

The Seduction of Wealth 7-31-05

Matthew 18:13-30

¹³Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. ¹⁴Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." ¹⁵When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

¹⁶Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" ¹⁷"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." ¹⁸"Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁰"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. ²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." ²⁷Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" ²⁸Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

I have intentionally put these two stories in one sermon. We have discussed Jesus' illustration of children being like spiritual children, and seen that their humility and dependency are qualities that are required for entering the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3-4) Those little children were born into sin, but they were not yet at the age when they with understanding deliberately choose to rebel against God. We sometimes refer to that as the age of accountability. The question is often asked whether or not children go to heaven if they should die at a young age. Right here, Jesus said the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

The disciples should have understood the value that Jesus placed on children from Jesus' teaching in the previous chapter. (Matthew 18:5-6) Parents were bringing their children for a blessing. You might recall how Jacob placed his hands on Joseph's children and blessed them. (Genesis 48:14-15) The disciples thought Jesus was too important and too busy for such a little thing. Remember, the disciples, from the time of that journey to Caesarea Philippi, are finally starting to understand that Jesus is the Son of God. (Matthew 16:15-16) Can God be bothered with such little things like blessing children? Not only can He, but that is what He longs to do! Every life is

Commented [notes1]: ³ And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:3-4 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: ⁵ "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. ⁶ But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Matthew 18:5-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁴ But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn. ¹⁵ Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, Genesis 48:14-15 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:15-16 (NIV)

precious to Him. This is one reason we have baby dedications. We present that child to the Lord for His blessing on their life. Are you too busy for children in your midst? God isn't! Are you annoyed by the distractions they bring? Jesus isn't!

This short passage on little children introduces the next passage by way of contrast. We see these little children who are totally dependent on their parents and then we are introduced to a man who wanted to be independent.

¹⁶*Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"*

This story is in all three of the synoptic gospels. I'll draw some of the details out of the other gospels. This man was a wealthy young ruler (*archon*). That may mean ruler of a synagogue. It was quite an honor to be considered an elder at a young age. It makes one wonder if his wealth had some kind of influence on his position. Of course, that never happens today. Right?

It is to his credit that while holding such a position he could humble himself enough to ask Jesus how to find salvation. To ask that you must first recognize that you have not found it, and that the one you are asking knows more than you. But his question presupposes that salvation is by merit; "...*what good thing must I do...*" It is there that we find the contrast with little children that are still at the age when they are entirely dependent on their parents and trust them for their every need.

¹⁷*"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."*

Mark and Luke both have the question as, "*Why do you call me good.*" As I looked at Matthew's version and the others together, a new perspective came to me that I trust is of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is asking this man to consider why he sees Jesus as good. What is it about Jesus that would cause you to ask Him about goodness? The ancient Scriptures declare that God alone is good. (Psalm 14:1; 1 Samuel 2:2) When you see the goodness of Jesus, you are seeing the goodness of God. How is that goodness manifested? We see in the gospels that Jesus was utterly dependent upon His Father, obeying Him completely. That is the same kind of dependency and trust we see in little children with their parents. As a man, Jesus acted at the direction of His Father. His goodness was God's goodness.

A person who trusts another obeys them, so Jesus told him to obey the commandments. The man wasn't satisfied with that. There was quite a debate in that era about which ones were most important and whether or not you could narrow it down to an essential few.

¹⁸*"Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself."*

In asking which ones, we have some further insight into the emptiness this man was feeling. Though he had attained a high position early on in life, he knew he did not have eternal life. That is not just eternal existence, but being alive to the things of God now and forever. He wasn't satisfied. He was looking for more and thought that there must be some action he could take, some step of obedience that would bring him into a satisfying place of peace with God. Do you have eternal life? Are you alive to the things of God?

Commented [notes5]: ¹ The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. Psalms 14:1 (KJV)

Commented [notes6]: ² "There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 1 Samuel 2:2 (NIV)

Jesus had quoted him a few of the commands from the second half of the ten commandments, the ones that have to do with our relationship with one another, knowing full well that this man was dissatisfied with his relationship with God. That is the first half of the commandments. (Exodus 20:12-16) In naming those commands that have to do with actions toward others, I believe Jesus was drawing this man out to a place where he could really see the condition of his heart and the depth of his need. Jesus named the ones he felt most confident that he had kept so that the man would realize eternal life is not found in rule keeping.

²⁰ "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

He may have kept these commands in the world of actions, but has anyone ever kept them in their heart? His perspective is still on what he does and how he does it, as if the peace he sought was attainable by his own attempts at goodness. Yet, he acknowledged that he was missing something.

By getting the man to declare that his works were insufficient to bring peace to his heart, Jesus had prepared him to hear the real answer. Mark tells us that Jesus loved him when he said this. (Mark 10:21) Sometimes the most loving thing we can hear is the most difficult thing to hear.

²¹ Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

The word translated 'perfect' in this passage means complete or whole. Allow me to paraphrase. "Do you want to have what you observe in me? Do you want the peace you see I have? Let go of the worldly goods that are so important to you and follow me in utter dependency on the Father." The surrendering of his goods was not an action earning merit. It was a clearing of the idols that he was dependent upon. Once the things he leaned upon were out of the way, he could abandon himself to God and become dependent upon God, as Jesus was. He could become alive to the things of God.

I hesitate to tell about times when people pray to receive Christ as their Savior with people for several reasons. One of the main ones is that saying the words does not make you a Christian. To make Jesus Lord of your life is more than asking Him into your heart. It is to abandon everything else and become dependent upon Him. (Luke 14:33) When that person who has prayed exhibits no change in their life, when they have no desire for fellowship, no hunger for God's word, no desire to share the truth with their friends and relatives, and no desire to grow spiritually, I can only assume the prayer was something less than accepting Him as Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:17) When He becomes Lord of your life your priorities change. Is He your Lord, or have you been fooling yourself? Are you following Jesus or your own whims and desires? Are you hungry to grow by feeding on His word, or are you doing your religious duty? Are you born again?

I hear people declare that God wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy if we'll just worship Jesus? They say He has a great plan for every life. I believe that but in the same way they mean it. They mean, and the audience hears, God wants you to be famous and rich. Then explain this story in the Bible! Jesus invites us to come and die to ourselves to find out His great plan for us. The plan, the destiny, is death to self and abandonment to God. He wants to live through us as a sacrificial servant of those

Commented [notes7]: ¹² "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ "You shall not murder. ¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ "You shall not steal. ¹⁶ "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
Exodus 20:12-16 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
Mark 10:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.
Luke 14:33 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

we come in contact with. That is being born again. You might be rich or poor, healthy or ill; it doesn't matter. The author of Hebrews wrote we should be content with what we have. (Hebrews 13:5) Our destiny is the life of Jesus manifested through us to a needy world. We need to put Jesus first just like this rich young ruler needed to. He was a needy person and he knew it.

Commented [notes11]: ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)

Jesus put his finger on this young man's god. His wealth made it possible to have the possessions he owned. Through it he obtained status and influence. That gave him the power to be a leader in his community. Would his family understand if he gave away his wealth? (Psalm 17:14) The forsaking of his wealth would have serious repercussions in every area of his life, but what is really important? There are all kinds of gods in our world today. They are things people depend on and trust in other than God. You can tell that is where they place their trust because it is where they turn in time of need. It is the grace of God that gives us a hunger to know peace. It is the mercy of God that stirred this ruler's heart with dissatisfaction until he sought answers. He was waking up the fact that money was his god of choice.

Commented [notes12]: ¹⁴ O LORD, by your hand save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life. You still the hunger of those you cherish; their sons have plenty, and they store up wealth for their children.
Psalms 17:14 (NIV)

If Jesus put his finger on your god this morning, what would it be? Do you trust in your wealth? It is not that money is evil, but the love of money that is the source of all evil. (1 Timothy 6:10) When Jesus puts his finger on the god to whom you turn, you have two choices. You either forsake it and live, or cling to it and harden your heart. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters. You will end up loving one and hating the other. (Matthew 6:24) That is why some people hate Christianity. The message of Jesus has exposed their god. Jesus says their god will leave them empty, but like this man in the story, they can't let go.

Commented [notes13]: 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.
1 Timothy 6:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: ²⁴ "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.
Matthew 6:24 (NIV)

²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. I see a man torn between his desire to know peace as he walked with God and his love for his wealth. Are you torn between two masters this morning? I'd like to think that this man was tormented by his indecision until the day of Pentecost, just a few months later when he became one of the first converts, but sadly that is probably not the case. In walking away, he made his choice. He declared by his actions that he would serve the god of riches and just pretend to be spiritual. He will trust in his riches to see him through this life. (Psalm 49:6-8)

Commented [notes15]: ⁶ They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; ⁷ None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: ⁸ (For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever:)
Psalms 49:6-8 (KJV)

Can you imagine a 3-year-old telling his mother and father that he is going out on his own to get a job and find an apartment? Are you starting to see the connection between this story and the one before? The rich young ruler would not simply trust and obey, becoming dependent on his heavenly Father. He had to do it his own way. He chose his own god. In two months Pentecost would be taking place. Imagine all that this man missed by clinging to his wealth.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."
Why would Jesus tell us the lesson and then repeat it with an illustration? Because it is so important for us to take heed. Wealth has a way of seducing the human heart away from God. If you are an American you are wealthy. If you live in Sedona, you

are very wealthy, probably in the upper 1% of this world's wealthiest. This message is for us. Why is Christianity growing so rapidly in the third world but at a stand still in the Western world? It is because we have been seduced by wealth. We place our trust in our wealth. We have declared it to be our savior by turning to it first whenever we have a problem. The more we have, the more secure we believe ourselves to be. (1 Timothy 6:17) Nonsense! One successful terrorist attack or well placed Electro Magnetic Pulse bomb or an earthquake that dropped California into the sea and our economy would be nothing. Our dollars would be only paper for starting a fire. I'm not trying to scare you, but I am trying to do what Jesus did for that young man, to open our eyes to where our heart is. (Proverbs 23:5)

Commented [notes16]: ¹⁷ Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; 1 Timothy 6:17 (KJV)

Commented [notes17]: Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle. Proverbs 23:5 (NIV)

A camel through the eye of a needle was a colloquialism for impossibility. Wealth cannot earn you a way into heaven. Philanthropy and giving are good things, but you can't earn your way into heaven through it. Why would it be easier for the poor to enter the kingdom? It's because they have an easier time seeing the need to be utterly dependent upon God. This young man wanted to trust in his own works and his finances. (Titus 3:5) He wasn't just on the wrong train, He was totally on the wrong track. Are you on the same track, wanting eternal life but clinging to the world?

Commented [notes18]: ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, Titus 3:5 (NIV)

²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

The Jews thought wealth was a sign of the blessing of God for a righteous life. The Scriptures declare that is not always true, but that is what many believed. (Psalm 52:7) They figured if the righteous people blessed with wealth can't be saved, who can? Then Jesus spoke those words that clarified the whole issue. *With man this is impossible...* For any man, rich or poor, salvation is not attainable.

Commented [notes19]: ⁷ Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness. Psalms 52:7 (KJV)

Go back and look at those commandments the Lord prompted the young man with. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Who can say they've never lusted after a person or property? Do not bear false witness. Who can say honestly they've never implied something that was wrong. Honor you father and mother. Who can say they never thought dishonorable thoughts toward their parents? Love your neighbor as yourself. Who on earth can say they've even come close to that? And that is the easier half of the commandments! It is impossible for man to be righteous. (Psalm 14:3) We can't depend on our good deeds. We must depend on our Father for Whom all things are possible. Even the Old Testament declared over and over that the Lord makes us holy. (Exodus 31:13) He is our righteousness. (Jeremiah 23:6) We must depend on Him for He is the only one that can do it, and He did it for us on the cross.

Commented [notes20]: ³ All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. Psalms 14:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ¹³ "Say to the Israelites, "You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy. Exodus 31:13 (NIV)

²⁷Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" ²⁸Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Commented [notes22]: ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness. Jeremiah 23:6 (NIV)

Peter said that the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. They were putting

Him first in their life, so what was in it for them. Jesus said they would be the judges of Israel. In the book of Revelation we see that their names are on the foundation of New Jerusalem. (Revelation 21:14) What they passed on to us is what the church has been teaching for the last 2000 years.

But Jesus was speaking to us all when He said that whatever you leave for His sake, whatever you must abandon to put Him first in your life, you will receive 100 times as much. If your family rejects you, you have the family of God. If you give up your title, you have a new and greater title that matters in eternity. If you give up your wealth, you will have true wealth. In the message to Laodicea, Jesus told us that what we sometimes value is worthless compared to what He would give us. (Revelation 3:17-18) The problem with this world's gods is that they are a lie. They promise but never deliver. It is always a little bit more to attain satisfaction. You never have quite enough. And then there is the price to pay that is more than we could have ever imagined. The true wealth is life now and forever. It is peace with God. It is living as you were created and designed to live, with heaven's values.

Jesus ended that message by pointing again to the upside down world of the kingdom. Those who are first in this world are most likely to be last in the next. Those who are last in this world, the humble, the simple, the poor, are more likely to be first in the next. Are your eyes set on heaven? Do you see this world with a kingdom of God perspective or are the deceiving gods of this world blurring your vision? As the Holy Spirit puts His finger on your gods and tells you to leave them and follow Jesus, what will your answer be?

Commented [notes23]: ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.
Revelation 21:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.
Revelation 3:17-18 (NIV)