

The Man Whose Money Made Him Sad • Luke 18:18-30

Russell Conwell was a pastor in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He traveled America telling a story that raised millions of dollars to found Temple University. The story went like this:

Ali Hafed was a content and wealthy man. He lived in the Middle East near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

One day an itinerant Buddhist monk came to his house and told him a story about the origins of the universe. He said that once upon a time there was a bank of fog that spread across space. God thrust his finger into the midst of the fog and begin spinning it around faster and faster until a ball of fire was formed and was flung through space.

As the ball of fire sped across the universe it began to cool and became our earth. The part that cooled first was coal, what cooled next was copper, then silver, then gold and finally diamonds.

He defined a diamond as a “congealed drop of sunlight”. He told Ali Hafed that if he had a diamond the size of his thumb he could own the entire county. If he owned a diamond mine he could place his children on the thrones of the world.

That night Ali Hafed went to bed neither content nor wealthy. He felt poor because he didn’t own diamonds. The next morning he asked the monk where he could find these congealed drops of sunlight. When the monk asked him why he wanted to know Ali Hafed said he wanted to become very rich. So the monk told him to look where clear waters run over white sands within sight of mountains.

Immediately Ali Hafed began the process of selling his home and business. He made arrangements to leave his family in the care of others. Then he set out on a quest to find diamonds.

Ali Hafed searched through the Middle East and into Palestine. Unsuccessful, he

headed south into Africa, to Kenya and the Mountains of the Moon, but he found no diamonds. He made his way through central Africa and up to the north of Africa and eventually across the Mediterranean Sea. He searched across Europe and ended up at the Pillars of Hercules near Barcelona, Spain. Bankrupt, his health and hope all gone—and still no diamonds—he took his own life by throwing himself into the surf of the Mediterranean.

About this time Ali Hafed’s successor was watering his camel in his backyard when the animal nosed up a large black stone that caught the man’s attention because of the

way it glistened in the sun. He took the stone into his house, set it on the fireplace mantle and pretty much forgot about it.

Then one day that same itinerant Buddhist monk came by again, entered the

house, saw the stone on the mantle and asked, “Has Ali Hafed returned?” Ali Hafed’s successor said, “No, why do you ask?” The monk explained that he saw the diamond on the mantle and assumed Ali Hafed was back. Ali Hafed’s successor insisted that was no diamond, it was just a stone from the brook in the back. The monk insisted and was correct. In fact, they went and searched to find many more diamonds. It was the site of the Golconda Diamond Mine, one to the largest diamond mines ever discovered, producing the famous Hope and Regent diamonds and others later laid into the crowns of the world’s kings and queens.

Russell Conwell would finish the story by explaining, “Ali Hafed searched the world for diamonds when there were acres of diamonds in his own backyard.”

The point of the story is that often what we are looking for in life can be found near rather than afar. It is a story related to another story told about a man who came to Jesus. In the Bible, Luke tells

Good without God is never good enough.

us that he was a ruler. In Jesus' other biographies we are told that he was young and rich. He had it made, but he was not happy.

The story in Luke 18:18-21 starts with a conversation about being good:

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."

This rich young leader was a seeker and that was good. Some people are self-satisfied without God. This man wanted more. He was smart enough, sensitive enough and spiritual enough to realize that money and power and youth were not enough to satisfy the soul. He knew that what he had was not enough to inherit eternal life with God.

There are lots of seekers like him today. Maybe you are one of them. You know you don't have all the answers. You know that there has to be more to life than what you have. You are open to hearing God and finding God.

He called Jesus "*Good teacher*" and asked him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' answer can be misunderstood. Jesus replied, "*Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.*" Some might think Jesus was making a statement about whether or not he (Jesus) was God. While it is true that Jesus was and is fully God that is really not what he was talking about. Jesus wanted to focus the man's attention on God to understand how to inherit eternal life.

Jesus used a very interesting approach. He referred to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were understood to come in two "tables". The first table focuses on how we relate to God and the second table focuses on how we relate to our neighbors. The trouble is, how do we know if we are rightly relating to God? The answer is in the way we relate to our neighbors. In other words, the way we treat other people is a strong indication of whether or not we are truly devoted to God.

Focusing on the second table, the measurable one, Jesus asked this young man if he had kept the neighbor commandments: "*Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.*" Have you

done these things?

He assured Jesus he had kept all these commandments since he was a child: "*'All these I have kept since I was a boy,' he said.*" But, he knew in the depths of his soul that he wanted something more. Something was still missing. He still didn't have eternal life.

What we have here is a man who was good, but without God. He had and still has lots of company. There are many people who really try to live life right. They try to say and do good things, but they just haven't connected to God. Good is not good enough. Good without God is never good enough.

So listen to Dr. Jesus' diagnosis: "*You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*" This was a stunning prescription, one that still continues to alarm people today. People have insisted that Jesus didn't mean what he said. Jesus really didn't mean that this guy was supposed to sell everything in order to be a follower of Jesus Christ, did he? If Jesus *is* saying that we must sell everything we have in order to go to heaven, many of us would rather not go. We would choose to have a few thousand dollars now rather than the kingdom of God forever.

The usual response to this teaching of Jesus is to insist that he did not mean what he said. We try to spin Jesus' words to say something else in order to convince ourselves that we can keep our money and have God too. Let me suggest that Jesus meant exactly what he said. I think he was telling the man that he literally had to sell everything he had and give it to the poor.

The reason was simple—he an idolater. He said he kept the Ten Commandments but he really did not. Money was his god. It was #1. Money was more important than anything else in his life. If it came down to a choice between God and money, money was more important.

How does that apply to us? For some, it is the same. Money is god. "*Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.*" For others, a job is god. For still others it is a relationship. The principle is simple. God must be first. Anything that is more important than God has to go.

When Charleen and I were married, my public

vow to her included the words, “. . . forsaking all others, I will cling to thee and thee alone as long as we both shall live.” I have found her to be very fussy about this vow. She has insisted that there be no one else ahead of her in our marriage relationship. I had to forsake all others to make her first.

God is far more demanding. God insists that no person or thing can come ahead of him in life. We must forsake all others and cling to him and to him alone forever.

Imagine yourself in conversation with Jesus. He examines, diagnoses and prescribes. Is there anything he insists must be forsaken from your life because it is more important than God? If so, it has to go. Don't let anything ever block your path to God and eternal life. Whatever gets in the way has to go.

“When (the rich young leader) heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.” He was loaded and he didn't want to give it away. If he had no money he would not have been so sad. His wealth weighed him down. He was sad because he was rich. What an interesting commentary on his values. The thought of giving his money to the poor saddened him. How unlike God! God loves to give to the poor. This man was a very ungodlike rich man.

Do you ever give to the poor? Have you ever had poor beggars come up to you in some foreign country? What about small children with outstretched hands? Do you remember times

when you saw people along the side of the highway asking for money and carrying signs saying, “I'm homeless,” or “Will work for food”? Is your first thought that they might rip you off if you give them ten dollars? Or is your first thought how much fun it would be to help someone who needs the cash?

If this man was as rich as he seems to have been he could have given away lots of money to the poor without lowering his lifestyle. So it was not that he himself would go hungry or homeless. It was that he wanted to keep his money. He liked having money. He loved his money. The thought of letting go of it made him sad.

Money is attractive, even loveable! It looks good. It feels good. It even smells good.

Jesus made an observation that has also troubled a lot of people since. It is one of his more memorable quotes and is found in Luke 18:24-25:

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 a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Camels were the largest animals in Palestine and the eyes of needles were among the smallest holes people could see. Jesus was using exaggeration to make his point. Do not get hung up on the exaggeration; just get the point. The point is that the richer a person is the easier it is to love money more than God. The richer a person is the less appealing the kingdom of God.

In those days Jews believed that money was an evidence of God's blessing. That's why *“Those who heard this asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’”*

Jesus had some really good news for his followers. Jesus said, *“What is impossible with men is possible with God.”* In other words, it is humanly impossible for a really rich person to love God more

than money, but God can make it happen. Anyone who wants to really put God first and make him #1 will get supernatural help to make it happen. Jesus can put it in a person's heart to give up wealth to follow him.

Peter was one of Jesus most vocal followers. He

had given up his fishing business and just about everything else to follow Jesus full-time. He wanted to remind Jesus what he had done so he said, *“We have left all that we had to follow you.”*

Not long ago I had a conversation with a couple that sounded a lot like Peter. After many years of education and what looked like a very successful professional career they decided that to truly follow Jesus Christ meant that the husband had to quit his job. That was a hard decision. They have young children. This was done months ago. I asked them what they were doing for money and how they were going to eat. They said it is getting hard. But, they

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also said they would make the same decision if they had it to do over again. They gave up a lot to follow Jesus. This is not just some ancient religious theory. This is what this couple did last November after much prayer and discussion as a couple and family. They are now experiencing the results.

Listen carefully to what Jesus said to Peter and to this couple:

“I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or wife or brothers 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.”

Does this mean that this couple will come out ahead financially? I think they probably will, but that is not the point. The point is that God will satisfy those who put him first. He will satisfy their souls. He will give them good. He will meet their needs. They will not be sorry.

David Livingstone was a successful English physician who left the comfort and success of his career to explore and open Africa for Christian missions. He never became rich. He suffered a crushed arm in a lion attack. He battled tropical diseases. He faced terrible dangers.

The English journalist, Sir Henry Stanley, tracked him down in order to write his story for the whole British Empire to read. When asked about his great sacrifices Livingstone answered, “Sacrifices? I never made a sacrifice in all my life.”

God did something supernatural in his life. God gave him something better than money. God satisfied his soul. God made him happy. If you visit Westminster Abbey in London you will see the tombs of kings and queens, poets and generals and hundreds of other great English heroes. But the most famous tomb of all is in the most prominent place, the center aisle of the main nave of Westminster Abby. It is the tomb of David Livingstone.

God takes care of those who live for him.

“ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus said to them, ‘no one who has left home or wife or brothers 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.’ ”

Let me tell you about a man I met who described himself as the ultimate seeker. He became very successful in one of America’s largest stock brokerage

houses. His goal was to make money, be happy and join the best country club. This continued for years. He joined a church. He was elected to the church board. But something was missing. He told me that he knew he wasn’t happy although he wasn’t exactly unhappy.

He searched more. He identified every Christian he could find who seemed to have what he was lacking, invited them out to lunch and asked them what he needed to know. Finally he came to pray a simple prayer of faith. In his case, it wasn’t to accept Jesus as Savior but to ask God to show him the way. God did and Jesus transformed his life.

When he was telling me his story we were riding in his Lexus. But it was obvious that the car did not much matter. He had found what he sought for so many years. He found a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ that made God #1 in his life.

I asked him why it took so long. He said that no one ever asked him to give his life to Jesus. He said that even during all those years in church he was never once invited to ask Jesus Christ to become the Lord of his life.

Maybe that’s your story. I want to invite you today to come to Jesus Christ. Believe in him. Give him your life. Be willing to give up anything that stands in the way. Surrender completely. Tell God today.

One last thing! The man in the Lexus told me that the day he was invited to fully commit to God through Jesus Christ the person who helped him in the process told him to do two things. Number one, tell God; and number two, today tell someone else what you told God.

I think it was good advice. Tell God and then tell someone else what you told God.

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