

Home Campaign: Center

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, again, let me welcome you this morning.

And especially those of you who are new or joining us for the first time or joining us for the first time in a while, we're delighted to have you. And we're delighted at the ability just to worship together in the flesh in person.

I hope I never take that for granted again in my whole life. But every week, I'm so excited to be together in person. This is week two of the Home Campaign at Church of the Advent.

And the Home Campaign was birthed out of many, many years of prayer. This was a church that 14 years ago, we were in a living room praying about what this church might become, and we prayed about making a long-term commitment to the city, a desire to love the city long-term.

And as we have seen over the years, God has provided for us and enabled us to do that. And so now, as we look at that long-term commitment over the course of many generations past this one, we need a home.

[1 : 12] We need a home from which to love and serve this city, the people in this city. And so that's what this campaign is all about. It's about making good on that commitment. And many of us have already committed to this campaign.

I've committed to the campaign. Our staff has committed. Our parish council's committed. Nobody's going to ask anyone to make a commitment today, but in a few weeks, in about three weeks, we are going to have an opportunity for everybody who would like to commit to being a part of this campaign to do that.

And I'm really excited about that because, as we've said all along, I think this is a tremendous opportunity for our church. And it's an opportunity not just to get a building but to grow spiritually, to take the biggest step, the biggest leap, the biggest act of trust, I think, that we've ever done as a community.

And so this is a huge opportunity for us to grow in our faith, to grow in our trust, particularly in how we think about stewardship and generosity. And one of the things that I've said all along is one of my core commitments to this process is that it be a spiritually healthy one, that it matters less to me whether we get a building, even how much we raise.

The thing that matters most is whether or not we grow, whether or not on the other end of this, we look back and we say we've been deepened in our faith and matured in our trust in the Lord through this process. We are a stronger, more vitalized church that has a little bit more of a sense of how God is able to do the amazing things in our midst.

[2 : 40] And so that's what this process is all about. So we've been looking at a series over the past few weeks on stewardship, on faith, on trust. And this week we're looking at Luke chapter 18.

It's a very well-known story. And this is a story about a man who I think seems to have it all. And it's the kind of person that I think most people in D.C. want to be, right?

He has everything that, like, D.C. people want, right? He has...he's wealthy, he has influence, he has power, he has status, he has respect. He has all of the things that bring people who don't grow up in D.C. to a place like D.C.

He has all of these things. And yet, for that very reason, this man's actually in grave spiritual danger. That's something that Jesus reveals over the course of this encounter, which means we may actually also be in spiritual danger.

So what we're going to do is look at this encounter and we're going to answer these questions. What is the danger that we're talking about? How do we know if we are in danger?

[3 : 46] And then finally, what can we do about it? Let's pray and then we'll open God's Word together. Lord, we thank You for Your Word. Lord, we thank You that we can come with our distractions or maybe even not even wanting to be here or confused about why we're here or thinking we know what we need.

And yet, You're the kind of God who knows our hearts. And You're not just words on a page. You're living and active. And You can speak to us and You can do Your work in us through Word and Spirit.

And so I pray that that would happen. Lord, I know I need that this morning. I need You to speak into my heart, Lord. And I pray that You do that for our good, Lord, so that we would grow, but also for Your glory.

And pray this in Your Son's name. Amen. So first of all, what is the danger that we're talking about here? What's the danger that this man is in that we might be in? What's the concern?

What's the concern? This passage shows us essentially that wealth can be spiritually dangerous, but probably not for the reason that most of us think.

[4 : 54] Even if you're not a Christian, most people know the verse that is in this passage, verse 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.

Now, at first glance, what that seems to say is that rich people will never enter the kingdom of God, so there must be something inherently wrong with being rich.

There must be something wrong with being wealthy. God must have a certain disdain for wealthy people that's going to keep them out.

And yet what we need to see is that in the larger context of Scripture, that can't possibly be the way we interpret this verse. Because some of the prophets and some of the apostles were very poor, and God used them.

Some of the early church leaders were poor. They had no social power. They were slaves. They were from minority classes. And yet God used them mightily. And yet we also know that we have wealthy people like Abraham, or David, or Solomon, or Matthew, or Lydia, or Joseph of Arimathea.

[6 : 05] These are wealthy people, powerful people, influential people. God used them powerfully right alongside the poor people. And so what we actually see is that the beauty of God's story is not that He only uses the poor or that He only uses the rich and powerful.

The beauty of God's story is that He can use anyone and everyone to further His kingdom. And He weaves all kinds of people into His story.

Okay, so it can't mean that. So then what does Jesus mean with this verse about wealth and a camel and a needle? Well, the clue comes from the context of the passage.

If we look at what comes just before this encounter, Jesus has just told a parable about two men praying in the temple. And it's no coincidence that Luke places that in the same section here.

One man in Jesus' parable comes into the temple, and he's a proud man. And he says, I thank God that I'm not like these sinners. I am a good man.

[7 : 10] And then in the parable, there's another person there who is so crushed by his guilt that all he can do is stare at the floor and beat his chest and say, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And then Jesus says, that is the man who goes home justified before God. So the humble man is crying out for mercy.

And mercy is, by definition, crying out for God to give you something that you don't deserve. Right? That's what mercy is. I don't deserve this, but I need it. The proud man doesn't believe that God needs to give him anything that he doesn't deserve.

He believes that God should give him what he's owed. Right? And so another way of saying it is, the proud man is entirely self-sufficient. He's his own Savior.

I'm standing before you, God. I've done all the right things, and I want you to give me what I'm owed. I upheld my end of the bargain. Now it's time for you to come through. So Jesus tells that parable. And then Jesus points to some children, probably children that were right there, and says, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like one of these children shall not enter it.

[8 : 28] Now what's the point there? What's the difference between a child and an adult? Well, there are a number of differences. The one that we're thinking about today is a child, by definition, is not self-sufficient.

You know, a child, by definition, needs an adult to take care of them and to meet their needs and to show them how to live. Right? Once you get to that point where you can do that on your own, you're no longer a child.

You're an adult, by definition. And so the point is, if we look at all that context, what's the point of what's really going on here? One of the most dangerous lies when it comes to our relationship with God is the lie of self-sufficiency.

It's the lie of self-sufficiency. And this goes all the way back to the fall. The Bible says that we were actually created to live with God and for God and to love God, that we were made for that relationship.

You know, St. Augustine says that the Trinity is, at its core, three persons who each have an entirely other-oriented, self-giving, sacrificial, other-glorifying love for the other members of the Trinity.

[9 : 44] Right? And we were created to have that kind of relationship with God who made us as an extension of that kind of love. And so another way of saying it is, life only works if God is at the center of it.

Right? Life only makes sense if God is at the center of it. If you think about a solar system, you know, why do all of the planets not constantly crash into each other?

Why is there not abject chaos in our solar system? Well, it's because they all share the same central object around which they orbit. It is their relationship with the sun at the center that creates harmony in their relationships with one another.

Right? Life is made to operate best when God is at the center of our orbit. And so the great lie of Satan is to say, that's not actually true. Life actually works better if you get to decide what's at the center of your life.

And might I make a suggestion? Maybe you should be at the center of your life. And that great lie that says, you don't need God to be at the center of your life.

[10 : 52] God is great. God is a nice add-on. God can be a helpful accessory, but you don't need Him to be at the center of your life. That goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 3.

That's the lie of self-sufficiency. So this is why wealth can be so dangerous. Because what does wealth do to that lie? Why? Well, it injects rocket fuel into it.

You know? It pours gasoline on it. You know? It greatly, greatly reinforces and strengthens the plausibility that I really don't need anything outside of myself.

Because it makes us more self-sufficient. Right? So, you know, if you're wealthy, and maybe you're sitting here thinking, I'm not really that wealthy. You know, this maybe applies to...I know that guy.

It applies to him, not to me. If you're wealthy, and by that I mean you have a place to live in relative safety. Right?

[11 : 56] You know, we just this week are grieving the dramatic increase in gun violence in D.C. And people we know in our community who know and are grieving kids who were shot.

Right? And killed. And that's awful. And the reality is that there are certain neighborhoods in D.C. where if you live in that neighborhood and you have a certain color skin, and it's like a death sentence.

Right? So, if you live in relative safety, if you have a steady job, steady income, if you have some kind of a plan or you've thought about retirement, if retirement even is something that is in your sort of vocabulary, if you have access to health care, if you have access to education, if you have access to transportation, if you have the kind of flexibility that allows you to work from home if you need to, especially if like child care falls through, if you have access to grocery stores that sell fresh produce, 24-hour pharmacies where you can get pretty much any medication you need within a day or two, if you can get almost any product you can imagine delivered to your house within 24 to 48 hours with the click of a button, then chances are this probably applies to you.

Because here's the question, like if those things are true about your life, how do you convince a person like that that they need anything? It's like most of my needs I don't even think about because they just get met automatically.

Right? So, how do you convince a person like that that they need anything? That's the danger of wealth. So, that's the first point. Second question, how do we know if we're in danger?

[13 : 39] Because as I said, it's not... you're not automatically corrupt if you're wealthy. You're in danger. How do we know if we're in danger? Well, look at this man's question to Jesus.

Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Right there, we know he's in danger. This guy's in danger. That one sentence, he's in danger.

He's in the red zone. So, how do we know that? There are actually three signs. If we break down this question, there are three signs of danger that we need to be aware of in our own lives.

The first thing that we see here is the way this man perceives Jesus. Right away, we see that this man perceives Jesus as an advisor, a good teacher, but not necessarily a savior.

He calls him good teacher, and Jesus says, why do you call me good? Only God is good. And this is one of those great places where you see Jesus' genius in the fact that he is not above using irony.

[14 : 45] And this is a kind of dramatic irony here, because we know who Jesus is as the reader, and we're reading this, and we see what this man is saying, and so Jesus essentially says, why do you call me good?

Are you saying that I'm God? And it's this great moment of irony here, right? And it's another way of saying, you have no idea who you're talking to, do you? This man fails to recognize Jesus for who he is because this man fails to recognize his own need.

And if you don't recognize your own need for Jesus, it's going to be almost impossible for you to recognize the significance of Jesus. And this man is standing face to face with the Son of God, and Jesus is ready and willing.

We know from other encounters, Jesus would be ready to give him the keys to the kingdom. If only he would ask. And this man essentially is saying, can I just get some advice?

Can I get some advice? So one sign that we're in spiritual danger is when we start seeing Jesus as merely a source of advice or wisdom, but we don't really feel any need for salvation, any need for mercy.

[16 : 01] So, you know, the question is, if you don't feel that, why would you even give someone like Jesus a second thought? It's a kind of offshoot of the luxury of not really having to think about our need for salvation.

I'm good. I don't really need much. So that's the first thing. The second sign that we see in this question that this man's in danger is that he clearly believes that he can do something to earn God's blessing.

And, you know, we can say we don't believe this, but all of us in our hearts do. I teach this every Sunday, and yet I'm constantly catching myself actually believing that I probably can actually earn God's blessing, if I'm really honest.

This man says, what must I do? You know, when you're wealthy, which means you have agency, which means you're able to sort of take steps to change your circumstances, you know, which means you can go out and spend money to meet your needs.

When you're able to do that, it's easy to start to think that everything in the world has a price, that anything and everything could be acquired if you just know what to do, if you just know what the dollar amount is or what the behavioral requirement is.

[17 : 20] And it's easy to start thinking like that about eternal life and heaven. I don't know if you all read this, but years ago, Warren Buffett, you know, the billionaire, announced that he was going to donate 85% of his fortune to charity.

He said, I'm going to donate 85% of all my fortune to charity. And all these people freaked out and said, you know, that's so amazing. They asked him about it, and he said this. This was the quote in the article. Well, there's more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.

And I think that there's a sense in which a lot of people in our culture do believe that. Somebody who gives that much money to charity, surely God's going to look at that and say, wow, that's one of the good ones. So another sign that we're in spiritual danger is when we begin thinking that we can earn blessings from God, that if we live the way God wants us to live, if we have enough faith, if we pray enough, that we should expect a reasonable amount of blessing from God in return.

And how do we know we're thinking that way? Well, it's when we reach a point in our life where God is not doing what we want, where God does not come through, where we've prayed all the right prayers, where we've come to church, where we've done all the right things.

We have clearly indicated that we have faith that God can do it. We've checked all the boxes, and God doesn't do it. The longing in your heart is the most godly longing you can imagine.

[18 : 42] It's a longing that God Himself should want for everybody, right? It's biblical, the thing that you want, and God doesn't give it to you. Right? You don't get the spouse.

You don't get the child. You don't get the job. And then you're left sitting there saying, well, how could you? I did everything. I did all of my part for you, and you're just silent.

You're not doing anything. And we begin to get angry at God and shake our fist at God, and how dare you? You know, for years, I've been living for you, and all I wanted was this one thing, and you couldn't do it. That's how you know that you've begun to believe that we can earn.

What must I do, Lord? So the phrase, you owe me, is the exact opposite of have mercy on me. In terms of meaning, it's the polar opposite.

Have mercy says, I need something from you, but I don't deserve it. You owe me, says, I demand something from you because I do deserve it. Right?

[19 : 44] So that's the second sign that we're in danger. The third sign that this man's in danger, that we might be in danger, is that he's after what God can give him instead of God himself.

He clearly wants eternal life. My life is going really well in this life, and I just, you know, the one thing that I haven't quite taken care of yet is what's going to happen in the next life. So I've got to make sure that's, I've got to cover that base.

Okay, teacher, what do I have to do to get eternal life? Now, I think this is really hard to see in our own hearts. I think it can be very hard to know if we want God because of what he can give us, or if we want God for his own sake.

Because, of course, there are lots of things that we should rightfully expect God to give us, right? I mean, it's right. A part of being in a relationship with God is to want God to give us the things that God can give us.

We want God to bless us. Of course we do. We want God to soothe our anxiety and give us peace in the storm. We want God to guide us in our decision-making, major vocational junctures.

[20 : 45] We want to know, God, do you want me to go this way in my company, or do you want me to change and go over here? Do you want me to live here, or do you want me to live here? Do you want me to marry this person, or do you want me to marry this person?

We want God to speak into those things. We want God to provide for us. And it's right to want those things from God. But it's very easy for us to begin treating God like a kind of divine vending machine.

You know, you need something, you come to God, you pray, you get it, thanks God, and then we kind of go on our merry way. And we begin to see God like a vending machine rather than a heavenly Father.

As someone who's there to meet our needs rather than somebody who's created us for a relationship with himself. And it's really hard to know the difference in your own heart. Often, the only time we really know the difference is when, again, we don't get the thing that we want.

And then we have that really hard decision confronting us, do I still want to be in relationship with God if He's not going to give me this thing that I want? Would I take God without the thing?

[21 : 47] That's how we begin to know. But if we've begun to kind of do this, if we've begun to say, you know, I want advice from Jesus but not salvation, I just want to know what I have to do to get blessing from Jesus, and really, I'm more interested in what I can get from God than having an ongoing relationship with God.

If those are true of us, then we're in major danger. And if that's true of you, then wealth really is going to be incredibly toxic for you.

It's going to have a horrible influence on your heart if those things are true about you. It's going to be very dangerous. It's going to be like radiation in your home. You know?

Asbestos, spiritual asbestos in your home. And so you're in danger. And so then the question becomes, well, what can we do about this? What can we do about it? And of course, the real question, the real question is, what can Jesus do about this?

Because right there, if we're in danger, we know that our only hope is Jesus. And so in Jesus' response, we begin to see an answer to that question. Jesus responds first by saying what the man expects.

[22 : 58] Jesus says, well, you know, you know the commandments. And he lifts off five of the commandments. You know, and the man is ready with an answer. Well, yeah, I know the commandments. I've kept these commandments as long as I can remember is essentially what he says.

But Jesus is setting him up. Right? And then Jesus says the thing that starts to get at this man's heart. He says, okay. And you can imagine Jesus sort of saying, you know the commandments.

And the man says, oh, yeah, I know them. I've kept them. Great. All right. And Jesus, you can imagine Jesus kind of turned away. Oh, yeah, yeah. One more thing. I want you to sell all that you have. I want you to give it all the way to the poor.

And I want you to come and follow me. And that's the heart. That's the heart. This man leaves sad, but he can't do it. Now, you read that as a Christian and you say, well, what does this mean?

Does this mean that the only way to follow Jesus is to sell everything that we have, give it all away? Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. What I think's going on here is Jesus is directly challenging the three issues that we just looked at.

[24 : 07] This man says, hey, I want your advice, not your salvation. In this statement, Jesus is saying, you don't just need my advice. You need me to become the center of your life. And in order for me to become the center of your life, the thing that is already at the center of your life needs to be displaced, and that's your self-sufficiency.

And you could say, oh, yeah, yeah, I'll follow you. But the only way to know for sure whether or not I'm actually the center of your life is for you to actually get rid of the thing that is at the center of your life.

Take away your self-sufficiency. Put yourself in a position where you have no idea what you're going to eat tomorrow. And then you'll know whether or not I'm at the center of your life.

That's what you need. I need to become the center. This man says to Jesus, what do I have to do to earn God's blessing? And in Jesus' response, Jesus is essentially saying to this man, there's no possible way you can earn anything from God.

You know, by calling this man to get rid of his wealth, he's exposing the sin in this man's heart. Notice, by the way, that when this man asks, what must I do, Jesus says, well, you know the commandments, and he doesn't list off all the commandments.

[25 : 26] He only lists five of the commandments, the what we would call the kind of social commandments, the commands that have to do with our relationships with other people. Notice he did not mention the first commandment.

What's the first commandment? Have no other gods but me, right? And as it's been famously said by Luther and others, Martin Luther and others, all sin and all breaking of commandments is essentially a breaking of the first commandment.

Right? So this man says, I've kept all the commandments. He says, well, except the first one. Have no other gods before me. This man thinks he's lived a good life and probably has, but he worships a different God.

His God is his wealth. His God is himself. And then the third thing that Jesus is doing is he's saying, you don't just need what God can give you. You actually need God himself.

And again, this is why he says to this man, sell all that you have, give to the poor, and come and follow me. It's very easy to say that you love God and that you're in it for a relationship with God when you're surrounded with abundance.

[26 : 44] But as I said earlier, what happens if you lose all of that? What happens if you don't get the thing that you want? What happens if there's another major stock market crash and you lose your job?

What happens if, God forbid, you actually decided to sell all that you have and give it away? What happens then to your relationship with God when you have to wonder whether or not you're going to eat again?

Do you still want God in your life then? or not? So, in a nutshell, Jesus is inviting this man to leave behind a life of self-sufficiency and to put himself in the position of total dependence on Jesus to provide for him.

He's inviting him to receive the kingdom like a child would. He's inviting him to cry out in the temple, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. And he's saying, I need to become the sinner of your life.

With me, it's an all-or-none deal. And, of course, this man refuses because he says, or it says in the text, he's extremely rich.

[27 : 51] And so, he refuses. And that's the Bible's way of saying, that's Luke's way of saying, this is too great a sacrifice and the man can't bring him to do it. The sacrifice is too great, Jesus. I'll give it some away but I can't give it all away.

It's too much. It's too much to ask. The sacrifice is too great. And here's the hard truth that we need to confront. Every single person in this room would do the same thing.

As much as I would like to say that I would respond differently to Jesus, not true. If none of you were around and it was just me and Jesus and there was nobody else to see, I would probably say, thanks but no thanks.

I prefer things the way they are. Where you're an accessory, you know, you're an app on the operating system, you're an advisor.

And this is why people say in this passage, then who can be saved? What? What? What? So Jesus says, what's impossible with man is possible with God.

[29 : 04] Now what's he talking about? Well, he's talking about the gospel. He's talking about the gospel. You know, there's two rich young rulers in this passage. There's the rich young ruler that we've been talking about and then there's Jesus himself.

Jesus is a rich young ruler. Jesus has all the wealth because everything in heaven and earth actually belongs to him. All of this man's wealth actually belongs to him.

Jesus is at this point fairly young in his earthly ministry. And talk about rulers. Jesus is the king of the heavens and the earth.

All authority belongs to him. He's the ultimate rich young ruler. And yet we have this amazing contrast where this man refuses to sacrifice this little bit of wealth that he thinks is his for the sake of Jesus.

He says, that's too great a sacrifice. He goes away sad. He can't do it. But the gospel says that Jesus was actually willing to sacrifice all of his wealth and all of his power and all of his status and all of his dignity and even his own life for us.

[30 : 24] The gospel says that when we look at Jesus we say, it's too great a sacrifice. I can't do it. But when Jesus looks at you he says, that sacrifice is worth it a thousand times over. I would do it again tomorrow.

You're worth it. My Father in heaven is worth it. Right? And so we see Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 9, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich.

that's the gospel that this rich young ruler needs to hear. And this kind of change that is needed in us can only happen when the truth of those words hit home in our hearts and we begin to realize that sacrifice the willingness to give everything away has already happened on our behalf.

Whatever we have at the center of our lives whatever you currently have as the center of your life as your operating system as the sun in your solar system I guarantee you it does not love you like that.

I guarantee you it will not sacrifice for you like that. And this is why Jesus is the only one worthy of being at the center of our lives. So the question that I hope we can sort of think about as we move on in the service is what does sit at the center of your life?

[32 : 02] And how do you know? You know is God at the center or is God an accessory add-on? Is Jesus Lord and Savior or is Jesus an advisor and teacher? You know is God an app or is He the operating system itself?

Is God the sun in your solar system or is God orbiting around something else? You know one of the only ways to know how central wealth has become is when we have an opportunity to give some of it away.

So that's why we talk about something like the home campaign as a major spiritual opportunity. As my wife Laura and I as we have talked about this we have sort of hit that place where we're having to figure out what role does this play in us and what difference is it going to have on our life by giving it?

And that's the place where you began to see how central something has become for you. So it doesn't matter to me as much how much we raise. The thing that matters most is that everybody is able to be a part of this and that everybody has the opportunity to give sacrificially at a level that makes us question and clarifies what is really sitting at the center of me.

Because in the gospel we have this opportunity to recenter our lives away from our own self-sufficiency and on to Jesus. Let's pray. Lord we thank you for your word and we thank you for the encounter with this man and I confess that I see so much of myself in this man.

[33 : 43] and Lord we see here why we need you so much. We see what we need from you Lord which is not just input but we need a Copernican revolution.

We need you to displace dislodge forcibly remove with a crowbar the things that sit at the very center of us and to become the center to sit on the throne to realign our orbit.

Lord we pray that we would be the kind of community moving forward that is centered on you and that that would be a blessing not just to us but that that would enable us to be the kind of blessing that we want to be to those around us in this city.

Lord that that would spill out into love and spill out into reconciliation and spill out into justice and spill out into evangelism and spill out into healing and spill out into all of the things that we hope will happen as we call the city our home that you would make your home in us.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen.