

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler.*"

We are working our way verse-by-verse through Luke's Gospel, and we find ourselves at **Luke 18:18**.

We have reached a wonderful, sobering account that I have referenced in other sermons, but have never had the joy of being able to preach through it. I have been looking forward to this account. I hope you are as blessed and challenged having it preached to you as I was blessed and challenged while studying it.

Randy Smith said, "The problem with greed is not so much seen in our possessions, but rather what is possessing our hearts."ⁱ

This morning we will see a man, the rich young ruler, whose possessions possessed his heart.

Look with me at Luke 18:18...

Luke 18:18 And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Listen to what it says about the rich young ruler in the parallel account...

Mark 10:17 As [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man **RAN UP** and **KNELT BEFORE HIM** and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now let me ask you...

How does the rich young ruler sound?

I think:

- He sounds zealous: he ran up to Jesus.
- He sounds humble: he knelt before him.
- He sounds respectful: he called him Good Teacher and seems to think highly of him
- He sounds sincerely interested in spiritual matters:
 - He asked one of the most important questions we can ask: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"
 - He believes in God.
 - He wants to go to heaven.

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Look how Jesus responded...

Luke 18:19 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

Jesus isn't saying he isn't good, and he isn't saying he isn't God. Instead, He's saying there's only One who is good and that's God. If the rich young ruler calls Jesus good he must also recognize he is God. Or another way to say it is, if the rich young ruler doesn't recognize that Jesus is God, he shouldn't be calling him good.

Look what else Jesus said to him...

Luke 18:20a You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,

The seventh commandment.

Luke 18:20b Do not murder,

The sixth commandment.

Luke 18:20c Do not steal,

The eighth commandment.

Luke 18:20d Do not bear false witness,

The ninth commandment.

Luke 18:20e Honor your father and mother.”

The fifth commandment.

Apparently, when you're Jesus, you can put the commandments in whatever order you want.

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Now this is interesting. Let me ask you something...

If you weren't familiar with this account, or in other words if you didn't already know how Jesus answered the rich young ruler's question about inheriting eternal life, what would you expect Jesus to say? What would you say if someone asked you about inheriting eternal life?

Repent and believe!

Our minds can go to Paul and Silas receiving this question from the Philippian jailer...

Acts 16:30 [the Philippian jailer] said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 [Paul and Silas] said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

So, what is going on here? Why did Jesus respond this way? Was he describing another way to be saved? I'm not trying to sound irreverent, but did he forget the gospel?

And believe it or not, this isn't even the only place Jesus responded this way!

This account has similarities with the lawyer who tested Jesus. Briefly turn to Luke 10:25.

Luke 10:25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

The similarity between the lawyer and the rich young ruler is they both asked the same good question: **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

The difference is they had completely different motives:

- The rich young ruler asked to learn.
- The lawyer asked to **put [Jesus] to the test**. He wanted to trap him and make him look bad.

Let me explain something about lawyers so you can better understand Jesus's response...

Don't think of courtroom lawyers. Instead, think of the way lawyers in our day study the law for a living, and the lawyers in Jesus's day studied the Mosaic Law for a living. Even priests and Levites didn't know the law as well as them because they spent so much of their time performing sacrifices and serving in the temple.

The NIV and amplified Bibles say expert in the law versus lawyer. In the NKJV and NASB there's a footnote that says lawyer could also be translated as expert in the law.

The reason I emphasize this is if there's anyone who could contend with Jesus in a debate, it would be a lawyer.

But Jesus responded as brilliantly and effortlessly as every other time...

Luke 10:26 He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" 27 And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus told the rich young ruler to obey the 10 Commandments and he told the lawyer the same thing. If you obey these two commands then you obey the 10 Commandments because they hang from these two.

If you love God perfectly, you'll obey commands one through four:

1. You won't have other gods.
2. You won't make idols.
3. You won't take God's name in vain.
4. You'll keep the Sabbath rest...which just as a note we keep through resting in Christ's finished work.

If you love your neighbor perfectly, you'll obey commands 5 through 10:

5. You'll honor your father and mother.
6. You won't murder.
7. You won't commit adultery.
8. You won't steal.
9. You won't give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You won't covet.

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BUT...

We know we can't inherit eternal life by obeying the Law – or keeping the Ten Commandments – so Jesus is going to tell the lawyer that he can't keep these commands to be saved, right?

Nope. He responded the same way he responded to the rich young ruler...

Luke 10:28 And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

And this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson One: We would be justified by the law if we kept it perfectly.

Why did Jesus respond to these two men this way?

He was simply answering their question!

Much of his answer is contained in the word DO:

- **Luke 10:25** The lawyer asked, "Teacher, what SHALL I DO to inherit eternal life?"
- **Luke 18:18** The Rich Young Ruler asked, "What MUST I DO to inherit eternal life?"

They thought they were saved by DOING, so Jesus told them what to DO: keep the law perfectly.

If they would've asked "**HOW can I inherit eternal life?**" versus "**What MUST I DO to inherit eternal life?**" maybe Jesus would've answered differently.

Maybe you're uncomfortable with Jesus's response because it seems like he misled them. But he didn't. He told them one of the two ways to be saved. If you can keep the law perfectly you can be saved.

And the law itself testified to this. Let me share something interesting with you...

When the rich young ruler and the lawyer responded to Jesus it is obvious they quoted the law. It is less obvious, but when Jesus responded to them he also quoted the law.

He told them, "Do this and you will live," and the words, "**You will live,**" were frequently attached to Old Testament verses associated with obeying God's commands. Here are three examples:

1. **Deuteronomy 4:1 O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, THAT YOU MAY LIVE.**
2. **Nehemiah 9:29 If a person [obeys your commandments], HE SHALL LIVE BY THEM.**
3. **Ezekiel 18:9 [Whoever] walks in my statutes, and keeps My rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; HE SHALL SURELY LIVE.**

Because of this, it was well-known that if people obeyed God's law perfectly they would live, or inherit eternal life, so that's how Jesus responded.

But what's the problem?

None of us can keep the law perfectly.

Lesson Two: We must be justified by faith because we can't keep the law perfectly.

We have talked about this many times, so I don't want to spend much time on it, but the point of the law is to show us our sinfulness...

Romans 3:20 By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

This helps us understand what Jesus was doing with the lawyer and the rich young ruler. He was getting them to quote the law so they would see their sinfulness and need to be saved.

Because none of us can do keep the law perfectly, God graciously provided a way for us to be justified, or declared righteous, by faith apart from the law...

Romans 3:21 The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...22 The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe...28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Look what happened with the lawyer and then we will see what happened with the rich young ruler...

Luke 10:29 But he, DESIRING TO JUSTIFY HIMSELF, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

As sad as this response is, I love the way it is worded because it reveals the alternative to being justified, or declared righteous, by faith. We attempt to justify ourselves, or declare our righteousness, which is what the lawyer tried to do.

I think the lawyer knew he couldn't keep the law perfectly, but instead of submitting to Christ, he tried to lower the bar and make it more manageable by limiting who his neighbor might be.

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Turn back to Luke 18 to see if the rich young ruler recognized his sinfulness and need to be saved...

Luke 18:21 And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth."

In a truly remarkable demonstration of pride, the rich young ruler claimed to have kept all the commandments...since he was a child.

He believes the world's most common lie: "I'm a good person." Ask people why they will go to heaven and many of them will tell you they follow the 10 Commandments...just like the rich young ruler.

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Are any of you familiar with Jeff Foxworthy's "You might be a redneck if..." jokes?

- You might be a redneck if you cut your grass and find a car.
- You might be a redneck if birds are attracted to your beard.
- You might be a redneck if you own a homemade fur coat.

I was going to do more, but Katie told me to stop at 3.

You guys want to hear a few more anyway?

You might be a redneck if the gas pedal on your car is shaped like a bare foot.

This is the shape of the gas pedal in Will Bauska's truck!

You might be a redneck if you've ever made change in the offering plate.

This is why we don't pass the plate!

My personal favorite...

You might be a redneck if someone said you were lying through your tooth.

I came up with my own series about pride:

- You might be proud if you don't think you've broken God's Law.
- You might be proud if you think you've kept the Ten Commandments from your youth.

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Now let tell you something interesting, not just about this account, but about its location...

The account is in all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and each time it follows the account we studied last week: [Jesus blessing the children and declaring the kingdom of God belongs to them and those like them.](#)

And this brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Three: The rich young ruler is the opposite of little children.

It's almost like Jesus says, "Be like little children. Don't be like the rich young ruler."

We talked about how we are to become like little children, so that the kingdom of God belongs to us as well. Children's main attribute that allows the kingdom of God to belong to them is their humility. Jesus said as much...

Matthew 18:3 “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4** Whoever **HUMBLES HIMSELF** like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Briefly look back at Luke 18:17...

Luke 18:17 Truly, I say to you, whoever does **NOT RECEIVE THE KINGDOM OF GOD LIKE A CHILD shall not enter it.**”

Jesus said we must receive the kingdom of God like a child, because children receive things freely, and salvation is a gift we must receive freely...

Romans 6:23 The **FREE GIFT OF GOD** is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But the rich young ruler isn't going to receive the kingdom of God humbly and freely like a child. Instead, he thinks he has earned it because he has been so obedient since he was a child. He's the picture of self-righteousness and salvation by works.

Now because the rich young ruler didn't see his sinfulness, Jesus is going to point it out to him...

Luke 18:22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “**One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.**”

You might notice one commandment Jesus didn't mention earlier, and that's the 10th commandment: you shall not covet.

Jesus said this to the rich young ruler to expose his covetousness.

In essence, Jesus said, “If you would come after me, repent of your covetousness.”

And this brings us to lesson four...

Lesson Four: Following Jesus requires repentance.

This brings up a question...

Do we need to sell all that we have and give it to the poor?

You can probably guess that we don't. We don't see that commanded anywhere in the epistles.

So how do we explain Jesus saying this to the rich young ruler?

This is an account that requires figuring out what is descriptive versus prescriptive.

Part of Jesus's dealing with the ruler is descriptive, or simply a description of what happened, without being prescriptive for us.

Consider these two verses:

- **John 2:24** [Jesus] knew all people.
- **Hebrews 4:12** [Jesus] is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Because Jesus knew the ruler and what was in his heart, he knew what he needed to repent of: covetousness.

We have talked many times before that repenting means putting off and putting on. For the rich young ruler to repent:

- He had to put off covetousness, which meant selling his possessions.
- He had to put on giving, which meant giving his possessions to the poor.

But even though all of this isn't prescriptive for us, the part that is, is we need to repent as well. Maybe we don't need to repent of covetousness, but we all have something – or some things – to repent of. Maybe it is bitterness, anger, lying, deceitfulness, pornography, or theft.

Because we struggle with different sins, repentance looks different for each of us. But the commonality is we must all repent.

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Now let me get you to notice one more thing before we look at the next verse...

Jesus told him to get rid of all his possessions because he “[would] have treasure in heaven.”

If you write in your Bible, you can circle the words treasure in heaven and right Matthew 6:19-20, where Jesus said something similar...

Matthew 6:19 Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...20 but lay up for yourselves TREASURES IN HEAVEN.

And now we get to see: would the rich young ruler cling to his treasures on earth or would he repent and store up for himself treasure in heaven?

Sadly, he might be the best example in Scripture of disobeying Matthew 6:19-20. Look at Luke 18:23...

Luke 18:23 But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Earthly treasure was more important to him than heavenly treasure.

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Although Luke's account doesn't say that the rich young ruler walked away after this, the parallel accounts both say the same thing...

Matthew 19:22 and Mark 10:22 he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Now because of the way that Jesus talked to the rich young ruler, in particular saying something that would lead to him walking away, it might be tempting to think that perhaps Jesus doesn't care about him. But listen to what it says in the parallel account...

Mark 10:21 Jesus, looking at him, LOVED HIM, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor....”

This is touching and dramatic. We don't read many places in the Gospels that Jesus loved someone.

John 11:5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

We also know that John referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. But that's not the same as this verse saying Jesus loved this man.

We could think that perhaps Jesus only loves those who follow him, but right here we see his heart for even someone who loved his possessions more than he loved Jesus.

I'm not saying that Jesus didn't love other people, or that he didn't love everyone. In fact, I'm convinced Jesus does love everyone. But I am saying that the fact that Scripture tells us Jesus loved this man is significant.

Now I can't tell you with absolute certainty why we are told Jesus loved the rich young ruler, but I can tell you that it is a blessing to read this here, because it would be easy to think that he didn't. And here's why...

Because of what Jesus said to him.

Let me ask you something so you can see what I mean...

Did Jesus know that what he said would cause this man to walk away?

Yes...and he said it anyway!

And this brings us to lesson five...

Lesson Five: Jesus isn't chasing us down.

Think of the father of the prodigal son. He stood there waiting and looking, but he didn't head to the far country and grab his son by the collar and drag him home.

In a sense, Jesus said the one thing we would expect him NOT to say, because of the response it produced. But that's exactly what he said. He didn't change the message or water it down whatsoever.

Here's what it reminds me of...

In Luke 9:10-17 Jesus fed the 5000. We know this caused even greater crowds to follow him.

Recognizing the crowds were bloated and filled with people who only wanted more food and had no desire to be Jesus's disciples...

Luke 9:23 [Jesus] said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

I cannot imagine a message that would cause more people to abandon Jesus than this. This is the opposite of the health and wealth or prosperity preaching.

And it gets worse. Look at the next verse...

Luke 18:24 Jesus, seeing that he (the rich young ruler) had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

This account is in all three synoptic Gospels, and in each of them after the rich young ruler walks away, Jesus turns to his disciples and warns them about the difficulty of rich people entering heaven.

In other words, Jesus didn't try to stop him from abandoning him. He didn't say something like...

"You are so close. You believe in God, and you want to go to heaven. Do you really want to throw all that away for your possessions? Please rethink things. Your salvation is at stake."

Now let me share two things with you that I find particularly significant and sobering about this account...

First, the rich young ruler wasn't an atheist or pagan. We would expect these people to turn away from Jesus. But he was a man who looked incredibly sincere and interested in religious matters, yet even he walked away.

And this brings us to lesson six...

Lesson Six: Riches can choke Jesus out of our lives.

When I read about the rich young ruler walking away from Christ, it shocks me, and here's why...

People should never walk away from Jesus for any reason, but if I had to imagine situations that could be so difficult that someone would abandon Jesus, it would be:

- The loss of a child
- An unfaithful spouse
- A terminal disease
- Persecution

But the rich young ruler abandoned Jesus...because of his possessions...and that is shocking!

Think of it like this...

Did the rich young ruler want to go to heaven?

Yes he did.

So, what happened?

He didn't want to go to heaven ENOUGH to part with his riches. As soon as Jesus told him to choose, sadly, he chose his possessions. He said, "I want to follow Jesus...but not that much...not if it means giving up my wealth."

It is a reminder that covetousness is one of the 10 Commandments for a reason. It is as dangerous as any other sin.

Think about the parable of the sower. Regarding the third soil, Jesus said...

Matthew 13:22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and THE DECEITFULNESS OF RICHES CHOKES THE WORD, and it proves unfruitful.

Covetousness choked the Word of God right out of the rich young ruler's heart. He is a perfect example of what it looks like when this happens.

And just to drive the point home Jesus gives us one of the most familiar analogies in Scripture...

Luke 18:25 For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

There are different opinions about what it means for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but the main point is obvious: It's hard for rich people to enter heaven. Whatever the eye of a needle is, a camel can't fit through it. Similarly, people who love money can't "fit" into the kingdom of God. Their wealth doesn't leave room for Jesus.

This does not mean rich people can't go to heaven...at all. But it does mean it is harder for them. There are certain temptations that rich people face that those who are not rich do not. In this way, riches can be an obstacle to salvation.

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The issue is competition. We can have only so many things occupying space in our hearts. To let one thing in is to keep out something else. This is why Jesus said...

Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

We can't serve God and money, because if we serve money it will always push Jesus out of our lives. We don't have room for two gods in our hearts. We can have Jesus, or the love of money, but not both. Let's make sure we choose wisely.

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If you have any questions or I can pray for you in any way, I'll be up front after service and it would be a privilege to speak with you.

Let's pray.

ⁱ Sermon, Greed's Graveyard, Luke 12:13-21, June 16, 2019. Randy Smith.