

Words For A Rich Man • Matthew 19:16–29

Lady Astor said, “You can never be too rich or too thin.” Jesus Christ said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus’ words come from a conversation with a guy who seemed to have everything. He was young, he was good, he was powerful, he was rich, and although the Bible doesn’t say it, I’m sure he was thin as well. But he wasn’t satisfied, something was missing from his life. The conversation that Jesus had with this man has become one of the most famous conversations in all of history. The familiar words are found in Matthew 19:16-30.

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

“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.”

“Which ones?” the man inquired.

Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’

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

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.”

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again 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.”

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can

be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

Jesus 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. And 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. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

I like this guy who is talking to Jesus. In fact, Jesus liked him too. The same story is told by Mark in chapter 10 of his gospel. He tells that as soon as Jesus looked at him, he loved him, he was that kind of guy. You know those kind of people, you just look at them and love them. He was great. He was a lovable person. Mark adds a few more action details as well. Mark explains that when this guy came to Jesus, he ran to him and knelt down in front of him.

You’ve had that experience where you really wanted something ...I mean you really, really wanted that. And when you got it, it wasn’t the way you thought it was going to be.

The way I figure it, even though he was rich, young, powerful, he was not pompous or proud or pushy. He was a humble, lovable, honest seeker after God and eternal

life. But something was missing in his life, and even though it seemed like he absolutely had it made, he wasn’t happy. He wasn’t content. He didn’t have peace. It was something very important that was missing.

I think you know that feeling. You’ve had that experience where you really wanted something, a job or an education or a house or a car or a marriage or a child or to get better from being

sick or success. I mean you really, really wanted that. And when you got it, it wasn't the way you thought it was going to be. Somehow you weren't as satisfied as you thought that you would be. You didn't quite have the peace that you expected. There was still that gnawing hunger for something that was still missing.

That's the way he felt. So he ran and fell down before Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" As soon as we hear that, we automatically assume something that's incorrect and I'm not sure that anything I'm going to say here is going to correct it. When we think of eternal life we put the emphasis on time. We say, "Eternal life — that's living forever." But the New Testament doesn't primarily think of eternal life that way. Eternal life in the New Testament is primarily qualitative and only secondarily quantitative. It is the life of eternity, the good life, the God life of eternity that can be gotten here and now. It just happens that that life that is very good lasts for a very long time.

If you just think of eternal life quantitatively, like living forever, that's not really necessarily a good thing. Because forever can mean hell as well as it can mean heaven. The ancient Greeks had an interesting myth about Aurora, the goddess of the dawn. She fell in love with a mortal man named Tithonus. Zeus, the head god of the Greek pantheon, one day offered to Aurora any wish concerning her human lover. She made the wish that he would live forever, so that he could be as she, immortal. Unfortunately, the wish was granted and she failed to ask Zeus that he stay young forever. And so Tithonis grew older and weaker and sicker and feeble and pathetic, but he could never die. So what at first they thought was to be a blessing, in fact turned out to be a terrible curse.

This rich young man asked Jesus how to get the good life more than he asked him how to get a long life. It was, I think, a very good question. It should be everyone's question. Jesus' answer was direct and personal and individual. He said, "If you want the good life, then just live like the good one and that's God. And you do that by keeping his commandments." That made sense. And the rich guy said, "Which commandments?" (After all, there are thousands of commandments

from God.)

But Jesus knew something that this young man had not yet figured out. Then Jesus did something that's brilliant. Instead of just laying the truth on him because he wouldn't have bought it, Jesus sought to lead him to the point where he could understand something that was absolutely profound. Jesus knew that living the good life, eternal life, the life of God, can never happen by obeying commands on the outside. It can only happen by getting the eternal life of God on the inside. A person first has to be transformed on the inside through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

But the rich man wasn't ready for that yet, he had to be led there. And so Jesus led him by reciting five of the ten commandments. He said, "Don't murder, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't lie, and honor your parents." Then Jesus added an extra one which really isn't part of the ten commandments but summarizes them all, "And love your neighbor as yourself."

Then this guy says, "Yup, I did that — I did it all." This guy actually thought that he had done it all. He thought that he had complied with everything that God expected and that he was just perfect. This guy thought deep down inside he had done it all right. So Jesus needed to convince him of the real issue in his life before he would accept Jesus' help. He said to him, "Buddy, you've got to admit your need and you need to remove the barrier that is between you and God. You need to sell all your possessions, everything you've got and give the money to the poor. When you've done that, come and follow me."

Jesus knew that this man could never follow him until he unloaded his wealth because this man loved his possessions. He was proud of his wealth and he found a lot of security in it. Now look, I'm not finding fault with him because, to be perfectly truthful, the more I've got, the more prone I am to become just as he was. It's easy to become kind of proud of the things I've got, to find my security in having some savings and having a home, to be in love with things. There is something about money and possessions that just suck us into them so that they become very, very important in our lives.

There is an old story that dates back to the

time of Christopher Columbus. At that time a lot of pirates and sailors came to the New World in search of wealth. The story tells of a sailor who accumulated a whole lot of gold that he wanted to take back to Europe so he could live out his days as a very wealthy person. But he was afraid that his shipmates or others would steal his wealth from him and so he kept it on his person. He had large pockets filled with gold nuggets and gold coins and sacks of gold dust. Around his neck he had heavy gold chains and on his wrists he had more gold bracelets. He slept with it, worked with it — he had his wealth with him all the time. Unfortunately, one day he fell overboard. His shipmates were trying to save him, but couldn't get to him quickly enough. They shouted to him, "Dump the gold! Take off the chains and bracelets! Empty your pockets!" But he just couldn't do it. He couldn't let go. So he chose to drown rich rather than to live poor. I think he was like this nice, lovable, humble, good, rich young man who went away sad because he had great wealth.

Suppose this were your story. If Jesus were to name one thing that stands between you and him, what would that one thing be? Would you be willing to let it go? Or would you rather keep it and die in sadness without Jesus rather than let go and live eternally with Jesus? Sadly, the rich guy walked away, and Jesus switched his conversation from the rich man to the poor disciples. If I can guess at their positions, Jesus' back was to the rich man but the disciples could see him walking away in the distance.

Jesus was a master communicator and a craftsman with words. And he had a great sense of humor. As the disciples watched the rich man walk away dejectedly, Jesus said to them, "You know, it's really hard for a rich guy to get into heaven. In fact, it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to make it into the kingdom of God."

I don't know about you, but I've never been very good at threading needles. I have tried a few times. I cut off a fresh end, I twist the end, I spit on it, then I try to find a brighter light. It is very

difficult to hold a needle in one hand and the thread in the other hand and a magnifying glass in your teeth and try to get that thread through the eye of a needle. I seem to miss every time. I know I wouldn't have much of a chance of getting a camel through the eye of a needle. I'm not even sure I could get a needle through a camel, much less a camel through a needle! So it seems impossible to me.

It's fascinating how people, especially 20th century Americans, try to explain away what Jesus was saying. Christians and some of them scholars have said, "He can't possibly have meant what he said. There's got to be some other meaning or explanation to this." One of the most creative explanations is that in Jerusalem in those days there were large gates to the city through a thick wall. The caravans with camels as their beasts of burden would come through them. But there was another gate to the city that was so low that only a man could walk through standing up. The only way to get a camel through it would be if you could get the camel to crawl on its knees. They claim the name of the gate was "the eye of the needle." It would be tough to get a camel through the eye of the needle gate, but possible. The idea is that it is tough to get a rich person into heaven, but it's possible.

That's a swell explanation, except did you know that there is no historical or archeological evidence whatsoever for the city of

Jerusalem ever having such a gate or such a name for any type of gate? Somebody made it up. Good explanation, sounds interesting and sort of gets rich folks off the hook, but maybe we should just accept what Jesus had to say. Hyperbole, you say. Yes, I believe it's hyperbole, but let's not explain it away so that we miss the point. It is impossible to thread a needle with a camel. You just can't do it. And Jesus was saying, it is impossible to get a rich guy into heaven, you just can't do it. Jesus really got their attention!

Jesus' disciples were astonished at his words. They said, "Who then can be saved?" The disciples had bought into a very popular philosophy

If Jesus were to name one thing that stands between you and him, what would that one thing be?

of the first century. They figured that God blessed the best, so anybody who was rich and powerful, anybody who had a lot of possessions obviously was blessed by God. And if the richest people were blessed by God, they were in his favor, and they were the ones most likely to make it into heaven. What they were saying was, "If they don't get in, then who is going to get in?"

Jesus gave two explanations. Explanation number one is that God does the impossible. Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Isn't it fascinating that when we talk about how great and powerful God is, we talk about miracles like making sick people well? Jesus says, "Do you want to know something that God can do that you could never do? The greatest miracle of all? God can get a rich man into heaven!" Talk about doing the impossible. But you see, God can do anything. If he needs to, he can remove the wealth; if he needs to, he can find a way around the riches. God can even get a rich man into heaven.

Jesus' second explanation was that God repays sacrifices. Motor-mouth Peter did it again and said, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?" You might think that Jesus would say, "Oh, come on, Peter, stop thinking you're so great." That isn't the way he answered. Jesus said, "What are you going to get? You're going to get it all, Peter. You're a disciple of mine and those who have left their houses and their businesses and their mothers and their fathers and sons and daughters and their brothers and their sisters, those who have made sacrifices to follow me, they will share the kingdom with me and will be the rulers over others. I will give to you disciples one hundred times everything that you have sacrificed and eternal life as well!"

Do you get it? Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Jesus is saying that he wants to be number one in our lives and that nothing must be more important to us than he is. Not money or anything else. And when he is number one, the truth of it is that we may well have to give up some things, some things that we would like to clutch onto at any price. But if we will let go and make Jesus number one, in exchange we will get Jesus

and eternal life and the wealth of heaven forever.

Missionary martyr, Jim Elliot, said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Is Jesus number one for you? Is there any barrier that stands between you and God's very best? Please don't go away this morning rich and sad and without Jesus. Instead, choose Jesus as number one and go away happy and satisfied, with the good life of heaven here and now.

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