

Vision Series 2017

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[0 : 00] Hopefully you've received one of these on your seats or on the way in. If you haven't got one of those, then our ushers will be more than happy to bring one to you where you are.

Just a bit of an outline of where I'm heading this morning. And as Sam has indicated, if you're a guest here today, you have helicoptered right in the middle of our vision series for us as a church. And the big theme of the vision series is that if we have been the recipients of such radical, abundant generosity from God, what sort of lives does that lead to?

What does it mean for us? What does it mean for the recipients? And the bottom line is that it overflows from us into a life of radical generosity as we have received. So we give and not just in terms, as I said last week, in terms of finance, although that is going to be what I'm going to land on today, is that it's much more than that.

It's emotional generosity. It is generosity with your time. It's generosity in every aspect of life. When you are the recipient of abundant generosity, it overflows to a life of abundant generosity.

[1 : 19] And as Sam also said, we are on this journey with Jesus. It's said in chapter 9 of Luke, Jesus resolutely set his face to Jerusalem. He's on the way there to die.

Again, it's his radical generosity towards us in that he's dying for the sins of humanity. And he calls us to follow him, but to also acknowledge there's a cost that's associated with following him.

In chapter 9, verse 23, it says, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

That is, because as a recipient of God's radical generosity, our whole life is just turned around and do totally different priorities of what they used to be. This is a difficult journey for Jesus to make, but he calls us to walk it with him.

He's not just our substitute, which is what I've said all along, not just our substitute, but he is also our pace setter. He sets the pace for us in life. This is a radical call for us.

[2 : 26] It's a radical call, but the basis of it is radical generosity, mercy, grace towards sinners. And so what is the result is pervasive generosity, which includes money, which we're looking at here.

The issue of riches and wealth and money come up again and again as Jesus walks this road to Jerusalem. As he teaches his disciples what it means to be a follower of him, what does it mean to be on the road with him.

And someone says here in verse 18, he gets asked this question. He has a number of encounters with different individuals where he tells stories about rich people, but here's one in the flesh right in front of him.

It says that this person is a ruler. In verse 23, we are also told that he's rich. And in Matthew and Mark's account of this incident, we are also told that he is young.

And so for centuries, this guy has been known as the rich young ruler. Don't know what his name is. Just know that he's the rich young ruler. That's who he is. And with this particular interaction with Jesus, there are three things that we can learn about money, wealth, possessions, and where they fit.

[3 : 44] So firstly, the danger of wealth. We see that right in the middle of the passage, verse 24, Jesus looks straight at this young man in the eyes.

And he says how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Now what Jesus is using here is a metaphor. It's a metaphor of impossibility. The camel was the biggest land animal that people knew of their time.

They didn't have elephants in the Palestine at that point. And the eye of the needle was the smallest hole that they could kind of imagine.

And it's kind of a similar kind of metaphor that we might use nowadays. Oh, you know, they've got a snowball's chance in hell. It's that kind of a metaphor. It's a metaphor of impossibility.

[4 : 43] It is virtually impossible for the rich to get into heaven. That's what Jesus is saying. Now, I don't know if you saw the news this week, but Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, passed the \$100 billion US mark in personal wealth.

Apparently, it's the second time it's ever happened. Bill Gates hit the milestone very briefly in 1999. So it's nearly 20 years since anyone's hit the \$100 billion mark in personal wealth.

He's got more money than I've got. That's another understatement thing. However, I'm not on any BRW rich list or anything like that, not even close, but I am on the global rich list.

That's something that's more significant. And you too are on the global rich list. The global rich list is a website. You go on the website. You can load on your income or you can load on your assets.

And it will give you a position in the world of where you sit in terms of wealth. And as it turns out, Nat and I are ranked in the top 6 million richest people in the world in terms of income.

[6 : 04] Top 6 million people. So if they had a BRW that went right down to 6 million, I'd be on the list. Down the bottom, but I'd be on the list. That means that I'm in the top 0.09% of the wealthiest people in the world.

And yet, as a financial advisor said to us recently, based on our incomes, he says, Steve, you're a pastor, Nat, you're a teacher, you haven't given me much to work with here. Did you know that even if you're a student in this country and you live off solely off the government to be a student, which, let's be frank, most students do, or their parents, you are in the top 16% of wealthiest people in the world.

So when Jesus is here speaking about rich people, he's talking about people like me. Not Jeff, he's referring to Jeff as well, but people like me, people like you. He's saying it's easier for a camel to go through that little eye of a needle than it is for us to get into heaven, to be part of his kingdom, to be friends with God.

So, is Jesus saying here that it's only possible for rich people to get into heaven, but everyone else, holidays for everyone else?

I think that would be a problem, if that's what he was saying, because a number of the great ones in the Bible were fabulously wealthy. Job, for instance, in the Old Testament, fabulously wealthy, and yet they were saved.

[7 : 46] See, notice the reaction of those who were listening to this incident, this little encounter. Verse 26, they said, well, who then can be saved? Who can be saved? You see, the disciples are confused because in their culture, they just assumed that the rich ones were the ones who God had blessed.

That's why they would say, well, that God had blessed them. So if they can't be saved, then who can be saved? But Jesus responds with, what is impossible with men is possible with God.

Jesus didn't say here, what is impossible for rich people is possible with God. He says, what is impossible for all people is possible with God.

What he's saying there is that all salvation, all rescue is a miracle.

It's impossible that anyone can be saved because as Romans 3 says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It's not possible for anyone to be part of God's kingdom, part of his family, to be friends with God, to be saved, except for God intervening and doing the impossible.

[9 : 08] That's what Jesus is saying here. So why does it appear that Jesus is picking on the rich guy? I think it's because that the spiritual issues that create a problem for us tend to be made worse by wealth.

The same thing that makes salvation impossible for all is made worse by money, wealth, possessions. That is, money has an incredible power for good, but it also has an incredible power to make things even worse.

The Bible actually says a great deal of positive things about money, but it also has a number of warnings. The Old Testament book of Proverbs is a wisdom book and it's primarily concerned about how to navigate life well in God's world his way.

And it says a great deal about money, a great deal of positive things about money. But there are two really important things that it says about the spiritual power of money.

Firstly, it says that money has the spiritual power to distract us from what is really important in life. That is, it says that money makes us very busy.

[10:32] And I'm not sure if you've ever noticed in another kind of word study here how busyness and business are very similar words, as you will know from Monday to Friday at least.

The making of money takes so much time. It absorbs so much of our life to accumulate things. And then when you do make it, it gets you busy spending it.

It makes you busy getting it, then it makes you busy getting even more of it and maintaining it and sustaining it and spending it. So busy, in fact, that we don't have time to really ask the important questions of what am I really here for?

What is my life about? What is the trajectory of my life? Is this world all that there is? What am I really seeking to accomplish in life? Nobody, and I mean nobody, on their deathbed says, I wish I'd spent more time in the office.

Nobody. And Proverbs 11.4 says, Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.

[11:52] Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath means money can't help you when troubles hit. It does attempt to give us the delusion that that's what it can do for us when troubles hit.

It does try to give us the delusion that we're safe when we've got it. You know, for instance, you get into sorts of legal troubles, and if I've got money, I can pay the best lawyers who can get me an innocent verdict, so then I've got a clear conscience.

The one thing God can give you, money can provide, apparently in this scenario. Or if I get really sick, I can have the best doctors to treat me, and I can get healing, and so on and so forth.

That's why Jesus says that money is the alternative God. It gives me the delusion that it can give me things that only God can give me.

We're not safe. We're not safe from grief, from bereavement. We're not safe from illness. We're not safe from disaster, and it doesn't matter how much money you've got, you're never safe from financial ruin.

[13:06] You're never safe from financial ruin. No amount of money can stop those things happening to us. Money can't stop death, can't stop tragedy, heartbreak, and when they come, it says in Proverbs, you're not ready for it.

When it happens, you're not ready for it. In fact, right at the beginning of this journey to Jerusalem, Jesus told a story about a rich man who accumulated more and more things with the goal of having a safe, and secure retirement in ease and comfort.

And God said to him, you fool, you idiot, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you. Then you will get, who will get what you're prepared for yourself.

So busy, distracted from what is really important. Secondly, Proverbs also says that money has the ability to distort our understanding of ourselves.

It distorts our self-image. Proverbs 38, 9 says, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

[14:19] Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, who is the Lord? I could extend on extensively with this one, but as I think it was Bernadette Clairvaux said, to see a person humbled under prosperity is the greatest rarity in the world.

To see a person humbled under prosperity is the greatest rarity in the world. Wealth leads to pride. It leads to independence, self-confidence.

It puts us in a place in our thinking where we actually think that because I'm a self-made individual in a Western world, it leads us to a view that we're experts on everything.

It puts us in a place where we say, who is God? Why do I need him? I've got myself. So why then is wealth so dangerous?

Let's go back to the beginning of this passage. Verse 18, a certain ruler asked him, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Why do you call me good? Jesus answered, no one is good except God alone.

[15:37] You know the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and your mother. All these things I've kept since I was a boy, he said. Now, if you've been here for the first few weeks of this series, you should be shocked by that answer from Jesus.

You should be shocked that the answer to the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life, Jesus effectively says to this guy, obey the Ten Commandments. The implication is, that's how you get eternal life.

And if you were here a couple of weeks ago, you should be shocked by that because immediately, in fact, almost exactly immediately before Jesus has this encounter with this rich young ruler, he has this story of this Pharisee and the tax collector.

And the Pharisee is proud that he obeys the commandments. He was sure that he was right with God. And the tax collector instead knows he's rotten, knows he's a sinner, pleads for mercy. And Jesus says, it was that tax collector, that rotten scoundrel tax collector, the one who said, who asked and pleaded for grace and mercy, forgiveness. He was the one who went home saved. He was the one who went home with eternal life.

[16:56] He was the one who went home right with God. And the Pharisee went home not saved, not justified, not right with God. That is the point back then was you cannot get a relationship through good works.

You can't get a relationship with God through the obedience to Ten Commandments. Nobody can do it. It's impossible. So why does Jesus say here? Why does he say that here?

Why does he not say to this rich young ruler, dude, whatever your name is, I'm on the way to Jerusalem. I'm going there to die on a cross to pay a ransom for the sins of humanity, to take the penalty for the sins that you deserve upon myself.

And if you put your trust in me and walk with me, you put your trust in me, you will have eternal life. I mean, that would be consistent, Jesus. That'd be consistent with everything you've said.

That'd be consistent with the whole New Testament if you did that. I think the reason why he doesn't do it is because Jesus is brilliant.

[18:06] That's why he doesn't do it. Jesus is so, so perceptive. When Jesus deals with people, he's not working from some script.

Don't forget, you know, someone comes to you and asks me about eternal life, start at point one and go down to point six. He is amazing in the way he deals with people. He is so perceptive into the insights of their hearts and he penetrates their hearts every time.

To say, I've come to die for your sins would have been totally incomprehensible to this man in the same way that it is totally incomprehensible to most people in Sydney right now.

this man like us don't think we've got a problem. We don't think we need a rescuer.

We don't need someone to die for us. In fact, reading a journalist early this week from London said that the most, and this journalist is not a friend of Christianity but said the most offensive thing about the Christian faith is the fact that we need a rescuer.

[19:32] Look what he says in verse 21. All this I've kept since I was a boy. In other words, I don't need a rescuer. I'm a good person. I might not be perfect but I don't need a rescuer.

And Jesus is so perceptive here. He's digging deep into this young man's heart. He projects, this young man projects a confidence in his own righteousness, his own goodness.

So you've got to ask the question, why is he even here? Why is he even in front of Jesus at this point? Because deep down, take the surface off, deep down in his heart he must have been feeling something.

He must have been knowing something's not quite right here. There's got to be more. Something's wrong. Something's missing. A doubt that in fact he was not right.

Which of course, if we think we can get right with God by being good, it will always, always deep down result in a lack of confidence.

[20:43] It will always dig down in a sense of insecurity. Am I really good enough? Have I really done enough? Even those who project an image that they've got it all together, on the outside, on the inside they know better.

There's always things that we would not want to come to the surface, things that we would work hard to hide. Jesus seems to jump on in straight away.

He says this man in verse 19, he just jumps on him, why do you call me good? It's like he rebukes him straight away. What do you call me good for? No one is good except God alone.

Now Jesus isn't saying here that he's not good, he is however responding to this rich young ruler's characterization of him. This rich young ruler walks up to Jesus as Jesus is walking to Jerusalem and he calls him teacher, rabbi.

That's it. you're a good bloke, Jesus. You said some amazing stuff. But you are just like any other man, you're another man.

[22 : 03] And Jesus is saying here, why are you walking up to someone who you regard just merely as another human being and calling him good? Why are you doing that?

If you think I'm merely just another human being, why are you calling me good? Because there is no person is good, only God is good.

And so what Jesus is doing here in a roundabout kind of way is he's reminding this young man that his first problem, his foundational problem, his biggest fundamental problem is that he in fact is not good.

And Jesus then goes on to show him where he's not good. Verse 22, when Jesus heard this, he said to him, you still lack one thing, sell everything you have, give to the poor, and then you will come and have treasure in heaven, then come follow me.

Now Jesus has never suggested to anyone else that this is the way to be saved. Never suggested to anyone else that you must give away all of your money.

[23 : 09] John 4 with the woman of the world, didn't say to her, give away all your money.

Zacchaeus, next chapter, Zacchaeus is welcomed by Jesus, so overwhelmed by that, he immediately gives away half of his income, half of his resources, just gives it away.

Jesus doesn't say, we're going to beat Zacchaeus, that's only halfway. Zacchaeus, that's fine, good on you Zacchaeus. Good work Zacchaeus. So why here?

Again, Jesus is just so brilliant. He's doing it because it's a brilliant strategy to help this rich young ruler to see where he needs rescuing. Jesus targets deep down in his heart the idol of this man, what he values more than anything else.

This is the thing that he's looking to, to give him what only God can give him. See, money is not just a tool for him, it is his identity scorecard, it is his security and his hope, and Jesus is going after it because it is the thing in his life that is squeezing God out.

And when Jesus presses him on, we see he hasn't in fact obeyed the commandments at all. He's not good.

[24 : 35] Jesus pushed him to give it all up for the poor, to give it all away for God, to give it all up and follow him. And he couldn't.

He wouldn't do it. Verse 23 says he became very sad. It's a strong word that means he was deeply grieved, deeply distressed. His money was just too important for him to give it up.

His money to him is what money is to many of us in a Western materialistic world. More important than anything. He didn't want God to get in the way of what was so important for him and so what Jesus was showing him, dude, you're not good.

You're not good. You actually haven't obeyed the Ten Commandments. You, in fact, haven't even got past the First Commandment which says you will have no other gods but me.

He says this money is your God. We cannot possibly get eternal life by obeying the Ten Commandments.

[25 : 47] We need a Saviour. Money can so easily become the pseudo-Saviour for us, the alternative of God, a false Saviour, and Jesus sets it up as the alternative God when he says you cannot serve both God and money.

You're either devoted to the one or to the other but you cannot have both. That is why money is so dangerous. So how do we escape the danger?

First thing is to assume you're in denial. That's the first thing. Assume everyone here just work on the assumption you're in denial. Jesus is pretty blunt to this guy.

It's like why was he so blunt? It's like because Jesus is slapping him in the face. Wake up dude.

Wake up you're in denial. That's the nature of addiction. The addiction will say I'm not addicted.

I haven't got a problem. So the first thing is to assume we are under the influence. Just humor me with this one. Assume that the amount of money you think you need is more than what you really need.

[26 : 55] Just assume that. Assume that the amount of money you think you need is more than what you really need. And assume also the amount of money you think you can give away is less than what you really can give away.

Assume it. The Bible says that money makes us blind. Second thing to escape the danger of money is to look to the rich young ruler.

Why do that when this guy doesn't do the right thing? He walks away sad, he rejects Jesus. So why look to the rich young ruler? Well, there's actually two rich young rulers in this text.

Did you notice there's a second one? Jesus is around 30 to 32 when he's heading to Jerusalem.

The Bible says that he existed with God for eternity.

He made everything. He rules everything. He sustains everything. And he left that aside, came from heaven to identify with the spiritual poverty of the human race.

[28 : 05] And he is on his way here to Jerusalem to die on a cross and to at that moment to go into deep, deep poverty, deeper poverty than anyone else has ever experienced.

He will be stripped of everything of his earthly goods, which is minimal. Everything will be taken away from him. And he will be abandoned by his father and he will lose his life.

He will even give away his life. And he gave everything for us, for the poor, the spiritually blind, the spiritually dead, the ones who need rescuing. 2 Corinthians 8-9 puts it in economic terms.

It says, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

He was drained of all of his riches, so that we, though poor, can receive all of his riches. In Jesus, we get adoption into God's family, forgiveness, pardon, eternal life.

[29 : 13] It is the only wealth that makes you truly secure, even through and beyond death. And so we need to look to the true rich young ruler in this passage.

until we get weepingly excited, weepingly excited over what he has achieved for us and what he has gifted us.

Look to the glorious news of God's grace and his riches to us in the Lord Jesus until it drains, drains all the power out of money and possessions.

until those things just become currency. Not identity markers, just currency.

Just money are no longer our security and our self-esteem. Third thing to do is to have a plan. Step one, this is getting particular now in terms of radical generosity.

[30 : 18] Step one, investigate what percentage of your income you are giving away. We in Australia, the more money we get, the less we give away. I think the latest thing was around 2% or even under 2% that we give away of our income.

So work out what percentage of your income you're giving away. How much of that goes to Christian ministry? How much of that goes to poor, needy, outside your own family? Step two, if it's not 10%, the very least amount the disciples are encouraged to give away.

Work out how you can aggressively move towards 10% this year. Step three, figure out what sacrifices you are going to make in order to get there.

If you don't need to make sacrifices in order to give 10%, then you aren't really giving. Sacrificial giving is not about a percentage.

It's about a standard of living. It's about a standard of living changing in such a way that we feel the loss. That's what generosity, we start to feel the loss.

[31 : 31] Just let me add here what Jesus says at the end of these verses when I talk about loss. Having seen the rich young man walk away, Peter pipes up. Verse 28, we've left all we had to follow you.

And Jesus reassures the disciples in this moment that though they have made sacrifices and have sacrificed many things, they have left many things, they will not fail to receive many more blessings now and forever.

Truly I say to you, Jesus said, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

God's no man debtor. He's no man's debtor. Step four, decide what you're going to give to, wear and follow through with it. That is make yourself accountable. That's why we do pledging here at St. Paul's.

Giving is a spiritual issue and like all spiritual issues we are accountable for it. To live radically generous, to be radically generous with our money, our wealth, our possessions.

[32 : 46] We don't need courage. What we need is joy. That's what we really need. We need joy. We need to be relaxed and at peace and secure enough in order to do this.

And the only joy, the only security, the only peace that comes to us is when we look at the true, rich, young ruler who lost everything so that we could gain everything.

The more we look to him and the riches that we have in him, the more free we will be, the more free we will live a pervasively generous life, including giving our money away in eye-popping proportions.