

SM056 The Rich Young Ruler

In the days of Jesus, a young man lived with his father. He was the oldest of his siblings, a good son, and one who kept the laws of his ancestors. He was faithful to his wife. He never harmed another person, he did not steal or lie, and he always honored his father and mother. Never was this honor more on display than when he buried his father with great dignity. The son had been loyal to him. He had stayed at home and cared for his father in old age and was by his bedside when his father breathed his last.

As the oldest son, the family estate, which was sizable, was placed in his care. He was now the ruler and he was rich. He would manage the estate for his siblings and care for them and his mother. Some of the estate belonged to them, but the greatest portion belonged to this young man.

As the days passed and the grief over his father subsided, the young man began to take stock of what he owned. He was indeed wealthy, and he was the ruler of his family. He believed God had put him in this position and he thought, “Surely, God is pleased with me. Surely God has given me this wealth and this great position. Surely, for these reasons, God will receive me into his kingdom.”

Just to be sure, the man said, “I think I will go find this rabbi that we have been hearing so much about, Jesus, and ask him. I will show him that God has given me great wealth and great status. I will let him confirm that I am indeed on the right path and that God will receive me into his eternal kingdom for all that I have done.”

So, the rich, young ruler gathered his servants together and told them of his mission. “Tomorrow we are going on a journey. We are going to find the esteemed teacher, Jesus. We will show him my wealth. We will tell him of the position God has given me, and we will ask him about the life of the age to come. Be prepared. Dress in your very best. Make sure that the caravan of camels is dressed as if for a parade, and I will instruct my steward on what possessions we will bring that will best represent our status before God and men.

And the next day, a caravan of camels displaying the rich young ruler’s wealth and his status set off in search of Jesus.

02619 Mystery Life

Jesus was not far away, and he was easy to find. One only had to follow the crowds. People by the hundreds were seeking him, many of them sick, lame, blind, possessed with evil spirits. And Jesus healed them all. The sick became healthy. The lame could walk again. The blind could see, and the oppressed were set free. There was great rejoicing in the land, and the people listened to Jesus as he spoke of God’s loving reign on the earth.

“The kingdom of God does not come like a mighty warrior with a sword. It comes with mighty mercy to those who are poor. The kingdom of God does not come like a pompous king with immeasurable wealth for all to behold in awe, but it comes to give blessing to the needy and to make them rich towards God. You have seen what I have done today. You have seen me make the

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sick well. You see the lame walking and the blind seeing. You see the oppressed set free. And above all, you see sinners forgiven. Behold – the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

Just then, the rich young ruler approached. From his seat high on his camel, he could see the size of the crowd. He could hear Jesus’ powerful voice and the amazing things he was saying about the kingdom of God. The young ruler was encouraged. He said, “Yes, this is why I have come. I have come to confirm my entrance into the kingdom. Who better than this man, Jesus, to do this for me!”

But as the young ruler began to dismount he noticed some of the religious rulers walking through the crowd. They had a smile on their faces, but it was not a smile of joy. It was more like a devilish grin, like young boys ready to play a trick, or a wily attorney ready to trap someone in an argument. The young ruler watched and listened intently and the religious leaders said,

“Jesus, we have a question about . . . marriage. This kingdom you have been talking about is something we all want. But sometimes, our wives get in the way and make life difficult. We have tried to deal with the situation of troublesome wives, and, as you know, our law teaches that a man has a right to divorce his wife. Some of our leaders have taught that sexual sin is the only reason for which divorce may take place. Others have taught that a man can divorce his wife for any reason. But what do you and your kingdom say about dealing with such women?”

Jesus was astonished. They had witnessed him healing people. They had witnessed him bringing forgiveness and a new start to men and women. They were talking about how to break people apart. Jesus had come to heal the brokenness of the world. Jesus remained silent and they said again.

“Well, Jesus, which is it? Can a man divorce his wife for any reason at all?” And Jesus replied,

“Have you not read that the Creator, the one who made them in the beginning made them male and female? He said that a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has joined together let no man separate.”

The religious leaders were stunned. They had been so caught up in their rules that they had forgotten God’s bigger purpose of one man and one woman joined for life. But they were not to be defeated that quickly and they said, “Yes, God did say that, but Moses also commanded that a man could divorce his wife and give her a certificate of divorce.”

“Yes, he said that because of your hardness of heart. Moses allowed men to divorce their wives and send them away, but that was not God’s design from the beginning and so I will tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except in the case of immorality, and then marries another woman is an adulterer. The heart of God is for oneness and the heart of God is for restoration and healing.”

The religious leaders were infuriated. Through the years, some of them had grown tired of their wives and thought up frivolous reasons for divorcing them so they could marry someone younger and prettier. Even the disciples were concerned. Some of them said, “Jesus, if a man doesn’t have the freedom to divorce his wife if she doesn’t please him anymore, it’s better not to marry.”

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Jesus said, “I realize not everyone can accept this, but he who is able, let him accept it for the sake of the kingdom of God.”

The rich young ruler was impressed. “Yes, I see that Jesus has dealt with the question of the religious leaders with great wisdom. He has not compromised but stood his ground in the face of their pressure and their trickery. Yes, it was right that I come and ask Jesus to confirm for me that all this blessing I have received is the gift of God for my faithfulness to the laws of my ancestors and that I am worthy of the life of the kingdom.”

He dismounted from his camel, and he approached Jesus, but before he could say a word he heard the voices of little children. They were coming through the crowd with their parents but just before they reached Jesus some of the disciples said, “Stop. What do you think you are doing?”

“We just wanted to bring our children to Jesus. We were thinking that he could lay his hands upon them and bless them.”

“Can’t you see what is happening here? Jesus is busy. He has been healing people. He has been teaching these multitudes. He has been dealing with Pharisees. He doesn’t have time for children.” And the disciples started taking the children by their shoulders and turning them around away from Jesus.

But Jesus raised his voice and said, “Stop! No! Leave the children alone.” He strode to the center of the parents and children and said, “Do not hinder the children from coming to me. I have been teaching you today about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. What have I said today about the kingdom? It is like these children. The kingdom of God comes with purity, with simplicity, with joy, with blessing.”

Jesus stooped down and opened his arms wide. The children giggled and smiled and came to him, some with shyness, some with great energy. Jesus embraced them all and kissed each of them. He laid his hands upon them and prayed for them. Then he bade them farewell and watched as they walked away with their parents.

Jesus said, “Let’s now go to another place and teach others about the kingdom.”

When the rich young ruler heard these words, he knew he had to act fast. He had found Jesus, and he did not want to miss this opportunity. Besides, he had to return to the estate and manage the wealth that he had gained. And so, he raised his voice and with as much dignity as possible, he knelt before Jesus and said, “Jesus, Good Teacher, I have journeyed to see you. I have just buried my father and I am now in charge of the family estate. I rule over it all. I have gained all these things, thanks be to God! Yet, I wish to ask you, what shall I do now to ensure that I gain eternal life?”

What a great question, and one all of us should ask. When we come back, we will hear what Jesus said to him.

Interlude

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The rich young ruler, with a great display of his huge humility bowed before Jesus. “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I might gain eternal life?” The man looked so sincere. He sounded so humble. He had also paid Jesus a great compliment by calling him *good* teacher for that compliment was reserved only for the most special person and by giving him a compliment he opened the door for Jesus to return the compliment as was the custom in his day.

But Jesus surprised him. No compliment came from his lips. He said, “Why do you call me ‘Good Teacher’ when you know only God is good?” Jesus’ answer pricked the man’s heart. No compliment would come from Jesus. He was not going to play games. This was not going to be as easy as he thought.

Jesus continued, “But to answer your question ... if you wish for eternal life, keep the commandments.”

And the ruler said, “Which ones?”

And Jesus said, “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not lie. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Ah yes,” the ruler thought, “I am safe. I have done all these things,” and he said to Jesus, “All these things I have kept since I was a child. Is there anything I am still lacking?”

Jesus looked upon the man. He appeared so sincere, yet he was so misguided. True, he had been a good son to his father. He had not hurt other people. He had never taken anything that was not his. He never bore false witness. He did honor his father and mother. But would this gain him entrance into the kingdom?

Jesus looked upon the man and felt love in his heart for him. He wanted this man to be with him, in this life, and in eternity and he said, “One thing you still lack.” Jesus reached down and pulled the kneeling young ruler to his feet. He walked with him to his camels that were richly laden with more goods than he would ever need. He pointed to these treasures and said, “Go home, sell everything that belongs to you. Give it to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Then, come and follow me.”

The rich man was stunned. He had never heard such a demand in his life. Sell everything he owned? Give it to the poor? Follow Jesus, literally, on these hard roads? This was unthinkable. The rich young ruler was proud of his wealth. He was proud of the status that came with it. Men looked up to him. Yes, he was generous, and he enjoyed being known as generous. But to give it all away at one time? To have nothing? And to follow Jesus in this rugged life?

He had seen how Jesus was challenged by the religious rulers. Did he want to enter that conflict? He had seen how his disciples were insensitive to the children and tried to send them away. Did he want to spend his life with such unsophisticated men? One’s property and one’s family were the two most important things! And Jesus was asking him to leave both and to trust God for wealth in heaven.

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The man looked at Jesus. Sadness covered his face and filled his voice as he said, “I’m sorry. I guess I did not know. I think there has been a misunderstanding. I thought ...” but the man did not finish his sentence. He took one more look at Jesus, slowly mounted his camel, and without saying another word rode away, never to see Jesus again.

Jesus watched as the rich, young ruler that he loved faded into the distance, having rejected true wealth. Then he turned to his disciples and said, “how hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!”

But now it was the turn of his disciples to be stunned. All their life they had been taught that the rich among their people could believe that their riches were a sign that the blessing of God was upon them, and if God’s blessing was upon them in this life, his blessing would be upon them in the age to come. The rich men were the ones who built synagogues, supported orphanages, gave alms to the poor, and refurbished the temple in Jerusalem. If it was hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, then what chance did the common man have to enter the kingdom for the common man could do none of those things.

Jesus saw the surprised look on their faces. It was important that they not miss this lesson and so he said again, “Listen, it is easier for one of those camels to go through the eye of a tiny needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!”

One of the disciples said, “Lord, if this is true, if those who have been blessed by God with wealth have such a hard time entering the kingdom, then what about us? Who can be saved?”

Jesus smiled and said, “Have faith. What is impossible for men, is possible with God.”

Peter said, “Lord, we have left our homes and followed You.” And Jesus said, “Yes, you have, and I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much now and in the age to come, eternal life.”

“Let’s pack up our things. We have other places to visit and other people to see.”

And that, my friends, is the story of the rich, young ruler.

In the land and time in which Jesus lived two things of supreme importance stood out – one’s family and one’s wealth. And this man showed how important these were to him. He was loyal to his family. He never committed adultery. He always honored his father and mother. He was careful with property. He never stole from another and never bore false witness to gain more for himself. He knew the importance that property held for others as well as himself.

But in his zeal for family and property he missed the most important reality of all – his relationship with God. Family and property were the center of his life, but God was nowhere to be found. The commandments that the man took pride in keeping dealt with family and property but the commandments about not worshipping other gods were never mentioned. Jesus put his finger on this man’s problem – his god was his money and his status in his community.

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When the man told Jesus that he had kept the commands, he expected Jesus to say, “Well done. Now here are a few more things you can do as you continue in your life and then everything will be OK.”

But Jesus did not do that for he knew that the man did not have God at the center of his life and doing a few more religious things would not help.

There was only one way for this man to get free from his false gods of wealth and status and from the false sense of security they gave. He must give away his wealth, lose his status in the world, and follow Jesus. That was his only hope.

What about you? Is God in control of your life? Is he at the center, or is something else at the center?

Family and family estates and honoring our parents and not committing adultery and not lying are good things. But keeping these commandments can never save us.

As Jesus told us in the parable, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a sewing needle. Camels are huge. In Middle Eastern villages, when a fully loaded camel passed through the gates leading to the courtyard of a home, those gates had to be at least ten feet high and twelve feet wide. If such a huge entrance was needed for a camel, what chance was it for a camel to pass through a sewing needle?

Jesus used this illustration to show us something we all must learn – the absolute impossibility of salvation for anyone, even if they do keep a few commandments of God. No one can earn salvation.

This leaves us in a state of hopelessness. If salvation is impossible, then what can we do? And here is where Jesus’ words are like cool water from a fresh spring to a man desperate with thirst. “What is impossible for men is possible with God.”

Salvation is impossible *for us to achieve*. We are so wrapped up in sin, even the best of us, that it is impossible to dethrone the false gods and the sin in our lives. But God in his power can dethrone them. What is impossible for men is possible with God.

Jesus came to show the power of God over sin that enslaves all of us. Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God, and when he died on the cross for our sin, he dealt a death blow to our greatest enemy – our sin and our guilt before God. Three days after he died, he rose from the grave and was then enthroned with all authority in heavenly places and on earth. With this power, he can break the hold of sin upon us. He can dethrone the false gods in our life. He can save us.

Friends, salvation is not something we earn. It is something Jesus gives. Salvation is not something that the smart, or the wise, or the powerful achieve. It is the gift of God to those who wake up to their weakness and who come to God with humility and faith and ask God for mercy. Have you received this gift, or like the proud, rich, young ruler, have you walked away from Jesus?