

A god Blocking the Way to Life

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together to Luke chapter 18, and tonight we're looking at these verses from verse 18 to 30, the passage dealing with this rich ruler.

One of the remarkable features that comes across to us repeatedly in looking at the account that we have of Jesus is the skill with which he was able to control all his interviews with a whole host of different people.

It doesn't matter what kind of person you find described coming to Jesus, to speak with Jesus, to ask things of Jesus, to be interviewed by Jesus, whether they're religious people, non-religious people, Pharisees, ordinary people, tax collectors, it doesn't matter who they are.

He deals with them expertly, skillfully. He has a knowledge of them and of their condition, of the very thoughts of their mind even, that enables him to control the interview absolutely perfectly.

Nowhere is that shown better than in John chapter 4, that wonderful interview that he had with the woman of Samaria. We're step by step, knowing already what this woman was like, what her home situation was, what her lifestyle was like, knowing that before he even began the conversation, he took her bit by bit, step by step, word by word, thought by thought, on to the point where he himself revealed that he was the Christ.

[1 : 51] And you find, in dealing with this rich young ruler, that same expertise of the Lord. And it's there for us not only to admire, but to make use of.

It's there so that you and I, as we come to follow Luke's account of Christ's ministry, can actually follow him in this question that he has so often, who is this man?

And for ourselves, who is this man? And for ourselves, can bring to ourselves the expertise that Christ has to deal with our condition personally, intimately, exactly as it is in each other's, in his presence.

This ruler initiated the conversation. It wasn't Jesus who began the conversation. That doesn't make any difference.

You never, ever find Christ, supposing it's somebody else who begins the conversation. You never find Jesus caught out by any questions. You never find him failing to keep up with the conversation or the questions that people are asking him.

[3 : 00] He is always a step or more ahead of the likes of this young man who has come with his important question. So let's look at three things in the passage.

First of all, here in verses 18 to 23, there is a very revealing conversation between this ruler and the Lord.

Then verses 24 to 27, you have an alarming declaration on the part of Jesus with regard to the difficulties for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And you have a response to that as well on the part of all those who listened and heard him saying this. It's an alarming declaration and there is a specific astonished response to it.

And thirdly, there is an everlasting compensation. What he mentions with regard to what those will come to possess and possess even now, but will possess afterwards too in the age to come.

[4 : 07] For having left whatever it is they have left in order to follow him. They shall receive abundantly more in this life and in the life to come than anything that they have had to leave for him.

So these three things are revealing conversation, an alarming declaration and an everlasting compensation. Here's this young ruler we are told in other gospels.

He wasn't very old. We know that he was very rich from this passage itself. And he says to Jesus, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, why do you call me good?

No one is good except God. Now in those days, nobody ever really addressed or were meant to address a rabbi, which of course Jesus was recognized as a religious teacher. Nobody would actually come to a rabbi and call him good teacher. The word good in this absolute sense was confined or restricted to God.

[5 : 16] And therefore, when this young man came and said to Jesus, good teacher, Jesus immediately asked him, why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

He is saying to this man, you are using a word of me that rightly belongs only to God. Why are you doing this? Now it's not that Jesus was refusing to be called good.

It's not that Jesus was questioning whether it was right of this young man to call him good. Jesus knew himself that he was God, of course. But what he's getting at is really asking this young man, do you really know what you're doing when you're using this word good about me?

Is it really because you recognize who I am? Is it really because you're accepting me to have the qualities of God about me that you are actually using this word good?

And of course, it wasn't that, it seems, with this ruler. He just used the word good without going into the depths of why he was using it and what it actually signifies.

[6 : 28] But Jesus, in bringing this before him, and therefore these words bringing it before ourselves as Luke records it, is really pretty much saying, well yes, the word good does rightly apply to me, but you have to think of what it means.

And you have to think of what that means as far as your view of me is concerned. Remember the great question Luke is setting out for us, who is this man?

Here is a man who accepts a word that applies to God and accepts it of himself, although he's asking the questioner why he's using it.

Now this man has a basic flaw in his thinking, not in terms of what he's saying here about good teacher. Lord Jesus did address and pick up that point. What his flaw is, is in what he's saying, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And if we follow the words in the Greek text literally, you can see the force of the words that this man used. What in my doing am I to do to inherit eternal life?

[7 : 41] The flaw in his teaching is that he thinks eternal life comes as a result of him doing something. And as we'll see in a moment, he's pretty confident that he actually has eternal life secured already, because in his own mind, he has been doing the commandments ever since he was born.

Ever since he was a youth. All these I've kept from my youth. His idea about eternal life, which he's asking Jesus about, is that it is something that you come into the possession of through your doing something, through your achievement, through your actually performing something or other, especially in regard to what God requires, and as a result of your doing that, you are given eternal life.

You have it as a reward for something that you have achieved, something you've managed to attain. You've reached a pinnacle of achievement, therefore eternal life becomes yours.

And Jesus immediately sets about destroying his thinking. It's a fatal error. This man thinks that he can actually have eternal life by his own achievements, by his own goodness.

And there are many people in the world, sadly, who attend church today, that think the same, who don't like being called sinners, who reject a description of them as other than already in the kingdom of God.

[9 : 30] But Jesus, of course, sees through to the very heart of things. And he's going to bring before this young man that actually his view of himself is nothing like as good as it seems to himself.

And the sad thing is that this young man is sincere. We don't read that he was immoral. He seems to be himself an honest and sincere and respectful man.

And yet, he's spiritually blind. In all his respectfulness, in all the decency, if you like, of his life, he is not decent in the presence of God.

He is not acceptable to God as he is in himself as a human being. He doesn't relate properly to God in a way that really has the sin of his life taken account of because he doesn't really have a true sense of his sinfulness.

His goodness is what's going to earn him a place in the kingdom of God. Not that he's going to come to the kingdom of God through the grace of Christ.

[10:48] By acknowledging that he's a poor and needy sinner. Go back to the previous passage where we saw the tax collector in contrast to the Pharisee in the temple praying God be merciful to me the sinner.

Well this man has no conception of that at all. He doesn't realize anything like his true self. And he's quite confident as he asks Jesus the question.

It looks really as if he's wanting Jesus just to confirm his own ideas for him. And just to say to him it's alright I know you've been doing your best and you can't do more than that.

So Jesus puts to him this point you know the commandments do not commit adultery do not murder do not steal do not bear false witness honor your father and mother and he said all these I have kept from my youth.

Now Jesus didn't give him the ten commandments but he gave him the commandments that have to do especially with relationships. And the reason that he gave him these commandments is that knowing the basic flaw of this man's heart and this man's thinking he really is setting about bringing to the surface the deficiency of his thinking.

[12:07] So he sets about putting these commandments to him and seeing what his reaction is and then what his reaction is I've ticked all the boxes every one of these commandments I've kept from my youth.

It's just Jesus as he specifies these commandments this young man is putting a tick opposite each one yes done that yes done that yes kept that all these I have kept from my youth.

He has no hesitation in saying this. And so Jesus then takes him to the hook on which he's going to pin him.

There is yet one thing that you lack. See this man is saying I've got all of these things in my achievement already this is all on my record look at how full my record is look at how complete it is what must I do is there anything else that I need to do to inherit eternal life as if he's saying to the Lord I don't really see anything else to do I've done it all already I've kept all of these commandments and then Jesus comes with this bombshell that he throws at him there is yet one thing that you lack and the one thing that you lack is a far greater thing than anything you've achieved.

What was the one thing that he lacked? Well Jesus said sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven and come follow me.

[13:53] What was the one thing that he lacked? He lacked the willingness to be devoted to God on God's terms.

The reason Jesus said this to him was not that to become a disciple a person needs to give everything away that they possess. What he was doing is really testing this young man's mind and this man's own self-confidence because when Jesus is saying to him if you really want eternal life yes you can have eternal life but there are conditions there are ways in which there is a way by which you come to have eternal life and that way is by following me and if you put me before your possessions you can have eternal life on these terms and you see that's different that's not in accordance with his own thoughts that's not with his in accordance with his preference Jesus Jesus has aimed his words at the young man's flaw at the young man's basic fault and now he's come up showing how much he lacks one thing you lack and what

Jesus is really showing is that although this man has ticked all the boxes as far as saying I have kept all these commandments Jesus is actually bringing to see actually you have not even managed to get past the first one you shall have no other gods before me why because this man has a god already he's in love with his riches he's devoted to his riches he has his riches barring the way to eternal life he has his riches as his god and you could say that is a title really for our study this evening a god blocking the way to god and god blocking the way to eternal life and this young man is not willing to get rid of his god so that he can have god the proper god in his life he's not willing to dispose of this thing that he's devoted to so much that he's not willing to give up and put god first ahead of it these riches are his god and they're keeping him back from eternal life that's what Jesus was bringing to the surface that's why Jesus dealt with him in this way he's really saying to him you've never really thought properly about this have you you don't love the lord your god with all your heart with all your mind you love your riches and you don't love god he's never got past the first commandment now it's not accidental that the new testament very frequently mentions riches as a barrier to our entrance to the kingdom of god you'll find it in Christ teaching you'll find it in Paul's teaching in his letter to Timothy for example his first letter to Timothy the apostle went out of his way

in some respects to emphasize for timothy that what he must be preaching must include the fact that he must warn those who hear him about the danger of riches it's in the letter to timothy that you find that great definition that sometimes you hear sadly misquoted it because you'll find people saying ah yes riches the root of all evil no it's not riches are not the root of all evil job was rich abraham was rich joseph of arimathea was rich there are many rich people in the course of history who are great christians it's not riches that are the root of all evil it is the love of riches that is the root of all evil it is when you make riches your god as human beings are so constantly prone to do that is when you produce and create a god or keep a god for yourself that keeps you from the true god and that he says in 1st timothy 6 verse 17 as for the rich in this present age charge them not to be proud nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but on god who richly provides us with everything to enjoy and of course jesus in the parable of the soils or the parable of the sower mentions that the thorns that kept the word kept the seed from growing properly and destroyed its growth that that represents what jesus himself called the deceitfulness of riches and the cares of this life when the lord says these things to us

we really have to sit up and take notice he's giving an emphasis to these sort of things in his word in his teaching because he knows how prone we as human beings are to make gods of these things for ourselves of our material possessions of our status in life of our riches of the things themselves that make life in many ways comfortable and there's nothing wrong with having a comfortable life providing you put god above it providing your riches your spiritual riches are in heaven seek as jesus put it elsewhere lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven where there is no corruption and where there is no decline in the value of your treasure because where your treasure is there will your heart be also you can see where this young man's heart is it's not in heaven though he's asking about eternal life his heart is on his riches here is a man who comes with these words on his mouth actually saying to jesus about eternal life what must i do to inherit it but he doesn't really deep down understand that in his condition he's not really wanting eternal life at all he wants to keep his riches he's not prepared to part from them and how often we find that in this life that people who have really made it good that the more you find especially people of the world filled with riches the less they think of god and of their need of their soul for eternity but notice how again exactly and wonderfully and deliberately jesus dealt with this man right through to this point where he shows him the real need of his soul and that his reluctance to be parted from his riches is really the barrier to his entering eternal life all the way through look at how exactly how precisely how wonderfully personal jesus is in dealing with him you know there are medical procedures nowadays that really fill us with wonder one of the advancements in the treatment of cancer especially prostate cancer in men is that the precision with which certain treatments different kinds of treatments but one of them involves the first of all a 3D computer model being made of the prostate land and what's called precision biopsy and that pools information from 90 core examples to map out the exact location of the tumor in the prostate and then the surgeon introduces a needle when the procedure begins through which argon gas is introduced right in that very precise point where it's needed in the prostate and that gas then expands and cools and creates an ice ball a tiny little ice ball which freezes the cancerous cells and each tumor is thawed and re-thawed at least twice during the procedure to tear the cells apart and destroy them

I'm telling you that because I looked it up on Wikipedia not because I'm expert in anything like that but that tells you the expertise the precision with which a surgeon or a consultant nowadays is able to actually pinpoint and treat exactly such a thing as cancer in the prostate and yet wonderful though that is it's absolutely nothing compared to the exactness and the precision of Jesus dealing with your soul doesn't matter what a variety of need you have in this building tonight it doesn't matter even throughout the world how many people are calling upon Jesus at the same time coming to the Lord with their condition your encouragement tonight and my encouragement is that Jesus is able to deal with you precisely and exactly in accordance with your minutest need as a sinner however different that may be from anybody else it doesn't matter what your need is tonight it doesn't matter what your condition is like it doesn't matter how much of it even is unknown to yourself and how unable you are to describe it to the Lord one thing you can be absolutely sure of is when you give your life to

[24 : 27] Christ you are giving it to someone who knows exactly and perfectly and minutely every fiber of your being every detail of your need that's why he is such a great savior and that's why he is such a great companion through life because at every turn of life when you turn to him you will always find he knows exactly what is going on and what you need and is able to give to you from

his grace there is nobody like that that's why he is so precious to his people and what did this young man do then well when he heard these things he became very sad for he was extremely rich isn't that a sad sentence doesn't that really just come across so full of sad isn't that a desperately tragic scene that a young man so full of life should come to Jesus with a question about eternal life and he's not prepared to take it on

Christ's terms in other words here's a young man who's disappointed with Christ and isn't that a sad sight somebody leaving the Lord Jesus Christ and saying no that's a disappointment to me that's not what I'm looking for that's not for me I hope there's no one here tonight that says that about him there's nobody that's going to turn away from Christ tonight just because he doesn't fit in with what they themselves prefer to find in him or would prefer to have as a saviour where can you find better where can you find as good where can you find anyone who can do all of these things for you where can you find eternal life on such good terms as Christ himself lays down for us terms where he has paid our debt terms where he has promised to be with us to the end of the world terms where he has promised to take us to be with himself in glory what other terms are there to be compared to that and in this translation it says that

Jesus himself looked at him with sadness now these words can be translated that Jesus looked at his sadness that's how the A.B. has it here it's actually looking at him with sadness and we can't be precisely sure whether it's Christ's sadness that's mentioned or is it the young man's sadness as Jesus looked at him and saw his sadness his sense of disappointment he surely saw that too but if you go to Mark's gospel it could very well be here that it's Christ's own sadness that we should understand from it because Mark tells us that Jesus looking at this young man as he was just making his way away from Christ filled with disappointment Jesus looked upon him and loving him said how difficult it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God now think about that Jesus loved him and yet he didn't stay with Jesus isn't that a tragedy isn't it a tragedy that the Lord had such regard for him such concern for him that he dealt with him so kindly that he brought to the surface in this wonderful way in his own expert way the man's basic flaw and the man's basic need he showed it to him he showed him what he needed to do he spelled it out for him clearly he made it clear that in following him and in not having his riches as his God he would have eternal life Jesus loved him Jesus actually dealt with him in a way that did everything possible for him yet he walked away from him now you won't do that will you you won't do that will you when you realize the kindness of Jesus the kindness that he shows to us each day the patience the concern the clarity with which he teaches us and shows us our need the way that he exposes the futility of our own thinking the way he brings out the terms that are best for us in regard to eternal life that these are his own we're not then going to walk away and say well that's just a bit disappointing and I'll just stay the way

I am no he says one thing you still lack sell all that you haven't distributed and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me but when he heard these things he became very sad because he was extremely rich and then he comes to this second point this alarming declaration much more briefly Jesus looking at him with sadness said how difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God 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 we said that the new testament especially deals with the danger of riches taking us away from the most important needs of our souls and here is Jesus saying that it is so difficult for someone who is really rich and by that he means like this young man who was extremely rich who had a lot of riches to live by for a person in that situation it is extremely difficult to enter the kingdom of God because the liability is that they will make the riches that God that they will rely upon their riches that's what makes it so difficult and he says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of

[31 : 21] God that's a form of words that really just emphasizes the difficulty some people think that it means that Jesus was describing the kind of narrow gates you have in some of the walls of cities in those times and still where it's very difficult to get a camel through with baggage unless you take the baggage off that you don't find the camel going through as easily but I think it's better just to keep the statement as it is it's just a way of Jesus demonstrating the extreme difficulty of a very rich man or woman entering the kingdom of God simply because of the heart's devotedness or proneness to be devoted to riches that's what a human sinful condition is about and then those who heard it were astonished because they said who then can be saved the idea you see was in those

days that if you had riches in your life if you were made rich in the course of your life then that was a sign of

God's favor and in many respects that's where this young man was coming from he had surely the favor of God in having all of these riches what then must I do how can I be absolutely sure if God has already blessed me and if I have his favor already is there anything else I need to do to have eternal life and Christ is saying it's actually nothing to do with riches but the people that were listening had that idea that if a person was rich as rich as this man was then that was a sign of the favor of God which is why they said well then who then can be saved they're more or less saying well this man is really at the top of society because of his riches and if it's that difficult for those people at the top of society to get into the kingdom of God where does it leave the rest of us and that's what makes Christ's reply so amazing and so wonderful the things which are impossible with men are possible with God when you look into

God's dictionary there is at least one word in human dictionaries that you don't find in his and that's this word impossible what is impossible with men is possible with God men cannot bring one another or another human being into the kingdom of God no human being can bring another especially a rich person into the kingdom of God for human beings that's impossible and even for that person themselves with the riches it's impossible actually to create for themselves the favor of God by which they have a place in his kingdom but what is impossible with men is possible with God and everybody and everybody who comes to the feet of Christ having been shown their need by this Christ isn't this what they say

Lord for me it is impossible I can't have eternal life by my own goodness by my own creative ability by my doings I need to have it on the basis of your doings by your grace in your mercy through your forgiveness that's how it is possible to enter the kingdom of God it's possible with God because God is the great intaker while sin and riches are the great excluders what is possible impossible with men is possible with God it's not about being rich it's not about being poor it's not about having status in society it's not about having no status at all it's not about being on a throne it's not about being in a prison cell it's all about grace amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me that's what

Newton came to put together as praise to God for what he could not do himself and then there is thirdly an everlasting compensation we don't know why Peter actually said this in verse 28 see we have left our homes and followed you maybe he was looking for some assurance maybe he just made the statement if it came to mind that what Jesus had said there about leaving things in order to follow him well that's what we've done he said we have left our homes and followed you and that's what we essentially need to do ourselves not that you actually leave your home in the literal sense but in the spiritual sense we leave home we actually put Jesus first even ahead of our own families in the sense in which we have to put him first as our Lord he is the one who controls our life and Jesus responds to

[37 : 26] Peter statement and he says 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 in the age to come eternal life well what he's saying basically is this it doesn't matter what you have to leave in order to follow Christ you're going to have a lot more in following him than you ever had to leave in order to follow him God will look after you God will look after everything in your life in respect to your need and meeting your need and taking you onwards through life it's not a matter of us sacrificing things and therefore getting a reward it's just a matter that whatever it is we do we put behind in order to follow Christ the Lord is assuring us even in this life you're going to have many more times than what you left behind that's the fear that people have isn't it a fear of what we're going to lose we're going to lose friends might lose the support of some people might lose our position in work might lose our popularity with people might lose a whole lot of things in coming to follow

Christ but Christ is saying actually you never lose by coming to follow him you always gain because what he gives you as a disciple far far outweighs whatever you give up to follow him and in the age to come eternal life one of the great issues of our times is retirement and pensions and we always give advice and probably seek advice as to what our pension is likely to be like what is likely to consist of by the time we retire it's not that far away from some of us it's a long way away if we're spared to see retirement age for some of you but what Jesus is saying is that the disciples of Christ God's saved people they have a retirement package they have the best terms in that policy never

becomes devalued there's never a huge hole in it that needs to be filled it's a retirement package out of this world it's eternal life it's life in all its fullness with God in heaven and that is what he's offering you and that's what you come to possess when you possess Christ himself he signs your retirement package in his own hand and he says you're now secure for this in the age to come you have eternal life is that your investment is that your retirement package is it more important to you than any retirement package in this world it wasn't to this young man he was looking to his riches but we will all leave our riches behind as we as we sang in the psalm and it doesn't matter how rich we have the day we're buried all we have is the garment that covers our corpse that's all that's all in the physical sense but if you die in christ you take your retirement package with you and it comes to maturity in eternal glory let's pray lord our gracious god make us wise we pray to consider the teaching of your word when you are so emphatic about those things that are of greatest importance to us in this life we thank you that you have revealed this to us that we may give all our concern to having eternal life for ourselves help us to see this world then oh lord in the light of eternity enable us to see the small dimensions of time against the great everlasting dimension of eternity and help us especially to turn to you and to follow you and to have in our possession before we leave this world those things which belong to your people to your own redeemed flock that will come to be glorified with you hear us we pray for your glory sake amen