

Center

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] And I'm so glad to be back together this morning. Some of you are regularly here with us and you know what's going on in the life of our church. Some of you may be new, maybe this is your first time.

So for all of us, this is week two of the Advent Home Campaign, which is an incredibly exciting time in the life of our church. It's an opportunity for us to revisit the reasons that we started this church 12 years ago, the values that drive the life of this community.

We started Advent in a living room in Columbia Heights on Newton Street with a commitment to loving the city of D.C. long term, loving the DMV region long term.

And the Home Campaign is a huge opportunity for us to take a major step forward toward accomplishing that goal and that vision. The biggest obstacle that we face in trying to live out this commitment is the lack of a permanent space, a place where we can serve the city not only for the next year or two, but for generations.

A place where we can be not only on Sundays, but every day of the week to love and to serve the community where God puts us. So the goal of the Home Campaign is to secure a permanent home for Church of the Advent so that we can love this city and this region long term until it becomes a great home for all people, where Jesus Christ is Lord.

[1 : 37] That's what we're doing. And so we're not asking anyone to make a commitment today. We recognize that this is a very unique thing. We've never done anything like this as a church in 12 years.

What we're doing right now is to simply ask people to commit to making a commitment, to be open to what God might do. And I recognize for some of you you're new and this is your first encounter with any of this.

And so we recognize all of that. But I'm asking everybody to just be open. In three weeks' time, March 29th, we're actually going to have an opportunity here to fill out a commitment card for those who feel called to be a part of this and to support it.

I'm fully committed and invested. Our staff is fully committed and invested. Our parish council is fully committed and invested already. My hope is that God will call you to be a part of this as well. It's a huge opportunity also for us to grow in our faith as a community. And this is a huge opportunity for us to rethink the way we approach things like stewardship and generosity.

[2 : 41] You know, if you look at Scripture, I said this last week, Jesus talks more about wealth than almost any other topic save for the kingdom of God. And many places where he talks about wealth, he's also talking about the kingdom of God.

So topics that come up a lot more like sex or money or sex or heaven or hell, things like that, he doesn't talk about nearly as much as he talks about money and wealth.

As a church, we've hardly ever talked about it. I said last week, I was looking back over 12 years, and I think I could count on one hand the number of times I've directly addressed this from the pulpit. It's just most of the time not the most comfortable topic to talk about.

A lot of other things that we'd rather talk about. But this is a huge opportunity for us to talk about this and look at what Jesus has to say. So this is what we're going to be doing for the next five weeks. We started last week looking at Luke chapter 12, and this week we'll be looking at Luke chapter 18. These encounters that Jesus has and what they teach us about stewardship and generosity. So this week we're looking at chapter 18, and we're going to meet a man who has what I would say most people in D.C. want.

[3 : 48] If you moved to D.C., you probably moved because you thought that moving here would help you get these things. He's young, he is wealthy, and he's influential.

He's young, he has means, he's very wealthy, and he's influential. He's a ruler. We learn that because this story shows up in all three of the synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to this encounter.

So we know it's important. And what we see in this encounter with Jesus is he comes to Jesus asking, how do I live the good life? How do I assure myself of salvation?

And Jesus' response reveals the fact that because of his wealth, this man is actually in grave spiritual danger. Because of his wealth, he's in grave spiritual danger.

And this completely catches him off guard. So we're going to see the danger of wealth. Then we're going to see the reason why it's dangerous. And then we're going to see how to overcome it, how to deal with it.

[4 : 48] The danger of wealth, the reason it's dangerous. And then how do we overcome it? How do we deal with it? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that when we come here every week, our hope does not rest in human wisdom.

It doesn't rest in our ability to help ourselves. That, Lord, we come here because we know in our souls that there is something that we need outside of us. And we know that when we gather together, you are present with us.

And when we open your word, your spirit illuminates it. And through your written word, we are able to encounter face-to-face your living word, Jesus Christ. And it's because of him that we're here and in his name that we pray.

Amen. So first of all, the danger of wealth. This passage is clear that wealth can be spiritually dangerous.

But chances are it is not for the reason that most of us might think. Even if you're not a Christian, most people are familiar with verse 25. People who have never opened a Bible on their own are familiar with this verse.

[5 : 59] For it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. So most everybody knows that verse. And at first glance, this seems to suggest that there is something inherently wrong with rich people.

Right? It seems to suggest that being wealthy is somehow inherently wrong. And that if you are rich, you must be so corrupt.

Maybe that's how you got rich that there's no chance for you to enter the kingdom of heaven. But if you look at the larger context of scripture, that would suggest otherwise.

Right? Some of the prophets, some of the apostles, some of the early church leaders were poor. That's absolutely true. They were poor, uneducated fishermen. But you also have wealthy people. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were phenomenally wealthy. People like David and Solomon, profoundly wealthy. People like Lydia, who hosted one of the first churches.

[7 : 00] A dealer of purple goods, obviously very wealthy. People like Joseph of Arimathea. These are people in the Old and New Testament who are wealthy. And God uses them. Right? You have cultural elites like Daniel.

High-level political leaders like Esther. Right? Influential city planners who get massive grants to do urban renewal work like Nehemiah. Right?

So the beauty of God's salvation story is not that he only uses poor people because they're the really faithful ones. Or that he only uses rich people because they're the ones who can really get things done.

The beauty of God's story is that he uses everybody. And anybody. Rich and poor alike. Educated and uneducated alike. Because the point is, it is God doing the work.

And he demonstrates that again and again and again by using anyone and everyone to do it. Right? So what does Jesus mean with the whole camel-needle analogy?

[8 : 00] And I think the clue to this, and I think it's a mysterious passage, frankly. I've wrestled with it for a long time. The clue comes from the context of the passage. By the way, if there's ever a point where you're reading Scripture and you're not quite clear how to make sense of what you're reading, look at the context.

It's one of the first things you can do to gain clarity as to what the passage means. So if you look just before this, earlier in Luke chapter 18, Jesus has just told a parable about two men who go to the temple to pray.

And one of the men in the parable goes and he says, I thank God that I am not like other sinners. I thank God that I'm a good man. And then Jesus contrasts that with the other man who is so full of awareness, so full of shame and guilt, that he's only able to look at the floor. He can't even lift his eyes. And all he can utter quietly is, have mercy on me, a sinner. And the point of the parable, Jesus says, I tell you the truth, that man went home justified. And he says, those who humble themselves will be justified, will be lifted up, right? And then Jesus makes a remark about the children. He points to some kids who are coming to them, to see him and to touch him.

[9 : 13] And he says of these children, to the people who are listening, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child, shall not enter it. So you look at these two together, and it seems to be saying something pretty clearly.

There's only one way into the kingdom of God. And that is to recognize, number one, that we need it. And number two, that there's nothing we can do to earn it. That's the flow of the passage.

You have to recognize that you need it, and you have to recognize that you can't earn it. That's the context that brings us into this encounter with this rich, young ruler.

The kingdom cannot be earned. It can only be received as a gift. There's a hymn that we sometimes sing that I love. This is my favorite verse. It says, Let not conscience make you linger, nor a fitness fondly dream.

All the fitness he requires is to feel your need of him. So when this man says to Jesus, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[10 : 17] Tell me what to do. What's the formula? What's the five steps? With the acrostic, What's the five-step plan? It's clear that he doesn't get it.

And this is why I think that Jesus responds in the curious way that he does. He says, And I think there's not a little bit of irony in this. Why do you call me good? Only God is good.

He's setting him up, right? It's almost like he's playing with him. You can see a bit of a wry smile tugging at the corner of Jesus' mouth, right? Why do you call me good? But this man obviously has no idea who he's talking to.

He doesn't get it. This man fails to recognize Jesus because he fails to recognize his own need. He fails to recognize Jesus because he fails to recognize his own need.

He is standing face to face with the Son of God, who is ready to give him the keys of the kingdom. And he's asking for advice. He doesn't get it. The point is this.

[11 : 23] You say, you know, well, what does this have to do with the man's wealth? Well, the danger of wealth, wealth is not inherently evil. It's neutral. The danger of wealth is that it insulates us from need.

It insulates us from need. If the only way, if this section of Luke is teaching us that the only way to know God and have a relationship with God and have access to God's kingdom is to know that we need it, anything that reduces our sense of need is going to be spiritually dangerous.

All right, so it's not just wealth. It could be a whole variety of things. But I'll tell you this. Wealth is at the top of that list. Need reduction, need mitigation, wealth.

That's the best thing it can do, right? It's the most effective use of wealth. And that's why most people use it for that reason. So now we want to look at the reason why.

So what's the danger of wealth? Well, it reduces our sense of need for God. Why is it dangerous? Without fail, every evening when we're in the kitchen cooking dinner, right around the time that we start to cook dinner, our kids bust into the kitchen from whatever they're doing, and they beg for junk food.

[12 : 43] And they are starving. And they're going to die if they don't eat something. And they're very dramatic about it, right? Without fail, right? The minute we fire up the stove, the minute we start to cook them something good and nutritious and healthy, they beg for junk food.

It's almost like the smell of cooking vegetables triggers their kind of primal mind to want sugar and fat. You know, and so they bust in and they're starving, right? And what's the problem with that, right?

The problem with junk food is that it tricks you into thinking that you have eaten what you need to eat, right? Hunger is a good thing.

The hunger drive motivates us to go get nutrients and put them into our body because that's what our body needs to grow. The problem with junk food is that it tricks us into thinking that we've gotten

those nutrients.

But in fact, all we've done is eat a bunch of sugar and fat. So if our kids eat junk food, if we give in and we say yes, they're not actually going to eat the healthy food when we give it to them 30 minutes later because they won't feel the need for it anymore.

[13:49] Right? And so the point is this. All of us have deeper existential spiritual needs. And we have those needs for a reason. Like hunger motivates us to get nutrients.

These deeper spiritual needs motivate us to seek the Lord. That's why we have them. We need as human beings a sense of safety and security.

We all need that. We all need to have a sense of our own value and our own worth as people. We all have to deal with and cope with negative, painful, unwanted emotions.

You can't live life and not have these needs. And these needs are ultimately there to drive us to the Lord, to lead us to God. They're like spiritual hunger.

We're spiritually hungry when we're feeling those needs. And the thing that we most need, like the body needs nutrients, the thing that we most need is God at the center of our lives.

[14:51] But the problem with wealth is that it tricks us into believing that our needs have already been met. It takes away that hunger.

Right? So for some people, wealth is where they find their security. We talked about that a little bit last week. By the way, I was with a small group this past week doing the week one of the curriculum that we're doing in all of our small groups.

We were working through some of those questions. And people were just sharing in very vulnerable ways what money means to them. And it was incredibly powerful just to hear what people said.

Some people said, for me, it's really about feeling safe and secure.

It meets that need. Right? For some people, wealth is a source of self-worth and validation. You have a job title. You're paid at a certain level. And that says something about who you are and your worth relative to other people.

And I think for a lot of us, when it comes to dealing with negative unwanted feelings, I think probably there's not a person in this room who hasn't found ways to self-medicate as a way to deal with those unwanted feelings.

[15:58] And, man, the more wealthy you are, the easier it is to self-medicate with things like food and drink or tech, you know, smartphones, things like that, or shopping.

Right? These are ways that we self-medicate. You know in hospitals when somebody is, they're doing pain management in a hospital and they give them the little button to dose themselves with pain medicine, right?

It's called a PCA. Not the denomination. It's called a patient, it's called a patient-controlled analgesia. Right? PCA. Every time you feel pain, a little click of that button gives you another dose. Right? Every time I'm on Amazon shopping and I see that little one-click buy now button, I think of that like a spiritual PCA button.

Right? It's a spiritual PCA. Just click. Just click. That's all. It's so easy. Right? You're feeling empty inside. Click. Right? You're feeling lonely and unwanted. Click. You're feeling sad and depressed.

[16:58] Click. You're feeling angry and unappreciated at work. Click. Click. Right? You're feeling like everybody around you is more successful than you are. Click. It's so easy to self-medicate.

Right? And the more we numb ourselves to those needs, the more we numb ourselves to that kind of pain, the less we feel the need for anything outside of ourselves.

How much American consumerism is driven by people trying to meet spiritual needs with material goods? You almost think of this as something that we could do to help the environment.

Right? How much less waste would there be if people were only buying what they need rather than using consumerism to self-medicate? Right? It's an interesting thing to think about how much excess is produced because of our desire to satisfy spiritual longings with material goods.

So the danger of wealth is that it diminishes our need for God. It tricks us into thinking that we're full, even when we're spiritually starving. So how do we overcome this danger?

[18:08] Right? All of this, I think, helps us understand Jesus' response to this man. Because first, Jesus says what the man expects. So you can imagine the man walks up, good teacher, in front of a bunch of people.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? How do I live a good life? And he's ready because he thinks he knows what Jesus is going to say. Jesus first responds the way most people, most rabbis would

respond. Well, you know the commandments. And the man's ready with an answer. Well, as long as I can remember, I've kept all the commandments. And so then Jesus says something that catches this man off guard. It's almost as though the man starts to walk away kind of feeling like, oh, yeah, I'm living a pretty good life.

And Jesus says, oh, one more thing. Sell all that you have, distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.

Now, what's going on there? Okay, the point is not if you want to go to heaven, give all your money away. That's not the point. You all know Warren Buffett.

[19:10] Years ago, Warren Buffett, the kind of multi-multi-billionaire. At this point, I think he was the second wealthiest man in the world. And he announces famously that he's going to donate 85% of his fortune to charity.

A lot of press about that. And so people ask him about it. And he says this, as a quote, there's more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way. That's so Warren Buffett, right?

And a lot of people, I think, think that on some level. A guy like Warren Buffett gives billions of dollars away to charity. Surely, if God's going to let somebody in, he's going to let a guy like that in. How amazingly generous is that, right?

I think a lot of people think that on some level. But that's not the point of what Jesus is saying. Think about what we just said about wealth, and look at what Jesus is really saying to this man. He's saying, okay, you kept the commandments.

One thing you still lack. Let go of your financial security. Let go of it. It could all be gone tomorrow, and you need to realize that.

[20:13] A few days ago, the Dow dropped the most points in a single day in history because of a virus. It could all be gone tomorrow. I read an article about a guy who retired that week.

He's like, I'm just not even looking at my investments. It's too depressing. It could all be gone. Let go of your financial security. It's an illusion. It's not real. Let go of the self-worth that you derive from your earnings or your job title.

Those don't say anything about your worth as a human being. Stop self-medicating to deal with the painful realities of life.

I didn't put you on this earth to be numb all the time. I put you here to be alive. Stop looking to your wealth, Jesus is saying.

He says, sell all that you have. What's he saying? Stop looking to your wealth to give you things only I can give you. Leave all that behind.

[21:15] Come, follow me. Make me the center of your life. Bring all of those needs to me. That's why you have them. But the man refuses.

And he goes away sad. He goes away in despair because it says he's extremely rich. That's the Bible's way of saying wealth had so taken hold of his heart and soul. It was so in his DNA and marrow and bones and blood.

It was so a part of who he was. It was so inextricably linked to his worldview. It was so necessary for him to get up in the morning. It was so necessary for him to deal with the day-to-day realities of his life.

He couldn't imagine life without it. It's too great a sacrifice. And he can't bring himself to do it. And, you know, it would be easy to kind of look at this and smugly think, well, you know, number one, I'm not nearly that rich.

And number two, I think I have a much better awareness of my spiritual need. And number three, I'm going to be able to do this in a way that this man can. And I just think we have to be honest with ourselves. These things have too firm a grip on us.

[22:20] You know, me too. This is why the people see all this happen and they say, well, who can be saved? You know, in their worldview, in our worldview, it's fashionable among some people to look at the wealthy and to be down on them, right?

And to assume the worst about people who are extremely wealthy. But in this society, in the ancient Near East, in the Greco-Roman world, if you were wealthy, people assumed that you were that way because God blessed you.

So this is a morally good man. He's wealthy. The assumption was that he'd been blessed by God.

And so they look at a guy like this and they say, well, if a guy like that can't be saved, then who can be saved? Right?

These things have a firm hold on us. But look at what Jesus says in verse 27. What is impossible with man is possible with God. Now, what's he talking about?

He's talking about the gospel. The rich young ruler refuses to sacrifice these things for Jesus. It's too great a sacrifice. But don't you see?

[23 : 22] The gospel tells us that Jesus made this exact same sacrifice for us. Only Jesus was unimaginably more wealthy than this rich young ruler.

He is the wealthiest being ever to have existed because everything that exists belongs to him. He's wealthier than we can possibly imagine. But he gave it all up.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9, The only way that you or I will ever have the courage to let go of these things that sit at the center of our lives is when we realize that Jesus Christ willingly sacrificed infinitely.

More for us. More for us. When you recognize that while this man was not willing to make the sacrifice, Jesus was. And he did so joyfully and willingly.

Not in this version, but in another gospel version of this story, it says that Jesus looked at this man and he loved him. He looked at you and he loved you and he says, you're not going to sacrifice anything for me.

[24 : 47] I'm going to sacrifice everything for you. So the question to think about this week is, what sits at the center of your life? And what role does wealth play in that?

It might be a need for security. It might be a need for status and worth. It might be something that I haven't mentioned. There's lots of reasons, lots of things. It could be combinations of things. But what do you do to meet those needs for security and self-worth and value?

How do you deal with your negative emotions? In the core group study this week, one of the questions that I'm asking people to think about, or one of the things that I'm asking you to do, is to look at your spending over the last month and to try to come up with a self-medication budget.

In other words, try to figure out of all that you spent over the last month, how much of that was in some way connected to your desire to self-medicate for these deeper needs? How much of your income is actually going to that?

Arithmetic can be a powerful thing. In overcoming that gap between who we think we are and who we really are, look at the math. The math doesn't lie.

[25 : 57] Right? So whatever that is, whatever we're looking to for these things, savings account, job, degree, whatever, ask yourself this. You know, look at that thing that's at the center of your life or those things, and ask yourself this.

Does this thing love me? Does it love me? Would it sacrifice for me? Or am I the one sacrificing for it?

And if the answer is no, you're making a bad investment. Jesus says at the end of the passage, truly 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 more in this time and the age to come eternal life.

Listen, that may sound extreme, but think about it. There are plenty of people who have sacrificed home and spouse and siblings and parents, even their children in pursuit of wealth.

People make that sacrifice every day, every week. And if they live long enough, those people reach a point in their life where they realize the sacrifice was not worth it.

[27 : 08] But Jesus says the best investment you can possibly make is to invest in the kingdom of God. He says that this investment yields a far greater return than anything it might cost you.

He says, you know, you may give up financial security. You may give up your sense of safety, but you gain the absolute certainty of life in the kingdom of God.

You may give up your source of self-worth, but you gain an eternal being who is willing to die for you because he loves you. You may give up your life in the kingdom of God. You may give up your life in the kingdom of God.

You may give up home or family or kids for your faith, but you gain a global family of mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and sons and daughters in the church that spans all space and time.

This is why we keep saying that this time in the life of our church is such a great opportunity, and I really believe that it is. Because this gives us a chance to recenter our lives on Jesus and away from some of the other things that have crept in.

[28 : 18] And it gives us an opportunity to make a kind of kingdom investment in the DMV that will yield returns for eternity. And so that's why I'm excited about this and why we're praying that the fruit of this is a community that much more deeply understands the trustworthiness and the faithfulness and the power of God to do his work through anyone and everyone for his glory.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you again for the fact that each one of us, if we were this rich young ruler and we were face to face with you, and you gave us this offer, that we would probably walk away. I know I would. Lord, I would. Lord, I would. And I thank you that it doesn't hinge on us, but it hinges on you looking at us, loving us, and laying down everything, not just your financial security, not just your self-worth, but your life.

Lord, that you were rich but became poor for us so that we might become rich. And we pray that we would be a wealthy community, Lord, that the wealth of the kingdom of God would overflow so that the more we grow and the more we are blessed, the more the entire community around us would celebrate because they're the ones who are the recipients of that blessing.

Lord, we pray this for the sake of this city that we're committed to loving because we believe that you've put us here for just that reason. In your son's name, amen.