

The Church's Reward

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Date: 03 November 2019

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[0 : 00] Now, when I was an undergraduate back at the University of Calgary, I had to take an intro to anthropology course. There I learned a great many things that I have completely forgotten.

But one lecture in particular stuck with me, and it resonated in a rather unexpected way. The lecture was on how different cultures value different items, and we were considering Bronislaw Mazalovsky's account of the Trobrian people of Papua New Guinea.

Now, the Trobrians, said Bronislaw, absolutely adored yams. So much so, they built special storehouses to fill with the yams they grew. If you were a headman or a chief elder in the village, people owed you tribute, and they would often pay you in yams.

Of course, a very powerful headman could not possibly eat all the yams being offered to him. And while many yams could be given away as gifts, earning prestige for this headman with his yam providing prowess, it was also a mark of tremendous power to let yams rot uneaten in the special yam houses.

And in this mental image of a pile of rotting yams, I came to the realization that the pursuit of wealth for its own sake is utter vanity. The problem for all of us is that it's much easier to see your brother's pile of rotting yams and much more difficult to see your own yam collections.

[1 : 34] Now, today we come to a passage, Matthew 19, 16 to 30, which, if you've got a pew Bible in front of you, you should turn to. It's a passage which, if I'm being honest, it makes me squirm a bit.

It is not a comfortable passage, perhaps especially because we live in a context where most of us are wealthy. And here, pulling no punches, Jesus is teaching us about renouncing riches so that we might inherit eternal life.

We are rich in ways most of the world never will be. And Jesus says to us, verse 24, Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Those are strong words. But although wealth is the occasion, I don't think it's ultimately the heart of the passage. And it should be said that saying that does not let us off the hook for our yams.

At a deeper level, this is an uncomfortable passage because it upends our persistent and our pernicious desire to invest in this world rather than in the kingdom of heaven.

[2 : 45] It's frighteningly easy to do. And Jesus' teaching invites us to become like the lilies of the field, the birds of the air. Because the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who, like little children, recognize everything they have is a gracious gift from God, meant to be used in praise of him.

And we encounter this remarkable and startling reality through two conversations in our passage today. The first one comes in verses 16 to 22, and Jesus engages with the rich young man.

And then in verses 23 to 30, we get the aftermath of that among the disciples, where Jesus leads them deeper to an understanding of what it means to follow him. So the first conversation, I'll call it the great rejection.

We need to give up something very dear to our hearts to follow Christ. And the second conversation, I'll call the great reward. Because in giving up this cherished thing, we gain something of infinitely greater value.

The passage in its entirety is framed by a great reversal, weaving its way through the discussion, which Jesus succinctly summarizes at the end of it all, verse 30, many who are first will be last, and the last first.

[4 : 04] And that is tremendous good news. Now, why might that be? Let's begin with rejection. A young man approaches Jesus and asks him, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

It's a good question. By asking it, the young man is acknowledging at the very least, Jesus is an authority worth listening to. He calls him teacher, a term of respect. In asking the question, we also see the young man is accustomed to success.

He's familiar with the experience of getting what he sets his eyes on. And the question comes across with the boldness of one who achieves what he aims for. You can just imagine him, flowing hair, thick beard, well-dressed, poised, confident.

By all accounts, he's a winner in the game of life. He is concerned with morality. He wants to know how he can better himself. He is socially responsible. He doesn't murder or lie or commit adultery. He looks after his parents. He is wealthy and has a lot of nice stuff, which in Jesus' time would have been a sign of God's favor. This young man is like the Keanu Reeves of the first century.

[5 : 16] He's the complete package. If you don't know who Keanu Reeves is, that's okay. I was trying to reach for a pop culture reference. Not only does he look good, he's also sharp and he's hungry for the kingdom of heaven.

After the initial exchange with Jesus in those first few verses, his reply is earnest. Verse 20, All these things I have kept, what do I still lack? He knows there's more to it.

He can sense his life is incomplete. So Jesus moves to the heart of the matter and exposes an idol hidden in this man's heart. Verse 21, Jesus says, If you want to be perfect, that is to say, if you want to be complete, if you want to be mature, if you want to be blessed, go sell what you have and give to the poor, then you will have treasure in heaven.

And that line, treasure in heaven, of course, takes us back to Matthew 6. In the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches his disciples, where your treasure is, there your heart is also.

And if our treasure is here on earth, what does that say about our hearts? Jesus pushes the point even further in chapter 6, saying this, We cannot serve both God and money.

[6 : 37] We'll either hate one and love the other, or devote ourselves to one and despise the other. And this is why Jesus asks the young man to renounce his many possessions.

Though he did not realize it, he had given his heart to wealth. The young man came to Jesus looking for one more thing he could do to attain spiritual maturity.

And Jesus lovingly flips the man's life upside down. Jesus' command to him is uncompromising and ruthlessly practical. And though it is important, this disinvestment, which Jesus demands of the young man, is actually a prelude to something far more important and life-changing.

He says, Go and sell, and then come and follow. Those two beautiful words. Come and follow. If the good teacher had only gone halfway, we would be left with another moral system that enshrined poverty rather than wealth.

Few, if any of us, would ever attain to its perfection. And if we had, we'd probably still be just as miserable. In Proverbs 30, we read these wise words, Feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, Who is the Lord?

[7 : 59] Or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. It's not a simple either or. So Jesus asks the young man to come and follow him so that the young man might be freed from his slavery to success.

And then tragically, he turns away from his Savior and goes about his own way. In this young, successful, morally upright, socially responsible person, we see the insidious and deceitful effects of riches.

Now, in the original Greek of this passage, there's an interesting connection between verse 22 and the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. In Matthew 13, as we know, Jesus illustrates different responses the human heart has to his gospel, one of which is to hear the word in Greek, tonlogon, but then to be overcome by the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.

These things ultimately choke out and render that word, tonlogon, unfruitful. Now, most English translations in Matthew 19, 22 read, when the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful.

But a translation that clings to the original Greek more closely would be, when the young man heard the word, tonlogon, he went away sorrowful for he had many possessions.

[9 : 33] That is to say, when the young man heard the gospel, when he realized what was required of him to enter eternal life, he turned away. And thus, Jesus exclaims, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.

In this first conversation, we witness the danger of wealth and we learn that to follow Jesus means that we must reject, in the words of Matthew 6, the deceitfulness of wealth.

If we want to be complete, we need to turn our back on the temptation that wealth will lead to happiness and give up everything we have in service of the kingdom and then we will have treasure in heaven.

Then we shift to our second conversation, the great reward that happens in verse 23. Jesus moves to address his disciples.

They have witnessed this remarkable exchange and we learn that they too don't really understand the math of Jesus' kingdom. The disciples in verse 25 after hearing Jesus' pronouncement are absolutely astonished.

[10:48] The man who came to Jesus was in their eyes the perfect candidate as a disciple. He was smart, motivated, law-abiding, wealthy, the complete package. He's the man they want on their team, not those grubby, useless kids that Jesus welcomed and blessed.

back at the start of Matthew 19 when he welcomed the little children. And so they think if this success story cannot get into heaven, what chance do any of us have?

Who then can be saved? And with Jesus' reply, we see with crystal clarity, it is not wealth or poverty that allows you to enter the kingdom of heaven, but rather the power of God himself which makes salvation possible.

And then Peter, seizing his moment, asks a rather ham-fisted but earnest question. He recognizes he and the disciples have in fact been following Jesus, turned their back on many things in order to do it, so he says, hey, what do we get for following you then?

And the disciples, compared to this rich young man, they don't look like much. And when they speak, they don't look like much, because they aren't. They are not winners.

[12:10] Even as they follow Jesus, they do it awkwardly, selfishly, half-comprehendingly, and praise God, it is enough. And I don't know about you, but I always find Matthew's portrayal of the disciples tremendously humbling and tremendously encouraging.

Humbling because in them, we have a mirror of our own awkward attempts to walk after our Savior. Encouraging because in them, we see that growth and maturity, or in the language of this passage, perfection, is possible when we follow Jesus and learn to turn our back on worldly things for his name's sake.

Peter, some years later, says it perfectly in his second letter. His, that is, Jesus, divine power, oh, we're in, sorry, 2 Peter, first chapter, verse 3.

You don't have to look it up, that's okay. So Jesus, his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his previous and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruptions that are in the world because of sinful desires.

That is a remarkable revelation. And it's quite a contrast to the man talking to Jesus here in chapter 19. But Peter didn't get to such a remarkable understanding of the power of God at work in his life overnight.

[13:46] Here in chapter 19, he's only just beginning his life of renunciation for Jesus' sake. And to Peter's brazen question, here at the start of his discipleship, Jesus replies that the twelve as the first fruits of the new Israel will sit on twelve thrones judging their fellow men.

And in fact, not just the twelve, but everyone who leaves whatever they must for the sake of Christ will be saved and inherit eternal life. Now this remarkable promise is freedom from the iron grasp of capitalism that we all feel.

Freedom from the calculations and market forces that we appear beholden to. Freedom from being defined by our net worth, how much we contribute to the economy, what sort of car we drive, if we can afford to do X, Y, Z, or whatever our hearts desire.

And that isn't to condemn any of those things either necessarily, but simply to put them in their proper place under the lordship of Christ. To remind ourselves that it's all his anyways.

And as we recognize this, it's also an opportunity to humbly and prayerfully ask God to reveal to us the ways we are not submitting to his lordship, to ask for strength in giving up what we ought to be renouncing.

[15:10] To be wealthy is not a sin, but it is very easy for wealth to choke out the good in our lives and lead us away from the one we should be following.

And this rejection of wealth is no small feat, because we've all got skin in the game. As Jesus himself reminds us, with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. To submit our wealth to Christ's lordship is to receive treasure in heaven, and to renounce the world for Christ's sake is to inherit a gift of inestimable reward, eternal life. And this is the great reward. So we learn first that in following Jesus there is a great rejection, and then second that there is a great reward. And Jesus ends his teaching here with a reversal, that memorable and perplexing line, son. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. [16:23] It is, I think, in part, a warning to the disciples, lest they think that now with Jesus' promises they've got it made in the shade. If we read along a little further in Matthew, the mother of James and John asks Jesus if in the new kingdom her sons will get the best seats in the house. So it's pretty clear that some of Jesus' promises are going to the disciples' heads. But when Jesus speaks of this great reversal, it's also a reminder we don't really know where people are at. In fact, only God knows who the first and the last truly are, and it's up to him to sort us out. And that brings us back to the story of the rich young ruler, who thought he was first, then found out he was last, which means perhaps he could be first after all. His story ends, and I think ends intentionally, on an ambiguous and unresolved note. It's actually a sign of health, that the young man turns from Jesus in sorrow, because it means there's a part of him which wants to follow the Savior. He wants to be delivered from his slavery. Jesus has confronted him with his sinfulness, and unlike the Pharisees, he has not hardened his heart and rejected the Christ. [17:43] there is still hope in his desire to be complete. And it is the same hope extended to all who feel incomplete, who have sought fulfillment in all the world can offer, and want more. The remarkable thing about what Jesus is teaching the young man here, what he's teaching all of us, is that entry into his kingdom is not a thing we do to earn a place at the table. It's a relationship we are invited into that demands our all, and blesses us beyond our wildest dreams. The reason we sell and give in order to come and follow is because following Jesus is the path to something far greater than worldly wealth, as much as our senses might deny it, and as much as we might desire it. And this is where the church's wealth resides. Cause for great repentance, and also cause for great joy. To God be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.