

Losing everything to gain it all * Matthew 19:16-30

March 17, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I have a confession to make. I like money.

I can use it to buy things. I can use it to buy stuff like soap. (Thank goodness, right?). I can use it to buy books. I can use it to buy birthday presents. I can use it to support a lot of good ministries.

And I need it too. I NEED money. I need money to buy food, to buy clothes, to pay the water bill, to put a roof over our heads.

But I also know that sometimes, money becomes a hindrance to my faith life. That happens when I trust more in it than I should. When it gets more attention than Jesus does. When I start to think that I can spend my way into happiness. Money can skew the way that I see the world.

And so I acknowledge that I may have blind spots and defensive walls when it comes to talking about money.

But Jesus talked a lot about money and His view of finances is way different than our culture's, so I need to pay attention to what He says. And what He says today is big.

21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Mat 19:21 NIV).

That's big! And from the moment that Jesus said it, people, I'll bet, have been arguing about how to apply it. Did Jesus really mean that? Did Jesus really mean that for ALL His followers?

Now listen – I think that it's possible to let ourselves off the hook too easily here – there is a sense in which this has to apply to everyone - but it's also possible to LEAVE ourselves on the hook inappropriately, by loading you up with works that you're not called to do so I want to look very carefully at this passage with you.

I want to explore the whole thing – from verse 16 to verse 30 – and then give you three thoughts to bring it all together at the end. I encourage you to have a Bible open in front of you, so you can keep the whole picture in front of you – we'll see what's going on in the text and then apply it when we get to the end.

So let's start, right off the top – verse 16.

Now this is probably a story that you've heard before – a rich young man comes up to Jesus dressed in his finest robes and asks Jesus (vs. 16) "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

Well that's a good question to ask. People in our day and age have a tendency to say 'I'm too busy in this life to think about the next' but we'd all do well to think like this rich young man and ask 'well, what about eternal life? How can I live forever?'

There's a problem though in the question that he's asking because look at what he says:

"Teacher, what GOOD thing must *I* do to GET eternal life?"

He's so used to trading good coin to get good things, that's he's thinking about salvation in a very similar, very transactional way. "Eternal life is something I want; what's it going to cost for me to get it?"

Jesus knows that this man's good works have nothing to do with salvation and so He - Jesus replies - 17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good."

“Like, listen buddy – you think your good works are good enough to earn you eternal life? Fat chance of that. There is only ONE who is good – and that’s God. Fortunately though – God’s goodness is more than enough to welcome people like you into his kingdom.

But He continues: “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

Now for me, listening as a believer on this side of the Cross, that sounds strange. Like, shouldn’t Jesus say: if you want to enter life, confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead – and you will be saved? Because that IS the way that you enter life and forever.

But remember, when Jesus was talking to this man Jesus hasn’t died on the Cross yet. At that point in history, keeping the Commandments WAS the way that you would respond to and relate to God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the mount - 17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Jesus was rightly saying to a Jewish person – you enter life by keeping the commandments – but – as He says in verse 21, there’s more to it than that. Hold onto that thought for a minute.

So the man hears Jesus say – “Enter life by keeping the commandments” and he says ‘which ones?’ This could be a ‘what do I have to study for the test’ situation, or it could be that the man is simply hoping to clarify which of the 613 laws found in OT were most important.

Jesus replied, " 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.' "

He’s highlighting here the second half of the Ten Commandments and then adds Leviticus 19:18 as a good summary – love your neighbour as yourself. He’s highlighting the core commandments of the Jewish faith and at this point, He hasn’t said anything yet that this young man doesn’t already know. The Jewish people understood that God’s Law gave life and clearly the man knew it -

20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" (Mat 19:18-20 NIV).

Now this is an interesting question, because – why is he asking it? Is he so spiritually aware that he realizes that there is still something holding him back from truly loving God? Like, keeping the commandments is fine, but there’s still some sin hidden away in his heart? Or is he actually hoping that Jesus will say ‘Way to go! You lack nothing! Let’s have a party because you’re so good.’

To be honest, I don’t think we’ll ever know what his motivation was and either way, 21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Now let’s unpack that. “If you want to be perfect” Jesus says... Does that mean that a Christian can opt to not be perfect? Like the monks and super-Christians are perfect but there’s an everyday variety of imperfect Christians that’s ok too? No – again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls all believers to be perfect. 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Ok, so what does ‘perfection’ look like? Never making a mistake? Being impeccably proper every time?

Well, Dick France puts it like this – not so much moral flawlessness, but completeness and full maturity (France, 734). Other scholars point out that Jesus is using this word the way it’s often used in the OT – to indicate undivided loyalty and full-hearted obedience (Carson, Matt 19:21-22).

~~What the word “perfection” suggests here is what it commonly means in the OT — undivided loyalty and full-hearted obedience.~~

So if you want to be wholly committed to God, Jesus says, 'go, sell all your possessions and give to the poor.' Why does He say this? Well, it looks as though Jesus already knows what we'll find out in the next verse, and that for this man, undivided loyalty is going to require that he get rid of his stuff. His stuff is keeping him from truly loving God and so Jesus says – get rid of it, help people who can use it and by doing that, he will actually be storing up treasure in heaven –

And then Jesus says – Come and follow me. That's something we need to hear very clearly. I think we tend to read this passage and our ears fixate on 'sell all you have' and we forget what is arguably the most important part of this command – 'follow me.' The point is not 'selling everything' because poverty in and of itself doesn't get you life. Only following Jesus does. And Jesus calls this man to the same life that He called Petr and James and John and us. Follow me.

22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth (Mat 19:21-22 NIV).

He didn't want to give it up. He valued his money more than he valued God. It's a tragic story. I think that this is the only time in the Gospels when someone hears Jesus' call and doesn't respond. Tragic.

23 Then Jesus (decides to interpret this encounter for His disciples so He) said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

24 Again I tell you, 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."

Now this is really interesting, because Jesus is saying that wealth is actually an obstacle to eternal life. Wealth can keep people from recognizing their need for God. Money can actually be a barrier that keeps people from being saved.

And Jesus puts it in a very memorable way - it's easier to push a camel through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom. It's easier to get a tank into a popcan than it is to get a rich person into Heaven.

You may have heard in the past a story about there being a gate in Jerusalem called 'the eye of the needle' and Jesus is referring to it – like you can get the camel through only if you drop all your baggage and come through on your knees – it's a lovely picture – but the problem is, there's no evidence of a gate in Jerusalem called 'the eye of the needle.' And Christian authors never tell that story until the middle ages... so we need to hear Jesus' words the way they were intended.

It is easier to fit a huge thing through a tiny thing than it is to get a rich person into Heaven.

That's shocking to us – and it was equally shocking to the disciples!

For them especially, wealth was a sign of God's favour and so they thought – 'wow, this man must really be loved by God' – but in comes Jesus to get us all to rethink our relationship with money.

25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

26 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."
(Mat 19:23-26 NIV).

Jesus, thankfully, lays it all out here. Wealth can be an obstacle to salvation, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle. And frankly, I'm sure Jesus would add that poverty can be an obstacle too, if you were to become so bitter as to not turn to good for help.

Fortunately though, with God, there is no such thing as an insurmountable barrier to faith. He wants people to be saved. And because He is good, He gave His Son to redeem anyone who would commit their lives to Him and follow Jesus – whether rich or poor, wealthy or not.

Michael Wilkins writes: “Jesus knows that riches can keep people’s eyes off of God. But he also knows God’s operation in the lives of people and says that even if it is impossible with humankind, if a rich person truly trusts God, God will make it possible” (19:26).

Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 651). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

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Well, hearing that, good old Peter blurts out the first thing that comes to mind –

27 Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" He’s probably comparing the rich man’s wealth to the boat he gave up and saying – all I had was that stinky boat – do I still get treasure in Heaven?’

28 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Jesus’ followers may have no power in this life but they will rule in the next).

29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

30 But many who are first (like the rich man) will be last, and many who are last (like the fishermen) will be first (Mat 19:27-30 NIV).

Jesus is assuring Peter – yes, it’s worth it. Jesus’ followers may not have the crispest suits and the fanciest cars and the biggest houses, but our eternal possessions will put all those to shame.

So... the rich young man...

Ok, so, lots of stuff there. What does it all mean? Let me try to pull these verses together into three points –

1. We enter eternal life by following Jesus.
2. We follow Jesus by giving everything up.
3. We give it all up but gain everything in return.

So first, we enter eternal life by following Jesus.

This rich young man comes to Jesus and he has a very specific question – how can I enter eternal life? – it would be a shame if in the midst of all this, that point was lost. The foremost question at the heart of this passage is how do I enter eternal life? And the answer is not ‘through good deeds.’ The answer is not ‘selling everything and give to the poor.’ The answer is ‘deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus, trusting Him for salvation.’ In short, we enter eternal life by following Jesus.

And even that is the gift of God. Remember the disciples, they’re flabbergasted when Jesus talks about wealth as an obstacle to salvation, and Jesus ultimately says – ‘look, rich or poor, wealthy or destitute – it doesn’t matter how good you are – it all depends on how good God is.’ Everything is possible when God is at work.

Selling all we have, doing good works, donating to charity, keeping the commandments – those are all good, but they are worthless if they are done outside of relationship with Jesus. And Jesus calls us to follow Him.

Point #2 – we follow Jesus by giving everything up.

Jesus is a gracious King; Jesus is a merciful King; but He will not tolerate competition. Because of His undeserved generosity, He deserves our undivided devotion and it will not do to split our ultimate allegiance between God and something else.

And that's the problem with money; it can very easily become that 'something else.' Money can very easily become a 'counterfeit god.' I mean think about it.

Money gets food for us. It keeps us from deprivation and hardship. Money helps us to do things that we want to do and can get us out of jams when they happen. Money motivates us and shapes what we do with our days – especially in our working years – and money can give us a sense of confidence and security when we feel like we have enough.

That sounds an awful lot like a god to me. And it appears that this rich young man was more devoted to his money than to His God. And that's why Jesus calls him to sell it all, give it away and begin a life of undivided devotion to Him.

Michael Wilkins puts it well: Jesus knew full well the controlling issue of the rich young man's life—it was his wealth, which provided him power, significance, and status. It became the god of his life; it determined his values, priorities, and ambitions. Jesus called him to exchange it for following him in discipleship in the kingdom of heaven. [Wilkins is entirely right – and then he takes that and applies it to our lives] - The young man's turning away is tragic, but it becomes a powerful illustration even in our own lives of the way we need to keep short account of what is ruling our lives. Even Christians can misplace their allegiance, so each person must be honest with himself or herself to know what is the treasure of the heart.

Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 659). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

And that's why I'm saying 'we follow Jesus by giving everything up.' Because money is not the only thing that can distract us from relationship with Jesus. Our careers can, our hobbies can, even our families can – and there's nothing wrong with those things – but when they begin to shove God aside to take first place in our lives, then we are giving them the authority that only God deserves. Jesus calls us to lay down ANYTHING and EVERYTHING that would distract us from Him and to follow Him with focused commitment.

Now, since Jesus is talking specifically about money here, let's talk about money. On one hand, I think that we all need to hear and take seriously Jesus call to sell all that we have, give to the poor and follow Him. If you have indoor plumbing in your house, you're probably at least as well off as this rich young man and I appreciate Dale Bruner's perspective here:

"Jesus seeks all disciples to reorganize their material lives in economic discipleship... to shake up our relationship with money and possessions" (Bruner, 296, 300).

Does that mean that all Christians should sell all that they have and give it away? No, I can't in good conscience say so. That call can't be for all believers; otherwise, I'm sure we would have heard it when Matthew the tax collector became a follower of Jesus and then at the end of this Gospel, when Joseph of Arimathea goes to bury Jesus' body, he's specifically called 'a rich man who had become a disciple.' With God, all things are possible.

57 As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.

So no, Jesus does not expect all believers to live without possessions, but He does intend for us to surrender those possessions to God, making them available for His use, eager to share at a moment's notice. If even we do not literally give everything away, we need to act as though we have, in order to make following Jesus our foremost priority.

But that raises the question that we asked last week, why? Why would you do that? Ask any kid – sharing does not come easily and it only gets harder as you get older. If you disagree, let me ask you, are you giving 10% of your income to help others and to extend the Gospel through the world? It only gets harder.

So why would we go against the grain and in a culture that says 'he who dies with the most toys wins' say 'he who dies with the least toys wins'? Because 'he who dies with the least toys doesn't actually die' – we give everything up because in Christ, we gain everything in return.

Remember what Jesus said to Peter?

29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. (Mat 19:29 NIV).

Jesus promises to pay back exponentially all that we surrender here on earth. Really, what you give up now is not just 'giving away'; it is actually an investment in eternity. When we hold possessions loosely and share them freely, we are literally storing up treasure in Heaven, instead of here on earth where moth and rust and thieves can destroy. Yes, that means that we may have less here on earth, but as R. T. France put it: "The life of heaven is far more than enough to compensate for any earthly loss" (France, 745).

"Jesus does not call us to mystic nothingness, to an unrecompensed poverty, or even to a 'virtue for its own sake;' He calls us to *transfer investments and to expect dividends*... If we have the courage to devote what we have to the service of the poor, we have the windfall of dividends [that are] literally out of this world" (Bruner, 300).

And that's why we give everything up - because in Christ, we gain everything in return.

1. We enter eternal life by following Jesus.
2. We follow Jesus by giving everything up.
3. We give it all up but gain everything in return.

BENEDICTION

9. Eph. 3:17-19 - (May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.