

The Problem with Wealth

(The Rich Young Ruler)

11 Sept 2011 - BBC

Luke 18:18-30 [cf. Matt.19:16-30]

Today's story and lesson is a very sad one.

It is about a young man and his attitude to money and possessions. Because of his love of money and possessions he actually passed up the greatest opportunity of his life.

What about you? Do you like surrounding yourself with lots of money, and valuable things like gold and jewellery? Certainly, the world around us, the media, and many forms of commercialism today keep hammering the message that without all these things our life is nothing, BUT, is this really true? [The answer has to be - NO!]

Read: **Luke 18:18-30**

I find this story fascinating. What was it that prompted the young man to come to Jesus in the first place?

He had wealth; and in vs.23 we read that he was a man of **GREAT** wealth.

He had power; because in vs.18 he is called a ruler. To be a ruler in Israel usually meant that he was part of the ruling priestly class, or that he held some kind of secular or government posting. Both meant power.

Thirdly, the man had youth on his side. We know this from another account of this story in Matt.19:20&22.

Some would say that this man had it all - **wealth, power and youth**, and yet he came to Jesus seeking. It seems obvious that, despite all he had, the man felt something was missing or lacking in his life.

He was **unfulfilled** and had **no assurance**.

His question in vs.18 is very revealing:

'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

This man, as a Jew, would have been brought up with all the pomp, ceremony, liturgy and tradition that most religions have, and the years of instruction and memorising scripture gave him no sense of fulfilment or hope that guaranteed him a place in heaven.

Here is a picture of a most pitiful man who, despite all his worldly advantage, lacked the one thing he needed the most - assurance.

For a few minutes, let's look at the man's question more closely, because it is a question that still plagues so many people today - even if they are hesitant to voice it.

Firstly, the man addressed Jesus as 'Good teacher'. Was this just a cultural address, or did the man truly consider Jesus as 'good'?

Jesus rebuked the man for this address, because, as Jesus said, *'No one is good - except God alone.'*

Jesus said this to highlight an important point. **WE all stand before God as sinners**, and in need of redemption. It seems most likely therefore that, when the man called Jesus 'good', it was in the belief that he also was good, and did not see himself as a common sinner. This is why Jesus rebuked him.

To add weight to this argument, it is of interest that Luke placed this story not long after the parable of a Pharisee and tax collector praying in the temple. The parable is introduced with the statement in vs.9, *'To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.'*

Was this man confident in his own righteousness?

It would seem that this was Luke's opinion.

The second part of the man's question was;

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

To this, in vs.20, Jesus outlined the traditional Jewish response that was summed up in the law of Moses.

Jesus quoted commandments 5-9 of the 10 commandments found in Deut.5.

Do not commit adultery - 7th

Do not murder - 6th

Do not steal - 8th

Do not give false testimony - 9th

Honour your father and mother - 5th

It is of interest that the first 4 commandments were not mentioned, because they deal with our relationship with God. The other 6 commandments deal with our relationships in community.

Also, did you note, the 10th commandment was not mentioned - Do not covet.

Whatever Jesus' reasons for only mentioning commands 5-9, the man's response was emphatic; 'All these **'I'** have kept since I was a boy.'

The man obviously saw himself as a good, sinless person, and well disciplined in his life. Surely, if he was a dutiful, religious person, this would be enough to guarantee himself a place in heaven?

Even today, we see this same kind of attitude in the traditions of many churches, and also in some other religions, like Buddhism and Islam. It is based on the idea that we can earn merit by our **good** works or **good** living, and so guarantee ourselves a place of honour in the 'afterlife'.

But, like this man, those who live according to the 'law' of **goodness** often feel unfulfilled and unsatisfied. What is the problem?
What we need to realise is that, while God's will for us is revealed in the law, like the 10 commandments, **we are not saved by the law.**

We come now to a very important part of the man's question:
'What must **I** do?'

Did you hear the emphasis? Without understanding, the man reveals his own problem. 'What must **I .. I .. I** do?' The man had swallowed the idea that **we .. mankind** .. decides who enters heaven, eternal life with God, and who does not.

Let me ask you this; if you went to England and wanted to visit the queen at Buckingham Palace, would you be admitted simply because **YOU** decided that's where you wanted to be? Of course not! It's absurd! It is ultimately the Queen who decides who will enter into **HER** home.

The same must be said of God. The privilege to enter into eternal life with God is **not** something in our control. It is at God's invitation, and His alone.

As such, **His** invitation is based on **His** judgements. While God may be impressed by our self-disciplines, our good works, and our right attitudes in living, ultimately, what God seeks the most is our personal relationship with Him. This is why He presented Himself in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus submitted himself to death on a cross to restore us to a **right relationship** with God in heaven.

In essence, what God is saying to all mankind is that He does not desire the company of those who choose to be strangers to Him!

The lesson the man needed to learn was that 'it is not what we do, but who we are, that is more important to God'.

In vs.22 Jesus 'hit the nail on the head'. What was the core issue that was hindering the man from entering into a right relationship with God?
It involved 2 things!

The **first** was the man's attitude to his wealth and possessions.
Jesus challenged him to make a choice; what was more important to him?
Was it his need for God in his life, or was it his need for all that his wealth could give to him in the here and now - comfort, security, enjoyment, prestige.

Jesus was asking the man to give all his wealth and possessions to the have-nots, the very people he would have looked down upon. Oh yes! I say this because there was a cultural belief at that time that wealth was a sign of God's blessing - approval. ie. The have-nots have not because they are not approved by God.

Therefore, those who did not have wealth were somehow under God's judgement. It was OK to give a small amount in alms to the poor, because that earned merit for yourself, but to give everything away, without any return, was unthinkable.

Of course, today, we think differently - or do we?

The **second** challenge of Jesus was the invitation for the man to develop a new relationship with God by following, and being in the presence of, Jesus. It is in the presence of Jesus that we not only learn about God, but experience one-ness with God, as we open our hearts and souls to Him.

Jesus was inviting the man, to not just be a listener and spectator of his teaching, but to be a fully involved participant in his life and ministry.

Wow! **What an invitation!**

BUT, this was crunch time! The man was now 'put on the spot'; 'on the hot seat'. Now, he had to decide which way to jump. It was a lifestyle choice. Let me read vs.23 again: 'When he heard this he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.' Matt. 19:22 adds: '.. he went away sad ..'

The man made his decision. We can only assume that it was a close call, evidenced by his sadness, BUT, he made his choice for the tangible, the here and now. As he weighed up his life, he decided that the cost was too great. Jesus had asked him to go against everything that he had been taught, and everything that represented his cultural heritage.

I find it interesting that Jesus did not chase after the man, or try to persuade him by any argument or debate. He let him go. I can only hope that, at some later time, the man had a change of heart.

As Jesus looked after the man he said to his disciples and followers: '*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.*' (vs.24)

This statement by Jesus acknowledges how much people are motivated by, and addicted to, material wealth and possessions. We **are** natural beings and we live in a natural environment.

So often we find it difficult to understand the importance of the spiritual dimension of our lives; that is, until we come to a situation of great need, or until we have lost everything else. Maybe this is why the world is experiencing so much need at the moment. **God is wanting our attention!**

Those who heard Jesus challenging this man were also troubled. They asked, 'Who then can be saved?'

If the wealthy and privileged can't guarantee themselves a place in Heaven, what hope is there for the rest of us? It reflects the false teaching, or false understandings, that had arisen in Judaism at that time (and which we find in much of Christendom even now).

Jesus' answer must ring loud in the church today:

'What is impossible with men is possible with God' (vs.27).

This is the true answer to the question of eternal salvation. It is only in a vital personal relationship with God that we can have assurance and learn to trust God in all things.

AMEN