

Storing up treasures in Heaven:

A discussion of Jesus' teachings on money

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The idea of living in poverty and denying oneself riches and comfortable lifestyle is not a popular aspiration for most characters in literature. In the New Testament biblical literature, the idea of living, denying, and forsaking all earthly gain is certainly a central theme. This topic is nearly non-existent in the Old Testament; however, throughout the New Testament, Jesus espouses this belief in his teachings to his disciples, the Pharisees, rich men, and even the poor. In Luke 18:18-30, there is an interesting scene regarding this concept when Jesus interacts with a young rich man. According to Luke and other passages in the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus taught that in order to have a fulfilled, abundant life that glorifies God, one must be prepared to leave all earthly treasures in pursuit of God's Kingdom. Within this theme of obtaining earthly riches, Jesus presents the reader with a glimpse of how to obtain eternal life by not simply following rules, storing up treasures in heaven, and trusting in God to obtain a greater reward.

This text from Luke gives insight to what Jesus really wanted from people if they desired eternal life. So often in literature people are seeking more material possessions and earthly fame in order to be satisfied with life. In this passage, a rich man comes to Jesus and asks what he can do to inherit eternal life (18). The following discussion will examine Jesus' answer and what implications this teaching has on its Christian readers. This essay will stray from summarization, focusing mainly on interpretation of the meaning and connection with other Scriptures in the New Testament. In some cases, a synopsis will be necessary; nevertheless the main point will be deciphering the importance of this story for understanding who God is in the scope of biblical literature.

On the surface, Jesus shows that obtaining eternal life is more than following the rules that God has set before humans, which is made known through the Law of the Old Testament. The rich man first comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Initially, this rich man calls Jesus "Good Teacher" to preface his question. Jesus says, "Why do you call me Good? No one is good except God alone" (19). He is not saying that he is inferior to God,

rather Jesus is saying to this man, “Do you know *who* I am?” Jesus is most likely implying to be God. This is a theological point, yet it is not the *main* point for the purposes of analyzing the theme of this passage. Essentially, Jesus is playing a mind game with this man by asking a trick question. From Jewish Scriptures in the Old Testament, it would be widely known that people are inherently bad and that only God is good. If Jesus were to ask a question of this manner, it would be as if he were to say, “If you knew who I was, you would truly call me Good and you would know what you have to do in order to get to heaven.” With this, Jesus sets up for his explanation of what this man must do to gain everlasting life.

The second question that Jesus responds with is if the man has kept the commandments. This man responds that he has kept all these commandments. Looking at the Bible holistically, keeping all of the commandments is technically impossible. James 2:10 says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” Jesus is not being legalistic with his questions; rather he is building up to having mercy, love, and compassion, which will be seen later in the passage. In Matthew 9:12-13, Jesus is seen eating with sinners at Matthew’s house. The Pharisees are outraged at Jesus and He said, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice.’” Jesus makes it clear in those verses that he does not want people to sacrifice things for the sheer essence of giving something up. Likewise, in the conversation with the rich man, Jesus continues probing, as he seeks to find what this young man really hopes in.

If this man is rich, one can assume that he is educated and trained in some sort of Jewish law. This certainly can be seen as a stretch of imagination as he is not a Pharisee or Sadducee; however the possibility is very plausible. He would understand this idea of compassion, forgiveness, and love—all qualities of God throughout Jewish history. The Apostle Paul espouses this view in a few of his letters, arguing that the Law brings death—not life (Romans 4:15). In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul writes that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” This letter is the letter of the Law—the Torah, the Ten Commandments of Jewish tradition—that Paul is referring to.

Without the Law, how would people know what sin is? Jesus is attempting to bring to light things this man has done that are wrong. Still, though, the man admits he has kept all the commandments. Jesus does not dig deeper into that issue. Rather, he moves to the deeper problem that lies in this man's heart: greed.

In verses 22 through 25, Jesus presents a very harsh reality. These words from Jesus are painful, uncomfortable words for the reader to hear. In America today, people are cultured to think that living a lush life in the suburbs, driving an expensive vehicle, and having the 'perfect job' is the objective and purpose of this life. The philosophy that Jesus presents is the same as he does in Matthew 6:20, which says, "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." To Jesus, and other primary passages in the Gospels, it is clear that earthly riches are worthless in the eternal perspective because they can be lost, ruined, or wasted. For the rich man, the rubber meets the road on the question of selling his wealth.

"Yet lackest thou one thing," Jesus said, "sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me" (22). For all intents and purposes, what Jesus says here is "Sell it all and don't even bother to keep the profit. Give that to the poor, too! If you do this and become my disciple, you'll have your reward for you in heaven." This section of Luke's account shows Jesus' heart for compassion—especially for the poor. The instruction Jesus gave was not to just sell the possessions for the sake of self-denial. The second part of the clause was to give the profit to the poor, the broken hearted, the homeless, the afflicted, the widows, the forgotten people of society. Scriptures show that Jesus did not present a "moral improvement program." His goal was to save sinful people. On the other hand, loving the unlovable and engaging the less fortunate is a major lesson that Jesus presents throughout the Gospels.

The man responds by becoming sad very quickly. Jesus probably looked at this man and most likely had compassion on him, perhaps just as sad as the rich man was. This rich man

could have been in tears, or perhaps shocked in unbelief at Jesus' thoughts. Without a doubt, he is torn, devastated, confused, and overwhelmed because he is extremely rich and he wants to keep his wealth, but also wants everlasting life. This dichotomy appears constantly in the Gospels. Jesus taught about money more than any other subject—almost 13% of the time as a matter of fact. In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6, Jesus said, "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (24). The notorious "eye of the needle" verse in verse 25 of Luke 18 gives an illustration of the difficulty that rich people have in entering heaven. Why is it so hard? The reason for the rich man being sad is that he already has everything he needs to survive. Why would he think he needs God to save him? Why would he need anything to make a "future investment" in to find fulfillment? These are complex issues that are rooted deep in one's life and take time to become free from.

It is easy to see this in relation to society today. So often, the rich are the ones who feel the need to depend only on themselves. This is not the 'rule', still it is a common theme in literature outside of the Bible as well. In New Testament literature, God and His kingdom is continually compared with the eternal, the unseen, the imperishable. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:18, "...for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." This simple phrase captures the core of Jesus' teaching: money and this world will not last forever, but God's kingdom will. This section of the passage poses an interesting issue. One could interpret this passage to say that Jesus is teaching that one must do good works to get to heaven (i.e. give money to the poor). Again, this is a theological issue, but it stands out enough in the literature to deserve some examination.

The implication that Jesus makes in answering the rich man is that if one wants to live a righteous life and obtain eternal life, then being prepared to leave riches for God's kingdom is essential. The famous Christian author, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Until you have given up your self to Him

you will not have a real self.”¹ This quote is not a commentary on the passage from Luke, yet Lewis shows that finding who oneself is relies solely on being vulnerable before God with the totality of one's life. Again, rich people often have a problem with letting go of the world's benefits. On the other hand, it is easy for a broken person who is homeless and poor to say, “I have nothing left, I might as well try God.” This is the point that Jesus is trying to make by saying, “For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Lk 18:25).

People are carnal, earthly, and fleshly. Paul wrote about the temporal and eternal for a reason: people struggle with the idea of forsaking things that are seen for a greater inheritance. In Matthew 13, Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a man who was seeking an expensive pearl. When he found it, Jesus said, “[He] went and sold all that he had, and bought it.” Here is the same thought process that Jesus had in dealing with the rich man. The kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is so much more valuable than any riches in this world. Jesus wanted to instill the urgency in people to sell it all for the sake of heaven, for the sake of their eternal destination.

After Jesus talked the rich having difficulty getting into heaven, the crowd around him asked who could then be saved (26). These people who heard Jesus' remarks could not believe that anybody could be saved if it was hard for a rich person. The audience's reaction again reemphasizes the fact that, in general, it is thought that rich people have all of the fulfillment they need. Jesus answers this easily with another widely known quote. Verse 27 says, “The things that are impossible with people are possible with God.” In other words, Jesus is saying that it is hard for rich people to deny themselves and their riches, but if they trust God, it can happen. This text insinuates that even though people cannot understand how life and salvation works, God does, and nothing is too big for Him to control and work out.

The last important theme that Jesus brings to light in this passage is that if people abandon everything for God, they will receive a greater reward than could be expected. The

¹ *Mere Christianity*

last section of the Scripture focuses on Christians—those who follow Christ and are on the inside of God's plan. In Biblical literature, the stories are often polarized with segments speaking to non-believers and others which teach and train the followers of Jesus. This passage has obviously done that in its instruction to the young rich man and here at the end with Jesus giving Peter and the others words of affirmation.

Peter, arguably one of the most intriguing disciples, makes an interesting statement. "Behold, we have left our own homes and followed you" (28). In the original Greek language, "behold" means "*to pay attention to; take notice of; to consider.*" Just moments after Jesus practically crushed the rich man's dreams of eternity, Peter asks this seemingly selfish question. In reality, Peter is asking Jesus to take notice of what they have done for God and that they have left everything they have known. Peter is asking, "What is in it for me, Jesus?" Most likely, being Jewish, Peter had a wife. Since he was Jesus' disciple for three years, he had to leave his wife, his children, his occupation, his home. Peter, the other disciples, and those who followed Jesus to hear him teach, essentially, left their lives behind or at least put them on hold.

This question by Peter makes great literary suspense. Peter's tone, to be sure, was worrisome, trembling, and anxious. Perhaps Peter is wondering, "What if we aren't going to get anything back? What if this is just a hoax?" This passage, on its own, may seem that worry and doubt is the best option and that the disciples should follow someone or something that gives them hope immediately. However, in the scope of Matthew 6, Jesus teaches about worrying, preaching about God giving people all they need when they trust Him. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33). This famous passage on worry does not mention money, but it does relate in the fact that in first century Palestine, sowing and reaping was a family's livelihood. That was their way of making money. Jesus said that if people seek God and His kingdom first, He will reward them with what they need. That is what Jesus means when he says, "And he said unto them, 'Verily I say unto you, there is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the

kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.'" (29-30).

Matthew 19 tells this same story about the young rich man. In Matthew's account, the rich man is said to have gone away sorrowful (22). As mentioned above, this man could not commit to a life of poverty to live a life of complete righteousness—despite Jesus' promise of eternal riches. Still, Jesus even said there would be riches “in this present time” as well. Seeing this conversation play out, Peter now asks Jesus his question. In John 6 (which happened before Luke 18), there is an incredible exchange between Jesus and Peter. At one point, Jesus had many disciples that followed him, yet when Jesus started to look less like a political king and more like a philosopher and moral teacher, his followers started to leave him. These so-called disciples started to realize that Jesus' viewpoint was counter-culture and backward. Jesus taught meekness, humility, brokenness, compassion, grace, and love. After the followers in John 6 left Jesus, he asked the twelve remaining disciples, “Will ye also go away?” In verse 68, Peter utters one of the most profound statements in all of the Gospels not from Jesus: “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” Looking at this in context with the main passage from Luke 18, it is clear that Peter has his eyes on the eternal perspective—the greater reward that Jesus has vowed to those who seek God's kingdom.

Present day pastor and theologian John Piper wrote, “The world is not impressed when Christians get rich and say thanks to God. [The world] is impressed when God is so satisfying that we give our riches away for Christ's sake and count it gain.”² The epitome of the Christian life, following Jesus, and pursuing God's kingdom is summed up in this quote from Piper. The themes that Luke presents are the keys to following Jesus. According to Jesus, doing more than following laws, living for eternity, and trusting in God's greater reward brings about an abundant life. This life was guaranteed when Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). The Gospel of Luke and other New

² *Don't Waste Your Life*

Testament texts show that in order to obtain God's kingdom, one must put aside all personal gain and store up eternal treasure in heaven.