

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE - Rev. Stephen Wisthoff
Nov. 15, 2009 Matthew 19:16-30
The Fullness of Giving

The Rich Young Man

- ¹⁶ Now 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,
- ¹⁹ honor 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?"
- 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."
- ²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.
- ²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.
- ²⁴ 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."
- ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"
- ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."
- ²⁷ Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"
- ²⁸ 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.
- ²⁹ 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.
- ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

"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." There is a method used for catching monkeys in India. This is how it is done. A narrow-necked pot, filled with grains, bananas or other eatables that monkeys love, is placed on the ground as a bait to trap them. As a monkey comes to take the grains or fruit, he puts his hand into the narrow-necked pot and grabs hold of the grains. Now, since his hand is full of grains, he cannot take his hand out of the narrow-necked pot and escape. In greed, thus the foolish monkey does not open his hand and let go of the grains so that he can escape. Since he will not let go of the food because of greed, he gets trapped and caught. Stupid monkey, by holding on to a few grains, he loses his freedom to roam around the forest where he can find abundance of grains and fresh fruits of his liking. In other words, for a

little food, he loses his entire world! Now caught and bound, he cannot freely play and enjoy life to his heart's liking. Instead, he is made to dance door to door by his captor.

This also perfectly describes the man in our story today. It also describes us. We so highly value our possessions that we are willing to trade it for the freedom of knowing Christ and the joy of serving him. I have come to believe that as 21st century Christians, we have been approaching stewardship more from a "Pay the bills" model than we have real biblical stewardship and tithing. It is important for us to know that tithing is not about the church as much as it is about YOU and your relationship with God. It is not a matter of God taxing us, but rather a spiritual discipline that ought to exist in the life of the believer.

In today's text, we become acquainted with a man known as the Rich young ruler. It sounds like he had everything going for him. He was Rich, he was young and he had power as a ruler. You will notice that in his title, we see the three characteristics that people are chasing after today: Wealth, youth and power. His title and conversation with Jesus is all we know about him except that he was also a devout Jew who was very intent upon keeping the law. Yet somehow he wasn't altogether satisfied that his life was in order. Something seemed to be missing. So he came to Jesus expecting to hear something else he could DO to be a better person. He kept the Jewish law which is what was expected, but he probably asked one too many questions – "What else can I do?" And Jesus dropped the bomb. **"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 Bible only says that the man walked away sad, because he had great wealth. He was the monkey with his hand in the jar.

If you are like me, you probably find this passage troubling. What is this saying to us? What did Jesus mean? Are we supposed to take all our possessions, sell them and give the money to the poor? Is that what God is asking of us? What is the message in this? Jesus had a marvelous ability to read people. Like the woman at the well whom he read like an open book, he could also look into the life of this Rich Young Ruler and basically know more about the man than the man knew about himself.

He could tell that the Rich Young Ruler had an attitude of piety. He had kept the law and all the commandments and he was feeling pretty good about himself. But the problem is, he was separating his spiritual life and righteousness, eternal life and all the elements of RELIGION over on one side, and it never crossed his mind that his finances and his wealth were part of his spiritual gifts and righteousness. He was thinking, "well, I've got it all covered. I do this religion thing quite well. I pray, keep the law, offer my sacrifices. BUT Jesus is saying, "But what about the rest of this? What are you doing with your money? How are you investing? What are your priorities? Do you honor me with your wealth?"

Here are a few Biblical truths about money. The first one is that the problem is not in the amount, it is in the attitude. Do you remember the story of the Widow's Mite? Jesus was watching people bring their alms to the Temple. He saw rich people putting in large sums. Jesus this poor widow put her penny into the Temple Treasury and he called his disciples together and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all

the others. She had so little to give, yet she gave a large portion of it. In today's terms suppose she had \$1000 a month to buy groceries, pay her rent and buy medicine. But this woman took \$100 – money she could have used for necessities, and she gave that \$100 in the form of a tithe.

Jesus was making the point that it is not the amount that makes a difference. Remember I said earlier, that it is not about the church, it is about the giver's relationship with God. It is about the love and trust of the one giving. The widow trusted God and loved God enough to give sacrificially – and she knew God would take care of her. The Rich young ruler did not have that trust. He could not let go of his wealth because he trusted in it rather than God – the giver of all things. He was religious, but he sure didn't trust God. He had separated his wealth and security from his relationship with the God he said he trusted.

Another problem we see with the Rich Young Ruler that Jesus points out is that money and wealth – especially the LOVE of money and wealth – is nearly an insurmountable obstacle in the life of any person. After the man went away sad, Jesus continued the lesson with his disciples. Vs. 23. **“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 heaven.”**

I've heard over the years that the eye of the needle is referring to a gate in the city of Jerusalem that has a low clearance and the camel has to get down on his knees to go through that gate. I don't buy that interpretation. I think Jesus is exaggerating this point because he wants to let the disciple know that money is a huge obstacle to discipleship and knowing Jesus.

It can be a good thing. J.L. Kraft was a Sunday school teacher for 42 years and a huge giver to North Shore Baptist Church, American Baptist missions and to Green Lake as well as dozens of other ministries. He did this all while developing the largest cheese and food processing plant in the world. He said, **“The only investment I ever made which has paid consistently increasing dividends is the money I have given to the Lord.”** His loyalty was to God first and then his business. That is not an easy thing for anyone to do. Normally, the wealthy person would walk away sad like the Rich Young Ruler.

Finally, we learn that few are willing to risk divesting themselves of whatever provides them security in this life to enter a new quality of life under God's rule. Like the monkey, we just can't trust God enough to let go of what is in the jar. In our refusal to trust God to take care of us, we are missing out on the joy of life in his hands. We sing that song at camp, “He's God you and me brother, in his hands – he's got you and me sister, in his hands – He's got the whole world in his hands. “Sure, as if we are going to let him hold us in his hands.” The Rich young ruler didn't, are we able?

There is no single attitude of giving found in the church. Here are a few common attitudes and can be found in your bulletin today. You can determine for yourself where you fit. I don't want to spend a lot of time on this because I could easily spend another half hour and I think you would like to eat lunch today. Across the top are the various theologies and down the left side is the varying views and ideas on money.

The **POVERTY THEOLOGY** says that money is bad and we should get by on as little as possible buying the cheapest we can find. The **PROSPERITY THEOLOGY** is the opposite of that. It believes that when we are righteous, then God gives us all kinds of money and material things. It is our reward for being good. The **AMERICAN DREAM** says that we as Americans ought to pursue the material wealth by our hard work. Our possessions are **OURS** to do as we wish. We should “get all we can and can all we get.” Much of our credit and borrowing crisis of this past year is the result of this thinking. What we have done is merged our American economic system with our beliefs about God. We want to be comfortable and we want everything to be convenient.

But none of these theologies are the **BALANCED BIBLICAL MODEL**. According to the Bible, we have no possessions. God has them and he gives them to us to take care of. It is not a right, but a privilege. It also means we are hanging on to these possessions only long enough to release them. It is generosity thinking. Helping the poor, giving to God, relinquishing our money and material possessions as there is need around us.

So what is your Theology? I’m thinking that although the Rich young Ruler isn’t American, he certainly is of the American Dream Theology. He is busy accumulating and hanging on to his wealth. He figures it’s his right to do with it what he wants. He has separated his wealth and his religion. I’m hoping that by understanding the difference between Stewardship giving and living these other giving theologies, God can begin to change our hearts. Do we trust God? Are willing to let go and allow God to take care of us? Amen.