

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. 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."

Woody Allen once said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve it through not dying".

Eternal life, a concept inviting to some, a nightmare to others. Depends what life is like for you, I guess. Yet, all of us want life now; not just physical life, but the meat and marrow of life. We want it to mean something; to leave an indelible mark, to know our lives are substantial. Meaningful life. We want to hear, *'Well done good and faithful servant'*. To be in God's will; that God is pleased - our lives have made a difference.

Here we have the Rich Young Ruler who I assume wants the same. This story is in three of the Gospels; Matthew, Mark, & Luke. They differ slightly, but aren't contradictory. Reading all three gives us a fuller image. For instance, in Mark it says this man ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees which gives you a little more insight into his heart. There's sincerity, and possibly some panic. However, it's also a story of spiritual suicide. He had it all, one of the religious elite. Yet, one of the few people who met Jesus with a sincere question and left more destitute than he came.

Proposition: Only Jesus is worthy of our worship.

Question: What do you love more than Him?

The sincerity and fear this guy felt isn't the only thing we can understand about him. He's rich, young, and a ruler. Rulers were usually older, but he's enjoying the power and benefits of ruling life at a young age. Life is ahead, he's wealthy; doesn't lack much. Unhindered, the possibilities are endless. There is, however, one thing missing and he feels it. All he enjoys now can't go beyond the grave and even now isn't ultimately fulfilling. Somethings wrong, he can't escape it. Maybe Jesus has the answer.

So, he comes with a good question to the right person. He kneels, "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Simple enough. Yet, let's notice two things. Firstly, this is the only time anyone referred to Jesus as 'Good Teacher'. Unusual. To refer to anyone as good would've been courting blasphemy. In the Jewish tradition only God was good, the term was reserved only for Yahweh. Possibly he sees something profound in Jesus, or, at the least, he flatters.

Jesus counters, not by denying his own goodness, but by putting this man back on his heels; "*Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.*" In other words, "*I hope you know what you're saying. If you call me good, you call me God. If so, then I know what you worship.*"

Secondly, let's listen carefully to that question, what must I do to inherit eternal life? It's a misunderstanding of grace. We don't do anything to inherit something. As my father's son I inherit his estate. But I do work to earn money. We do to earn. Inheritance has to do with relational position, receiving freely. We don't do anything to inherit. (Interpretation: Luke by Fred Craddock p213).

Jesus aims for the heart in conversation with people; no small talk & central to the person. Now, at first glance we may think Jesus is preaching a works based righteousness - which would contradict the idea of inheritance. He goes directly to Exodus 20 quoting some, but not all, of the Ten Commandments. We may think he's telling us that to find God you have to do good. Something we 'do' to earn eternal life; we'll find though,

he's not saying that at all. He quotes the second table of the 10 commandments, those which have to do with our relationship to others. The first four deal with our relationship with God and the rest deal with our relationship to people. He says, "*You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery (7th), do not murder (6th), do not steal (8th), do not give false testimony (9th), honor your father and mother (5th).'"* (I wonder if he gives these in decreasing seriousness which would have to mean adultery is worse in the Jewish mind than murder, so as to bring it down to the 10th which is covetousness, and maybe the least serious?). So he gives commandments five through nine which deal with his actions in community.

The interesting thing is he doesn't quote the 10th which is, '*do not covet*'. Jesus elicited a response of, "*All these I have kept since I was a boy,*" Jesus is leading him to an understanding of himself by **not** quoting the 10th commandment. Everyone present would have thought to themselves, "*He forgot the 10th.*" They knew the commandments, missing one wouldn't go unnoticed.

He's driving this man to the one area in life in which he hasn't fulfilled the law. He's been a model Jew in so many ways, "*All these I have kept since I was a boy.*" Model citizen; model Jew. However, in his heart, he has this one thing which is his downfall; covetousness. Covetousness has to do, not only with wanting what your neighbor has, but also with hoarding; self-preservation, our idols. Two weeks ago we studied you cannot serve both God and money. Here we have one who tries just that. Jesus asked him to do the one thing a covetous person can't bring themselves to do; give it away. It's their security. So he breaks the 10th commandment and if we break any commandment 2-10 we automatically break the first which is, "*you shall have no other gods before me.*" He's made a god of his money. He had no integrity; an outwardly pious life, inwardly a devotion to monetary security.

He didn't set out to be like this. None do. Wrong devotions are insidious as they slowly overshadow our hearts; almost undetectable. Like boiling a frog (explain). Slowly, the lure of wealth, self-preservation, and comfort, crowd Jesus out, as we find our security in something else. Outwardly we may still practice church form. However, religiosity is a facade, staying in place only because it enables and nurses our true idol.

Deuteronomy 6:5 says, ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.¹ St. Augustine said 'sin is disordered love'. To sin is to love inappropriately, to love some things (or people) more than one should, or to love them less than one should. To sin is to love anything other than God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." To sin is not just to hate God, but to love God less than one loves other things. (George Stroup, Preaching Idols) What do I love more than Jesus?

Jesus, in love, directs this guy to this black spot in his heart; *"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."* You cannot follow two things at once, one must die for the other to reign. Or one must be subordinate to the other. Jesus is challenging him to action on the 10th commandment - to show him what he loves more than God; to reorder his love. The guy may have thought he loved God and just had a struggle with security in wealth - but in reality he did not love God and loved wealth. Jesus wasn't posing a question when he said you cannot serve both God and Money, he was making an emphatic statement - one will win out over the other. So, what's Jesus saying? Do we have to sell everything to get right with God? Does he tell everyone to do this?

He told Peter and John to leave their nets. Matthew was told to leave his profession. He told another man to leave before seeing his family pass on. What's Jesus bidding me leave behind? What is it that stands in the way of Jesus's lordship in my life? Is it pleasure, comfort, safety, money, self-righteousness? What's that one thing? Where do I find identity other than in Jesus? *I'll tell you a secret; it's not as simple as an action, or an outward thing, it's an attitude/position of the heart. It's what you identify yourself with even if just inwardly. It's the idol of self manifest in some outward thing because that way you are still in control; still god. To be wealthy isn't the issue, it's when your wealth becomes your god is the problem. You can touch money, sit on your bed, look at your stocks, add up your net-worth, feel secure, and draw your self-worth from it. But... it's not really money*

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Dt 6:5). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

you love, it's self. Money isn't really your god, it's putting you before Jesus; we make ourselves gods.

Jesus doesn't tell everyone to sell off their material wealth – he treats us as individuals. He explores each of us and sees the one idol which stands in the way of his having full devotion; our worship of him.

Do you recall the woman at the well? Jesus converses with her leading her to a point of understanding she needs this 'Living Water'. She doesn't recognize this means himself and asks him for it. Do you remember his response? Did he tell her to go and follow the commandments? Did he tell her to go and give to the poor? No, he said, *'Go call your husband.'* He knew her heart issue. She had had five husbands, and the man she was currently with wasn't her husband. He revealed that she sought emotional comfort in men; fulfillment in the wrong place. He revealed her idol, and offered her the only way to a truly substantial life. What he was saying to her is, "If you want to follow me, you have to be mine." I'll share you with no idol. Following Jesus demands full devotion.

What if I said to my wife, *"I love you and commit to you as long as we shall live. However, I want a girlfriend on the side."* What do you think Kim would say? If you know my wife she would've done more than verbalize her disdain. On my wedding day I turned away the hundreds of women lined up at my door for just Kim. With all my faults, it was grace by which Kim married me. Not cheap grace; my commitment has to reflect love & fidelity to her. It's not that Jesus wanted this guy to give his money away necessarily, but to give up it's power over him; that it would not come between him and intimacy with God any longer. His wealth was the girlfriend on the side and a marriage does not work like that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *"When Christ calls a man, He bids him to die."* And, in Luke 17:33 it says, *"Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will preserve it."* What do you need to die to?

Apparently in some areas of the world there's a way to catch a monkey. They'll tie a coconut to a tree and carve a hole just large enough for the monkey to insert his hand. Inside they place some food. The monkey comes along, inserts his hand, grasps the item, but can't pull it out with a clenched fist. Yet, he will not let go of his prize and this reluctance is his

downfall; the monkey imprisons himself. The question for us is, what's in our grasp? What idol is in the clutches of our heart? What whispers in my ear that I am still lord over my life?

Haggai 1:5-6 says, *"Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."* Our idols don't satisfy forever; whatever that thing is that stands between us and Jesus, will fail us and have to go.

In the Dead Poets Society, Robin Williams elicits one shy student to make an impromptu poem. His poem is about a blanket too small as a metaphor for things in life which we seek to satisfy ourselves. If you pull it to your chin, your legs are cold. If you pull it to cover your toes, your torso is chilled. We kick and stretch at our idols to make them cover us, but they won't, because it's not how we were created to find security. The struggle eclipses Jesus, maybe not consciously, but slowly we're deceived. They'll not completely cover, they'll leave us cold.

This past week, states were crippled by a not so impressive hurricane. It didn't take much to grind life to a halt for people. It wasn't for 4 days before my parents could even drive out of their street - landlocked. When they went to get gas for their generator, the line at the only gas station open for miles, was hours long. NYC shut down due to some water. Things and people fail us - but that's not defeatist, it's reality which drives us back to reliance on the only one who can fulfill, Jesus.

It's important to remember what Jesus said in John 10:10, *"I've come that they may have life and have it to the fullest."* What Jesus says to this man is, *"See, you cannot fulfill the law, I know your heart. Follow me and it's done for you, I'm your fulfillment; just be honest with yourself!"* If we want meaningful life, it's to be found in Jesus alone.

When the rich young man heard Jesus's response, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth; covetousness & idolatry were his downfall. He called Jesus good, apparently He wasn't good enough. Jesus replied, *"How hard it is for the rich 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." Impossibility. A camel, the largest mammal in their understanding, could not fit through the smallest opening in their understanding, the eye of a needle. Translation? It's impossible for a rich man to get into heaven!

The disciples react strongly; *'Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"'*. Why such a strong reaction? It was a common belief that the wealthy & powerful, would have been favored most by God. They were people others believed God had found favor in - why else would they be so blessed? If they couldn't be saved, who could? What it communicated was, not even the best of the best can get in, and therefore, I have absolutely no chance. This is exactly where Jesus had wanted to lead the conversation; back to himself. The revolutionary transformational truth that we must come to the end of self to find life in Jesus.

Part of their confusion is a misunderstanding of blessing - just like this man thinking he can do something to inherit eternal life. In their minds blessing is showered on someone in the form of wealth and power. *However, let's compare the story of Zacheus. He was rich and powerful, but not respected, nor godly. What was his response to Jesus? He immediately gave half his belongings to the poor and committed himself to paying back those he cheated fourfold! Jesus said, "Surely today salvation has come to this house!"* A rich corrupt jerk made it in, how? He found Jesus, and nothing else was important any longer - love had been ordered rightly. Money had found its rightful place under Jesus; Zacheus had found his rightful place under Jesus. His giving was a reaction to Jesus, not a means of earning his favor. Betcha no one saw that coming.

The Disciples were concerned, they'd left everything for him, was it all for nothing? But Jesus answers simply, what's impossible with people, is possible with God. God can extract your hand from the coconut. We don't realize the blessing we miss by holding onto our disordered devotions; present & future blessing. *"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."* Do we believe him? Are you willing to let go and trust he'll bring you greater things than your idol has ever

brought. Since, if you've not figured it out, idols bring bondage like a monkey caught in a coconut. Idols place you in the way of intimacy with Jesus. The way out is simple, let go. But you can't, your sin nature won't allow it. We can't even do that simple thing for ourselves, just let go.

Paul speaks of this internal struggle with our idols in [Romans 7:14-25](#),
¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.
¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ²

We are delivered, we don't deliver ourselves. We inherit, we don't earn. Although we try. In the parallel passage in Mark, it states that Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and 'loved' him. Sadly the man left, his hand caught in the coconut.

Someone once said, *"The saddest words of tongue or pen, is these four words; what might have been?"* What might have been if he'd responded differently? Like Paul with, "Jesus, I can't! It's not as though I don't want to, but I'm battling self! Please do it for me!" ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ro 7:14–25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Jesus demands full devotion. Jesus is worthy of full worship. Abundant life inherited through costly grace. What's your disordered love/affection? What do you love more than Him? Behind that idol you will find yourself. That's what holds us back.