

Rich Ruler's Conundrum

Three Characters:

Rich Young Ruler

- *Ran to Jesus
- *Respectfully bowed to Jesus
- *Calls Jesus "Good"

(Young Man's Superficial View: Spiritual Things / Jesus / Law)

Jesus

- *He loved the young man
- *He challenged the rich

Peter

- *His confusion
- *His declaration

Examples of "Real" Biblical Wealth

- >Zacchaeus (Luke 19)
- >Cheerful "Generosity" (2Cor. 9)
- >Edges of the "Field" (Lev. 23:22)

EXEGETICAL NOTES:

WHAT SHALL I DO THAT I MAY INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE? (MARK 10:17-22)

"As (Jesus) was going out into the way" (*hodon*—"the way," a code phrase for Jesus' journey to Jerusalem) (v. 17a). Mark uses *hodon* to remind us that Jesus is on "the way" to Jerusalem and a cross. Note the irony. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die, but this man is asking how to live. Jesus is "on the way" to give his life, but this man is asking how to receive life. It was only recently that Jesus said, **"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it"** (8:35).

"one ran to him, knelt before him" (v. 17b). We think of this man as the Rich Young Ruler, but Mark identifies him only as a man who had many possessions and mentions his possessions only at the conclusion of this encounter (v. 22). Matthew says that he is young (19:20), and Luke identifies him as a ruler (18:18).

"Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (v. 17c). The prize that he seeks, eternal life, is mentioned frequently in the Gospel of John. In the Synoptics, outside of this story (found also in Matthew 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30), the

phrase “eternal life” appears only twice (Matthew 25:46; Luke 10:25). The more usual phrase in the Synoptics is “the kingdom of God,” which phrase Jesus uses in verses 24-25. The disciples use the word “saved” in verse 26 instead of “eternal life” or “kingdom of God.”

The man asks what he must do to *inherit* eternal life. As a rich man, he understands; inheritances. The law spells out inheritances. The firstborn son is to inherit two shares of the property, and each of the other sons is to inherit one share (Deuteronomy 21:17). In other words, the firstborn son is to get twice as much as any of his brothers. If there are no sons, daughters are allowed to receive the inheritance (Numbers 27:8-11). However, in most cases, a daughter would receive only a dowry—a bridal present from her father.

The Old Testament often uses the word “inherit” or “inheritance” in relationship to God and God’s people (Exodus 32:13; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 26:53-55, etc.), and the Israelites sometimes compromised that inheritance by their behavior.

“what shall I do” (v. 17c). The man wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. If what the man says in verse 20 is true, as might be the case, he is already doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons. He is less interested in serving God than in figuring out how to get God to serve him.

The man’s question also reveals that he has misunderstood the relationship between his own works and God’s grace. He cannot achieve eternal life by virtue of his own actions. He needs to acknowledge his spiritual deficits and seek God’s grace.

God has been generous to this man, and the man asks how to insure God’s continued generosity. He is rich in this life and wants to extend his prosperity into eternity. His answer in verse 20 shows that he knows the traditional answer to his question and is already complying with traditional requirements. Perhaps he is anxious to insure that he hasn’t failed at some unknown point. Perhaps he is looking for reassurance. Perhaps he is just looking for a pat on the back—“Keep up the good work!” In any event, we can be sure that he does not expect Jesus to lay a significant new requirement on him.

“Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God” (v. 18). We are surprised when Jesus rebukes the man for calling him “Good teacher.” The man came running—felt an urgency to receive advice from Jesus—knelt to ask his question. Nothing in his manner suggests that he is being dishonest or is trying to trap Jesus. Verse 21 tells us that Jesus loves him. However, Jews understand that God is good and avoid using the word “good” for people lest they be guilty of blasphemy. Jesus is, indeed, good, but he points this man to God’s goodness.

“You know the commandments” (v. 19a). We are surprised to hear Jesus connect commandments and eternal life. Hasn’t Jesus ushered in grace! Doesn’t faith trump obedience to the law! But Jesus cites five commandments from the second table of the Decalogue & one not a part of the original ten; all having to do with human relationships:

- **“Do not murder”** (v. 19) is the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13).
- **“Do not commit adultery”** is the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14).
- **“Do not steal”** is the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15).
- **“Do not give false testimony”** is ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16).
- **“Do not defraud”** is not part of the Ten Commandments. Jesus substitutes it for “You shall not covet”—the tenth commandment (Exodus 20:17). It makes sense that he should do so, because a rich man is less likely to covet the possessions of others than he is to defraud people in the pursuit of further wealth.
- **“Honor your father and mother”** is the fifth commandment—the commandment with a promise—that your days may be long in the land which Yahweh your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12). This is in keeping with the man’s concern—life—longevity.

The rich man responds, **“Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth”** (vs. 20). Jesus does not challenge his answer. The man has surely been meticulous, and believes that he has kept the commandments. Note, however that Jesus did not mention the following commandments, so the man has not claimed to obey them.

- The first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).
- The second is “You shall not make for yourselves an idol” (Exodus 20:4).
- The third is “You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain” (Exodus 20:7).
- The fourth is “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8).
- The tenth is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17). As noted above, Jesus may intend **“Do not defraud”** (v. 19), to substitute for “You shall not covet.”

Commandments one through four have to do with our relationship to God. The tenth commandment, “You shall not covet,” at first blush, seems to have to do with human relationships, but consider again. To covet material possessions is to invest them with great importance—to let them to fill our hearts—to allow them to fill the God-space in our lives. In a sense, a violation of the tenth commandment is also a violation of the first and second commandments—making a god of material possessions.

So, it seems that, in verse 19, Jesus listed only commandments that this rich man would find easy. The man says that he has kept them, and he may have—but commandments having to do with relationships to God represent a higher level of discipleship, one where this man is deficient. Now, Jesus tells the man what he must do to bring himself into compliance with the first and second commandments.

“Jesus looking at him loved him” (v. 21a). This tells us two things:

- First, the man didn’t come to Jesus, as so many powerful men did, trying to find a chink in Jesus’ armor. He asked a question for the purpose of learning from Jesus, and anticipated doing what Jesus told him to do.
- Second, Jesus saw that the man’s heart was pure and felt a genuine affection for him.

Whether he knew in advance how the man would respond is something that we can't know, but it is quite possible that he did not know—that he was giving the man a genuine opportunity to choose the road that leads to life—that he hoped the man would do just that. We must keep in mind that Jesus “emptied himself” (Greek: *heauton ekenosen*—poured himself out”) when he came to earth (Philippians 2:7). While he displayed an ability to read people's hearts, he doesn't seem to exercise omniscience.

“One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me, taking up the cross” (v. 21b). This is a shocking call to discipleship—especially shocking in a culture that assumed that riches constituted an endorsement by God of the rich person's life. This man has probably gone through his life believing that he has tried to please God and that his riches demonstrate that God is pleased with him.

This call is also shocking when contrasted with other calls to discipleship in the Gospels. In most cases, Jesus called people by saying simply, **“Come after me.”** There is no record of Jesus requiring the fishermen to sell their boats (1:17). Simon and Andrew kept their house in Capernaum (1:29). Martha and Mary owned a house (Luke 10:38). There is no mention of Levi, the tax collector, having to give up his ill-gotten gains (2:14), although it seems likely that he would have done so. Several wealthy people became disciples without divesting themselves of their wealth (Acts 16:14; Romans 16:1-5, 23).

Why then should Jesus demand such sacrifice from this man? At least two possibilities:

- As this story reveals, this man's wealth is very important to him—more important even than eternal life—unless he assumes that he can obtain eternal life without selling his property. The security afforded by material possessions tempts us to trust in possessions rather than in God.
- Note too that this story follows immediately after the story of the children in which Jesus said, **“Most certainly I tell you, whoever will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, he will in no way enter into it”** (10:15). The rich man is quite unlike those children. They were poor, but he is rich. They were dependent, but he is not. They had no status or power, but he has both. They had no security apart from those who cared for them, but the rich man is quite secure in his own right. Perhaps Jesus is simply requiring the rich man to become like a child before God—to strip himself of those things that provide him security so that he might find his security in God.

It is possible, then, that Jesus tailored the requirement to sell everything especially for this man—to meet his particular spiritual needs. We should not, however, imagine that Jesus will not ask something equally difficult of us.

“But his face fell at that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had great possessions” (v. 22). The man was shocked at the price tag that Jesus placed on eternal life. We too should be shocked when we hear this story. The only cheap grace is for children who have nothing to give (10:13-16). The rest of us can expect Jesus to make painful demands.

ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE WITH GOD (MARK 10:23-27)

“How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!” (v. 23b). Jesus states (verse 23) and then restates this (verse 24), perplexing the disciples (v. 23). They have been taught that wealth is a sign of God’s approval, so how can it be difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God? As he does so often, Jesus stands conventional religious thinking on its head—turns everything upside down and inside out. No wonder the disciples are perplexed.

“It is easier for a camel (*kamelon*) to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God” (v. 25). People sometimes try to soften Jesus’ words about the eye of a needle by suggesting that:

- The word that is translated camel (Greek: *kamelon*) should instead be translated rope (Greek: *kamilon*). The Greek words are similar, and it is easier to imagine threading a rope through a needle than having a camel crawl through the eye of a needle. However, the textual evidence for this is weak.
- The **“eye of a needle”** was a low gate in a city wall that would require a camel to be unloaded before proceeding on its knees through the opening. However, there is no evidence that such a gate existed in Jesus’ day.

Jesus is using hyperbole, exaggerated language, to make a point. He talks of the largest animal trying to negotiate the smallest opening to provide a memorable illustration of the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom of God. “To try to domesticate this language does Jesus no favor” (Williamson, 184). Instead of taking the image literally, let us take it seriously. It is a word of judgment, not just for that rich man, but for all of us who have many possessions.

The disciples ask the obvious question, **“Then who can be saved?”** (v. 26). If this decent, God-fearing, law-abiding man, whom God has blessed with riches, cannot be saved, who can? Listen carefully to the answer. **“With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God”** (v. 27). Apart from grace, this decent, God-fearing, law-abiding man has no hope. Only by God’s grace is there any possibility that he can enter the kingdom of God. The same is true for all of us. Our challenge is to accept our status as little children before God, penniless and hopeless except for God’s grace. Neither perfect attendance in worship—nor service in high church office—nor ordination—nor tithing—nor anything that we can do can save us apart from the grace of God.

This passage also warns us of the seductiveness of wealth. We might imagine that we are in no danger because we are poor or middle-class. However, most of us are wealthy by the standards of most of the world. People who have moved in the past year will understand better than most just how many possessions they really have. It is also true that we need not be wealthy to have our hearts and souls consumed by thoughts of money. We are all in danger of loving money more than God.

WE HAVE LEFT EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED YOU (MARK 10:28-31)

“Behold, we have left all, and have followed you” (v. 28). Peter and the disciples have already done what Jesus told this rich man to do. They have sacrificed everything to follow Jesus. Peter’s implied question is, “Will we receive any reward?”

“Most certainly I tell you, there is no one who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or land, for my sake, and for the sake of the Good News, but he will receive one hundred times more now in this time, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land, with persecutions; and in the age to come eternal life” (vv. 29-30). Jesus makes it clear that those who sacrifice for his sake will be rewarded both now and in eternity.

We would expect Jesus to reward us for sacrificing bad things (addictions, bad habits) and seductive things (fame and fortune), but the things that he mentions in verse 29 are all quite positive. It is possible for even good things to stand between us and Christ. The list of blessings in verse 30 parallels the list of sacrifices in verse 29 with one exception—the word “father” is conspicuously absent in verse 30. The Christian who leaves house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields gains access to many Christian houses, brothers, sisters —no need for many fathers, because God is our Father.

“and land, with persecutions” (v. 30). Jesus interjects a surprising word here—persecutions. Christians can never be completely comfortable in this world, because the gospel we preach runs counter to the values of this world. Mark’s church experienced persecution, and Christians are still persecuted around the world today. Christians are being martyred daily, sometimes in large numbers. Do not assume we will be exempt from persecution.

Jesus concludes by reassuring Peter, **“But many who are first will be last; and the last first”** (v. 31). In the kingdom of God, the person who loves God will be first, and the person who loves money will be last. The person who takes care of an ailing neighbor will be first, and the person who takes care of Number One will be last. What we see is not at all what we can expect to get once God’s Great Reversal takes place.