

This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt *God Can*

Luke 18:18-30

July 28, 2024

I think this is one of the most liberating passages in the New Testament, and I probably wouldn't say that if I hadn't spent many a sleepless night grappling with it many moons ago. In the city where I went to seminary, there was a community called Open Door. It was just down the street. Like monastic communities that preceded it, the folks who made this community their home had taken a vow of poverty. They lived together and simply. They shared their time, talent, and treasure. They were a mix. Some previously lived on the streets. Some previously lived in gated communities. Some, like a couple of my seminary classmates, had committed to living in the community for one year to explore the possibility of going all in for the rest of their lives.

These people were my friends. And they challenged me.

Did congregations like the ones I sought to serve as a pastor have it all wrong? Congregations with big steeples and million-dollar endowments. Congregations with a penchant for running "on time" and not taking up too much of our time. Congregations with budgets that tended mostly to property and personnel.

What does an authentic Christian life even look like? It was a question that kept me up at night.

My friends who had taken a vow of poverty on account of the life of Jesus and passages like the ones I just read had found their answer. Had I found mine?

In today's scripture we are introduced to a man whose archetype we know well. This man is more or less convinced that he is on the right path. He has done well for himself. As a child he probably followed all of the rules. He listened to his mama. He became his teacher's pet. He ate all of his leafy greens. He cleaned his room.

He went to college and majored in business. Perhaps he even minored in theology. He probably made the Dean's List. He went on to get married and had 2.5 kids and built and managed his wealth—effectively storing up all of the stuff that provides for a healthy and a secure future for himself and for his family. *I know this guy!* And this is the guy that asks Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

His question betrays something, but what is it? It betrays something because Gentle Jesus responds swiftly as if to say, "Don't flatter me." What was it behind the man's question that irked Jesus so? Would we not have the same question if an itinerant preacher with mass appeal and a reputation for healing walked on by? Would Jesus not expect such inquiries? *Eternal life?* That's the business that he's in, right?

The next exchange suggests that Jesus is sort of playing along with this. Perhaps the man is looking for a little assurance or affirmation that he's doing the right thing. Perhaps a little of both. "Well, surely you *know* the commandments," Jesus says as he rattles them off. And the man, as if on cue, responds readily and as anticipated: "Yes, yes, teacher; I've kept all of these, all of them, every single one, since my youth!"

And then the gauntlet is thrown. We all know it:

There's still one more thing: Sell all that you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.

Considered wealthy by today's standards or not, I'm guessing that not many of us in this room today are willing to sell all that we own, even if it is for a good cause. The imperative posed a huge problem for that

man, and it poses a problem for most of us gathered in this sanctuary today.

*Jesus, you made **this** the ticket to eternal life?*

You all know the grace is coming because it always does. It is new every morning. Pastor Madison assured us of it before we even opened the good book to this story today, and today we come to the end of a summer sermon series on the *promises* of scripture.

But dare we linger here for a moment, as if this is where the story ends:

Sell all that you own and give the money to the poor.

In the ancient world—where the vast majority of people lost their land if they had any to begin with, absorbed by large estates that manipulated their indebtedness and forced them into indentured, lifelong servitude—this would have been good news indeed.

The rich man's sale of his possessions and the gift of proceeds to the poor would have been nothing less than redistribution of wealth and restorative justice enacted. The imperative is serious. So serious, in fact, that Jesus does leave it there. In this Luke version of the story, we aren't sure how long the man sticks around after he hears this challenge. But in Matthew's version, he leaves upon receiving it. He leaves *grieving*. And Jesus lets him go.

There's a reason that Jesus makes such a radical demand of this rich man, and of all of us. Could it be that the restoration of relationships—even to people whose names we do not know—is at the very center, *the very center*, of the Gospel? Could it be that eternal life is less of a destination for the individual and more of a process for the collective, in which estranged relationships are restored and the worst of our exploitation—the worst of what we do to each other—ceases?

The rich man wanted to know about this place, this time, called eternal life, but Jesus spent most of his time talking about the Kingdom of God in the here and now, a kingdom that was much different from the ones that ruled

the day, the kingdoms that this rich man, this rich ruler, was probably quite content with. Why wouldn't he be?

The challenge posed to the rich man is actually an invitation if he can receive it. It's an invitation to seek the Kingdom of God first.

It was certainly good news for the poor. Was it good news for him? Is it good news for us?

This story reminds me of a mission trip that I took to rural Nicaragua many years ago. In our group, there was a young woman named Leah. She hadn't done much traveling, and what she had experienced was the rather glamorous variety. Southeast Nicaragua was different, and like many who are seeing extreme poverty up close for the first time, Leah's spirit broke, along with her composure. This was not a world that she was comfortable with anymore.

One day we sat down for lunch—really a feast that our incredible hosts had prepared for us—and the town leaders shared with us the problems that their community was experiencing and how we might be able to come alongside them as siblings in Christ. While we ate, clearly malnourished children kicked a deflated soccer ball up and down the dirt road beside us, occasionally looking over to see if we'd finished our meal. We had become accustomed to them swooping in after we were done to eat what was left off of our plates.

Like many of us, Leah moved the food around on her plate, and then the floodgates opened again. She put down her fork. She let out a big exhale, and she made a declaration to us: she was going to make some big, and I mean big, life changes upon returning to the States. She would begin by selling most of her possessions and writing a big old check to CEPAD, the umbrella organization that our Presbytery worked with in Nicaragua. When our well-meaning group leader suggested that she simply join the Presbytery's global outreach committee instead, Leah was indignant with a 20-year-old's indignation. She challenged us all to do something that "actually mattered."

Well, as you can most likely surmise, Leah didn't end up selling most of her possessions or making any apparent radical changes. Once back in the comfort of her own home, she was surprised and sobered by the difficulty of her intentions and the decisiveness that she had exercised so earnestly when confronted with the depths of human pain.

What she did have, however, was a change of conscience. In order for Leah to receive the divine invitation, her world had to be shaken up, and she had to cease being the center of it. Grief came first, as it does when we lose something precious. In Leah's case, it was a sense of general justice, of okay-ness in the world, of the security that comes with it, of integrity.

But when I met with her for coffee and a chat just a few months later, she expressed that the disappointment that she had in herself had begun to dissipate. What I heard is that this ensuing relief enabled her to make some changes that brought her ideals and her reality into a closer dance. Changes in how she managed her time and what she spent her money on, what she committed herself to, what she read, how she prayed. The biggest, smallest things.

Jesus knows that the rich man seeking the recipe for eternal life is anxious. Like most of us, he is missing an inherent sense of his goodness, his worth, his security. He compensates in all of the ways we tightly wound folks compensate. He follows the rules—or at least he tries really hard. He plays the game. He doesn't question too much. And despite it all, he is still excessively worried. *Am I really enough? Am I doing all of this the right way? Am I safe in this world? Am I saved in the next?* His question to Jesus is not *"How do I serve God and my neighbors more faithfully?"* But *"What do I need to do to secure my own salvation? To punch my ticket to heaven?"*

Jesus encounters this man with grace, but not with cheap grace. Jesus knows that the man's anxiety over all of these things is inherently self-centered. In this man's telling, he follows all of the commandments, but the indwelling, inbreaking Kingdom of God has clearly not

taken root. He has accumulated wealth at the expense of the poor without any apparent knowledge that this is unjust, and his faith in his ability to gain eternal life by and for himself has left him unable to recognize the presence of God when it is standing close enough for him to touch. Jesus knows that in order for this man to live in, to taste, the eternal life that he is seeking, he, like Leah, needs to cease being the center of his world. He has to break free of the worry that binds him to his own self-interest. He has to let go of the notion that he alone can merit his own present and his own future because if he continues in that way, his world is wholly consumed by concern for *himself*, and that—as it turns out—is exactly the opposite of the eternal life that he is seeking.

Rich man, you cannot do this! It is so hard, in fact, that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, Jesus says. It makes sense that the disciples were incredulous. And that we are. And that the Church was. In the fifth century, the Church was convinced that the metaphor of the camel going through the eye of the needle just needed to be tweaked to make it possible. They suggested that the Greek words for 'camel' and 'heavy cable'—the kind that's used as a ship anchor—must have gotten mixed up. (They were very similar words, after all, in Greek.) The ancient translator must have dozed off, accidentally writing 'camel' instead of 'heavy cable.' Of course, this explanation didn't last for long—well, you know why! Because no ship cable can be threaded through the eye of a needle any more than a camel can. The explanation may have been short-lived, but the effort to make the rich man's quest for eternal life possible is telling. *My gosh, there had to be a way to get that camel through the eye of that needle, to get that rich man into heaven. Putting salvation in God's hands alone was not sufficient.*

Is it sufficient for us? I sure hope so.

Church, this is a liberating story. If, for a handful of folks, the words of Jesus spark convicted souls, and a radical reorientation to one's material wealth, and a redistribution of the earth's bounty, then thanks be to God. That is good news. That is gospel.

And if, for most of us here today, this challenging call is a reminder that the imperative of God is serious, but so is the grace, then thanks be to God. What is impossible for us is possible for God. Thanks be to God.

God—and only God—can release us from the agony of self-worship and a meritocracy that is bound to leave us despairing like that rich man. Rich and poor and everything in-between: when we recognize that it is God's love, God's grace, God's gracious will at work in us and in our world, then it is God that retains the rightful place at the center—the very center—of our lives. And when God, and not “me, myself, and I,” is the center of my life, I am finally and actually free to think about the interests of others, the needs, the dreams of others. I am free to serve others with a courage I didn't even know that I had. I am free to imagine and work for a world that centers others. I might not sell all of my possessions, or whatever equivalent that would be for somebody in my tax bracket and station in life, but because my salvation does not depend on it, I am *untethered*—I am free to follow Jesus with obedience and with joy. I can begin to live that seemingly impossible lifestyle that Jesus pleads with us all to live, resting in the Truth that God can handle the rest.

Imagine if we all did that? Imagine if the rich man in our story did that? Maybe he did.

This story can be discomfoting, and it can be confusing because it holds two seemingly opposite things in tension: the call for radical discipleship on the one hand, and the revelation that it is impossible for most of us to heed that call on the other. But illuminating and connecting that tension is the revelation that for our God, it is possible. God can. And God has. And God will not let us go until everyone is fed, and all is restored, and life abundant is everyone's birthright. It is a God-given promise; it is a God-given gift. Most of all, it is an invitation to be so moved by our gratitude for it that we begin to do the impossible.

Thanks be to God. Amen.