I choose Jesus over a remodeled house. I choose Jesus over my freedom. I choose Jesus over what people think about me." A follower makes a decision every day to deny himself and choose Jesus...even if it costs everything.

The Olympics started just two days ago. Think about the US athletes who decided years ago they wanted to be Olympians. Everything else in their lives revolved around that commitment. They likely moved to a city that was ideal for the training they needed so they could give their full time attention to training, and then everything centered around that goal—the way they ate, the way they drank, the way they slept, the way they socialized—everything to make the Olympics and win the gold. Nobody stands on that platform with a medal around their neck, their flag lifted high and their anthem playing for all to hear, without making that objective the center of their focus and life. The same is true when it comes to following Jesus. We cannot hold on to all our stuff and at the same time take hold of Jesus. It just doesn't work like that! Peter Kreeft said, “If we come to God with empty hands, he fills them. If we come to God with full hands, he finds no place to put himself.” We don't want to find ourselves in that position.

Jesus tells a parable about this. In Matthew 13:14, he said, “**The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.**” He wasn't bummed out that he had to sell all he had to buy the field, because he knew the field was of infinitely higher value than everything else he had. It wasn't an obligation; it was an opportunity. Will we have to give things up to truly follow Christ? Absolutely! We have to give things up when we initially decide to follow Jesus, and then we continually have to give things up in order to grow in our relationship with Jesus—that's part of spiritual maturity and conformity to his image. But we shouldn't do it begrudgingly with a moeey spirit; it's something we do with joy. Years ago I traveled to Mozambique to do mission work. Mozambique is the seventh poorest country in the world, but even though they have so little, when they gather for worship everyone wants to give something. When it's time for the offering, everyone begins to sing—not a somber, reflective song, but a joyful, celebratory, energetic song. And then instead of passing the plate, they place one plate at the center in the front, and starting with the youngest, all the way to the oldest church members, people in their 80s and 90s, people come dancing down the aisle to place their offering in the plate. The poorest people in the world rejoice at the opportunity to give. They give something of great value, and exactly unlike the man in this passage, they lay it down with joy because they know deep in their hearts that Jesus is better than what they are laying down.

I don't know what Jesus may be calling you to lay down, but I do know this: whatever it is, Jesus is better! In the show *Hoarders*, professional organizers come into a person's home and help them get rid of their possessions. That is what God wants to do today. He wants to come in and help you remove the obstacles in your path to following Jesus—money or anything else. The story of the rich young ruler does not teach that we have to sell all of our possessions before we can follow Jesus; it teaches that we must be willing to take everything else off the throne of our lives before Jesus will sit down. And here is the thing: if you refuse, Jesus will let you walk away. If you want to ruin your life by clinging to your stuff and your idols, he will let you, but it will devastate him. The rich man is not the only one who walks away sad in this passage. Jesus has tears in his eyes, too. Jesus came to earth to love him and was preparing to die on a cross to save him, but this man chose to cling to his stuff, rather than his savior. Whatever it is that you might be holding on to, Jesus invites you today to lay it down and take hold of him. Everything else in this world will eventually perish or let us down. Jesus never will.