

48. The Rich Ruler

Luke 18:15-30

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

In his narrative of the life of Jesus, Luke went from the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:14) to give us three examples of Jesus meeting individuals, viz. a rich ruler, blind Bartimaeus, and Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Before we meet the rich ruler, Luke shows us Jesus' interaction with babies and children.

The Little Children and Jesus

¹⁵People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. ¹⁶But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁷I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:15-17).

The New International Version translates the Greek word *brephos* as *babies*. The word was used for babies, unborn babies, infants, or toddlers. In verse 16, Luke uses the Greek word *paideia*, the word for child, when He called the children to come to Him. These children were of walking age. It could be that the parents were carrying their babies in their arms, but they also had young children and toddlers coming to Him. I picture them wanting to climb up onto His lap while the disciples assume that He did not want to be bothered.

Question 1) Why were these parents bringing their children to Jesus for Him to touch them? For what do you think these parents were hoping as they brought their children to Him?

In Old Testament times, both Isaac and Jacob blessed their children and grandchildren (Genesis 27:25-30; 48:14). The passage records Jacob, also known as Israel, laying hands on his grandchildren. It was believed that there was an impartation of some aspect of a person's character or spirit that could be communicated to another. We see many examples of this happening in the Old and the New Testament. One such instance is in the life of Moses.

Moses was revered for the power and anointing upon his life, but he became tired of leading so many people, so much so that He said to God, "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me" (Numbers 11:14). God took some of the Spirit on Moses and put the Spirit on the seventy elders chosen by Moses (Genesis 11:25). The giftedness and anointing of the Spirit that was on Moses was transferred to seventy others.

This giftedness of the Holy Spirit was also something that the apostle Paul wanted for the churches he had planted: "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (Romans 1:11). And, of course, his protégé, Timothy, had received of this spiritual impartation by the laying on of hands: "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14).

The parents who had brought their babies and children recognized Jesus as the Prophet they were expecting; the One Moses said that God would send: **“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15).**□

They had undoubtedly heard the stories of Jesus’ teaching and His power to heal. They wanted this holy Man to bless their children in the hope that He would be able to impart something of His Spirit to their children and babies. It would not be out of place for us believers in Christ to also lay hands on our children and grandchildren and pray over them, speaking blessing to them as Isaac and Jacob did. It may be something that you would like to do as your children settle down in bed. Ask God to fill them with His peace and presence. Pray for them to walk with the Lord. If you do take time to do this with your kids and grandkids, you will find that these moments of blessing become special times with them.□

It is a sad thing that these disciples had now walked with Jesus for close to three years, and they were scolding the parents for bringing their children to Jesus. Luke doesn't tell us why the disciples were trying to hinder the parents from bringing their children. It could be that they were trying to protect Jesus’ time and energy from things they considered of little value. They still had lots to learn, and only weeks before Christ would be taken from them.

You can tell a lot about people by the way they relate to children. Children are very perceptive when it comes to acceptance and rejection. A characteristic of the Spirit of Christ resting on a person is that children will enjoy being around them. Some pastors considering a new employee to a church have been known to test out a person’s servanthood and character by arranging meetings with kids around, watching how they treat children, as well as waiters in restaurants. Jesus corrected His disciples and turned His attention toward the children, making them feel loved and valued. How welcoming He was and is toward all who wish to come to Him. It was a teachable moment for the disciples when Jesus said that the kingdom of God **“belongs to such as these.”** In fact, after teaching His disciples on being childlike, the Lord then stated a solemn truth about receiving the Kingdom of God like a child: **“I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (v. 17).**

Question 2) What do you think are the characteristics that Jesus sees in children that He would like for us to emulate as adults?

Babies and children are helpless and dependent on others. Our heavenly Father also wants that characteristic to be part of all who walk with Him. The fruit of the Spirit characterizes the Kingdom of Heaven. The fruits of the Spirit, e.g., love, joy, peace, etc., can become so integrated into our character that it is unnatural for us to tell a lie, to cheat, or steal.

I remember reading the book, *The Hiding Place*, written by Corrie Ten Boom. The Ten Boom family were living in occupied Holland during the Second World War and hiding Jews from the Nazis, who were rounding them up for the death camps of the Holocaust, the massacre of six million Jewish people. When the Nazi soldiers came to their house looking for some Jewish nephews, Corrie Ten Boom’s sister, Betsie, was asked where the nephews were hiding. Corrie was terrified, for she knew her sister could never lie. The nephews were hiding under the kitchen floor, with a rug and a table pulled over the opening. Betsie blurted out the truth, "They're under

the table!" and laughed hysterically. The soldiers looked under the tablecloth and saw nothing, not realizing the fact that they *were* under the table; they did not look under the rug to find the opening. The Nazi soldiers assumed that Betsie was crazy and looked no further. What amazed me is the fact that Betsie could not lie. In that instance, when she needed it, God gave her wisdom to say the truthful thing but in a way that still protected the Jewish children. She demonstrated a childlike faith and a character that clung to the truth of God's Word. The kingdom of God belonged to Betsie and all those who live a childlike trust in God. □

The words, "**The kingdom of God belongs to such as these**" (v. 16), indicate that those who are like the little ones belong to the kingdom. He wasn't speaking only about the children He was holding; Christ was talking about all children of God that enter the Kingdom of God through childlike faith. The children were an object lesson of those who enter the Kingdom of God.

Those of us who are parents learn much from our children. Children are so open to the truth of the Gospel. When they hear that God loves them and that He created the world and everything in it, they are not suspicious or unbelieving. They marvel at the story that Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth to die in their place. It is not hard for children to humble themselves and receive Him into their lives. When Simeon, my son, was just a child, we used to play a game where I put him on a high place and had him jump into my waiting arms. He always trusted that I would catch him, and he was never suspicious of my motives. Trust and faith are easy for children. Color of skin has no drawback to them, either. Prejudice is something that people learn; we are not born with it. Children are also very accepting, innocent, and open until life teaches them otherwise. We would do well to receive the King and His Kingdom in the same way a child does.

The Rich Ruler

¹⁸A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'" ²¹"All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "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." ²³When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth (Luke 18:18-23).

In a parallel passage, Matthew tells us that this man was young (19:20), yet very rich and that he was also a ruler, more than likely describing a synagogue ruling official (Luke 8:41). How he became a rich ruler at so young an age, we are not told. Few of the religious rulers had any time for Christ, yet this man seems compelled to get an interview with Jesus. He was so serious about finding eternal life that Mark tells us that he ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before Him (Mark 10:17). His luxurious robes, I'm sure, were all muddied in the dirt while he was on his knees, blurting out, "**Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**" One of Satan's schemes to deceive a man from turning to Christ is to have him look for things he can do to please God. People hope that God will see how hard they are trying to please Him and reward their work by opening the door of the kingdom to them. They plead their good works thinking that they have earned their way.

I remember sharing Christ on the streets in England with a man who told me that he would be alright on the Day of Judgment, for he had helped two men escape from a crashed airplane. He was hiding his sin behind his good work, thinking God would excuse his sin. Satan enjoys watching people work hard at trying to please God with their good works. He is the master of deception.

The young ruler may have witnessed Jesus' attitude toward the children and saw something of the nature of God. Watching Jesus blessing the children may have convinced him that this was more than a mere mortal in front of him. He had a question going on in his mind: **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”** (v. 18). This man had no assurance of salvation even though he had worked hard all his young life to gain peace with God.

Jesus responded first by saying, **“Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone”** (v. 19). It's possible that Jesus was wondering if the Spirit had revealed to the rich man who Jesus was, viz. the Messiah, for God alone is the only One who can claim to be good. The Lord was so encouraged when Peter recognized Him, saying, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”** (Matthew 16:15-17). The Lord longs for our eyes to be opened by the Holy Spirit, revealing to us who Jesus really is. I love the way the Lord gently leads him to the Scriptures. He points the rich ruler to five of the Ten Commandments.

Question 3) Do you think it is possible to find peace with God by keeping the commandments? Why did Jesus point to the commandments in answering the man's question?

Before a man can receive the kingdom of God, he must first see how far short of perfection he has fallen. The standard God demands is perfection:□

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

Our problem is that we are sinners by nature and fall far short of the standard God requires. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. It is in our very nature to sin. No matter how good a person thinks he is, just one sin makes him fall short of perfection and needful of God's grace and mercy.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

The Law and Commandments were given as a means for us to see how we have transgressed over the line into sin. How would we have known what sin was without the Ten Commandments? Paul the apostle wrote: **“No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law, rather through the law we become conscious of sin”** (Romans 3:20). The importance of the law cannot be overstated. How can one need a Savior if he has never been convinced of his need? Presenting the Gospel with no accompanying message of how a person has fallen short of God's glory seriously minimizes the message to a person's heart. A person loves much when he sees how much he has been forgiven. Jesus stated it like this: **“He who has been forgiven little loves little”** (Luke 7:47). The greater our perception of our personal sin is to a

holy God, the greater is our love response when we are forgiven our sin. God is looking for a love relationship with His bride, the church, i.e., you and me.

We have an inner judge, our conscience, which tells us before we sin, that what we are about to do is wrong. It punishes us as a judge if we do not listen to that inner voice and still go ahead and sin. The Internal Revenue Service received the following letter from a conscience-stricken taxpayer:

“Dear Sir: My conscience bothered me. Here is \$175.00, which I owe in back taxes.”
There was a P.S. at the bottom that read: “If my conscience still bothers me, I’ll send in the rest.”¹

This rich young man’s conscience was bothering him. John Trapp said, “Conscience is God’s spy and man’s overseer.” A guilty conscience is like driving your car with the red oil light on your car dashboard telling you to stop and fix the problem. Somehow, the young man knew that all was not well with his soul. He had the good sense to run to Jesus to get it fixed. Jesus pointed him back to the commandments so that he could see how far short he fell. The Lord quotes the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, i.e., the ones relating to how a person relates to others in this life. Shrugging off his conscience, he claimed to have kept the commandments since he was a boy, but something was still missing. The Lord saw his heart as only God can do and told him to sell all he had and give it to the poor.

Question 4) We don’t find Jesus giving this condition to anyone else, so why would He instruct this young man to sell everything and give it to the poor?

This rich young ruler’s problem was that he loved things more than he loved God. To be a disciple requires that we give up ownership of all that we have. Jesus said: “**In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple**” (Luke 14:33). When we give our lives to Christ, ownership of all we have and all we are, passes to the Lord. He owns everything! From that point onward, we are stewards or managers of God’s property. He doesn’t always require that we give up all we have, but we are to be willing to sacrifice if called upon by the Lord. He bought us for Himself when He died on the cross. That’s why He is called LORD. If He is not Lord of all, He’s not Lord at all.

Some people do not want to trust God with something they have not yet put in His hand. Abraham waited so long for a son that, when God gave him Isaac, the Lord had to deal with him by requiring him to sacrifice his son on Mount Moriah, now called Jerusalem, the place where God required the sacrifice of His Son. Of course, God stepped in and stopped Abraham, but it remains that God is jealous for our love and trust in Him – first. He is teaching us to trust Him. The Lord considered this young man’s soul and saw that he was holding something back and that it was keeping him from surrendering his life to God. Whatever crutch on which we lean in life, God wants to kick it away until we lean only on the finished work of Christ. Christianity is not a crutch; it is a wheelchair: we lean our total trust on Christ alone.□

¹ 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching, Michael P. Green, Page 79.

The rich man walked away with shoulders slumped and face downcast because the one thing he was holding onto kept him from enjoying the spiritual rest of Christ. There is a rest for our souls when nothing is held back, or kept in reserve, or leaned upon. Don't let anything hold you back from total abandonment to Christ. He will be there to support you. That is the essence of faith.

Meditations on Riches

²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!
²⁵Indeed, 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." ²⁶Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"
²⁷Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." ²⁸Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" ²⁹"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 ³⁰will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 18:24-30).

In a similar passage in Matthew's Gospel, when the young man heard the entry requirement, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Matthew 19:22). The Lord did not go after him and renegotiate the terms. After all, a rich man coming to church could do a lot of good. Jesus watched him walk away, saying that it was a hard thing for a rich man 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."

Three common explanations help us to understand Jesus' words. One suggestion is that the eye of the needle refers to a small door in the walls of a city. Tour guides in Israel, for instance, will point you to a small door at Bethlehem called the Eye of the Needle door. They say that the little door stopped raiders riding into the city on their horses, raiding and pillaging, and then riding out again. When a merchant would come in with his camels, they had to be stripped of everything and had to bend down low to get into the city.

The second explanation put forward by Origen and Cyril of Alexandria was that *kamēlon* was a misspelling of the word, "rope," *kamilos*. For those that hold to that view, it should read, "It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle." One would have to unravel every strand of the rope to get it through the needle.

The third possibility is that Jesus was saying that, just as it is an impossible task to get a camel through the eye of the needle, in the same way, is it an impossibility for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. This is a figure of speech from Mesopotamia. The saying there was of trying to thread an elephant through the eye of a needle. Of course, there were no elephants in Israel, so it was changed to the largest animal, the camel. What Jesus was saying was that it was an impossibility for a rich man to be saved by trusting that his riches had any merit on his spiritual bank account.

The disciple's response was one of amazement. They said, "Who then can be saved?" (v. 26). The Jewish people saw the rich as those who were blessed of God and accepted by Him. Their thought was that if the rich could not get in, how could the poor? However, it is the same for rich

and poor alike: salvation is an impossibility for men, but with God, all things are possible. It is impossible for man to make it on his own terms. There is only one way, i.e., through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ for you and as you. What's impossible for man is possible with God. The good news is that God has made a way. Jesus is *the* way! His substitutionary death on the cross was in the place of guilty man. He died for you and as you. God Himself paid the price of death. □

Peter wanted confirmation that they were doing enough. They had left all to follow Christ. The Lord's encouraging word to them is that they and all who follow Him shall receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come, i.e., eternal life. I personally have found a depth of relationship far higher among my brothers and sisters in Christ than that of my own family. For everything that the Lord requires us to give up, there is so much more of life's true riches to be gained. □

The great English cricketer, C.T. Studd, was born into wealth and luxury in the 1870s. He received the most exceptional education that money could buy, e.g., attending Cambridge University where he became captain of the English national cricket team. Studd was considered England's greatest cricketer. He had everything going for him, e.g., a huge fortune laid at his feet at the death of his father. However, God had a different plan for him than wealth and fame in this world. He went to hear D.L. Moody speak about Christ and, at the end of the message, gave His life to the Lord. He chose to give up his estate and his fortune, and he gave it all to mission work by even going himself to China and then India and Africa, too. To many people, that decision was a rash move and a colossal waste of intellect and ability. However, to Studd and six others who went, it was using their ability to the fullest. They laid down their will to God's call and purposes. "Yet not my will but yours be done." He once said:

If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him (C.T. Studd).

How about you, dear reader. Have you come to that place in your life where you are willing to put your all into His hands? Have you ever laid down your will to Christ? Keeping the Law of God cannot save you; your religious system cannot save you—only a perfect sacrifice can save you—Jesus Christ, the good Teacher. □

Prayer: Father, may we each become like little children in our receiving of the things of the Kingdom of God. Grant us childlike trust and faith to abandon all into Your capable hands. Amen.

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