

“Wealth Can Rob You from Real Life”

Lk 18:18-30 (text)

21 July 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

In my life (lived in various countries), I have seen a universal thing with human beings, i.e. that, by our sinful nature, we seek lasting security in temporary things – e.g. things like finding a beautiful wife or a handsome husband, or like striving for highest status!

Some seek lasting security in a bottle! However, all human beings (sinful as we are) are inclined to seek (or simply find) lasting security in wealth!

In one small town in New Zealand, I have known about a doctor and his wife who seemed to have made wealth & possessions their idols!

Although they had a small family, they built the biggest mansion! And every time they took annual leave, they went overseas to places they had not visited before!

And you know what was sad? The low wages this doctor paid his receptionist and nurses working in his practice!

It seemed everything about this doctor portrayed his self-centredness!

And here’s the irony: the money in which this doctor sought lasting security – an ever-elusive security I have to add – was the money which could have blessed his employees and could have secured that he would have long-term benefit of their services! Yet, as it inevitably turned out, this doctor kept on losing his kind and capable workers!

What lasting security does this doctor have?

Well, nothing – that’s to say, if he carried on in the same old way!

My brother & sister, what’s the danger of wealth?

Well, that it can so easily create *a false sense of security!*

And what does this false sense of security do to you?

Well, it robs you from meeting Jesus!

And what happens if you don’t have Jesus?

Well, then you don’t have life – neither eternal life, nor peace in this life!

And that’s the main message of our text...

Real life is found only in Jesus Christ. So, don’t let wealth with its false sense of security rob you from meeting Jesus (and staying with Him)!

Our text allows for us the following three points...

- Wealth
- Test
- Life

Wealth

If we read our text together with its parallel passages from Matthew and Mark, then we see that a certain *rich ruler* comes to Jesus!

Matthew says he is still *young*!¹

¹ Mt 19:22, **When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.** Young man, in Greek *neaniskos* (νεανίσκος), is a young man beyond the age of puberty, but normally before

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that this man has everything everyone else wants: he is still only *young*; yet, he is already *wealthy*. What's more, despite his youth, he is already a *ruler* – so, he also has *power*!

Yet, he is not satisfied!

My brother & sister, do you know any such people? The world is full of them!! They have what they thought would make them happy, but still there's a nagging emptiness in their soul!

Why?

For fame & wealth give a false sense of security, and of happiness!

Well, this man must have heard that Jesus had been teaching about the kingdom of God – and about readiness to entering that glorious kingdom!

So, Mark (in his gospel) says this man comes *running up*² to Jesus and falls on his knees before Him!³

Why does he do this? Why does he want to see Jesus? And why so fast?

Did he have an inkling that all of his outward blessings were giving him only a false sense of security?

Was he really wanting to make sure if he had eternal life? Or did he come in hypocrisy – in a fake humble way – to boast that he is already right with God? In other words, did he come in humility, or did he come to impress (show off)?

Well, looking at the rest of our text, it might well have been the latter – i.e. that he came in hypocrisy, wanting to impress!

Anyway, this is what he says (in v.18): “***Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?***”

And how does Jesus respond? “***Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone?***” (v.19).

What did Jesus mean?

Well, some say, “See?” “Jesus is denying here that He is God, because only God is good.” “And seeing that Jesus rejects this greeting, He must therefore be denying His deity!”

But that's not true!!

As someone has said, “Jesus knew very well that this man did *not* know very well who Jesus was. Jesus knew that the rich young ruler did not know that he was asking this

marriage—‘young man’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 107). New York: United Bible Societies).

² In Greek *prosdramōn* (προσδραμών) which is an Aorist Active Participle Masculine Singular Nominative of *prostrechō* (προστρέχω) to run into the presence of someone—‘to run up to, to run into the presence of’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 209). New York: United Bible Societies).

³ Mk 10:17, ***And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”***

question of God incarnate! From the young man's perspective, Jesus was merely a sagacious (wise) human being – but a good one!"⁴

So, all that Jesus is doing here, is He refuses to accept this young man's flattery. At the same time Jesus' answer is giving the man a warning that He (Jesus) will be very frank with him!⁵

Well, the man's question is (v.18), "***What must I do to inherit eternal life?***"

How does Jesus answer?

Well, Jesus selects a few of the Ten Commandments from Ex 20, saying, "***You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'***"

Why does Jesus answer him in this way? Is Jesus insinuating that one can earn one's salvation by perfectly obeying God's commandments?

No!

With this question, Jesus simply wants to lead this man to the point of acknowledging his imperfection – i.e. that he cannot fully keep God's Law and that he therefore needs a Saviour!

But how does this man answer?

Well, he says (in v.21), "***All these I have kept from my youth!***" "Yes, Jesus, since my Bar Mitzvah, I have kept all God's laws!"

Wow! What ignorance! What over-self-confidence! What false sense of security!

My brother & sister, is there any difference between this rich young ruler's attitude and that of the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?⁶

I guess this man wasn't there when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount – yes, when Jesus explained the depths of the implications of each of these commandments! You see, if this man was there (and if he was honest) he would have known that he had not kept one of those commandments since he got out of bed that very same morning!! Clearly, this young man didn't realise that if you have one thought of lust, you violated the Law against adultery. And if you hated somebody without just cause or if you have been angry with somebody without just cause, you violated the law against murder.⁷

Clearly, this man's wealth, status, and religious walk had gone straight to his head!

⁴ So Sproul, RC in his audio sermon on Lk 18:18-30 at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/rich-young-ruler-luke18/>

⁵ Cf. Bock, D. L. (1994. *Luke* [Lk 18:18]. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) for "Jesus is not replying to deprecates himself, but qualifying how the man views the teaching office in general. The teaching role, even for one who does it well, is not to be overly exalted. Jesus' refusal to accept the man's flattery also warns the man that Jesus will shoot straight with him."

⁶ Cf. Bock (1994:ibid) for, "His confidence recalls the Pharisee of verses 9–14: he has kept the law." Also cf. Bock, D. L. 1996. *Luke* [pp. 466–471]. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) for, "The rich man is like the Pharisee in 18:9–14, in that he is more concerned with where he stands than in knowing God's grace."

⁷ My adaptation of the well-said words of Sproul (ibid), "I guess you weren't there when I gave the Sermon on the Mount – when I explained the depths of the implications of each of these commandments, for if you were there and if you were listening and if you were honest you would know that you have not kept one of those commandments since you got out of your bed this morning!" Don't you realise that if you have one thought of lust, you violated the Law against adultery, and if you hated somebody without just cause or if you have been angry with somebody without just cause, you violated the law against murder?"

You see, in his day and culture, wealth was often seen as a blessing from God! If you're wealthy, then surely, you must be in God's favour!⁸

So, this man's wealth gave him a false sense of eternal security! But not just his *wealth*! No, also his false understanding that, through *perfect law-keeping*, he was in God's favour!

My brother & sister (Young person), please think with me: What gives you & me that sense of security in life?

Your status in life? The position you have at work? That Guinness-Book record you have made!? Yes, what gives you peace? That bank account that still has money in it – perhaps even enough to see you through till your dying day?

Well, let's be honest, although these things may help give some peace of mind and security, they can never give that kind of peace that passes understanding – that everlasting security that we are right with God! Neither can your/my “good” behaviour merit you/me entrance into God's kingdom!

But this young man thought so! He relied on his wealth! That's why our Lord Jesus now puts him to the test – which brings us to point 2...

Test

Here is the test our Lord Jesus gives this man. He says to him (in v.22), ***“You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven....”***⁹

Why did Jesus give such a command?

Did Jesus mean that *all* rich people should give *all* their wealth to the poor?

No, my brother & sister! Jesus is not insinuating that entrance into heaven comes by poverty! Imagine if instead of “Salvation by Grace,” the Reformation slogan was: “Salvation by empty bank account!”

That could never be! After all, there are wealthy people in the Bible who never received this *give-away command* from God!

Abraham did not receive such a command from God! Neither did *Joseph of Arimathea* nor even *Zaccheus*!

So, it's clear – the command to sell all possessions and give it to the poor is given to this one man specifically!

Why?

Well, because this man thought that, from the time he did his Bar Mitzvah at the age of twelve, he had kept all God's commandments!

So, because Jesus wanted to point out to him that he did not achieve that, He now touches a nerve with this man, i.e. Jesus draws his attention to the first commandment, which says, “You shall have no other gods before Me!”

⁸ Cf. Bock (1996:ibid) for, “The rich were often seen as the blessed. After all, did not Old Testament teaching on wealth suggest as much (Prov. 6:6–11; 10:4; 28:19)?”

Prov 6:6-11, ***Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. ⁷Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, ⁸she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. ⁹How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ¹¹and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.***

Also cf. Prov 10:4, ***A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.***

Also cf. Prov 28:19 ***Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.***

⁹ Lk 18:22

Well, this man's face confirmed his sin! According to Mark, the man's face fell! He was appalled!¹⁰ Our text says, *he became very sad*.¹¹ For he was *very* wealthy! Yes, his sadness was to the same degree as his wealth – *very* sad, because he was *very* wealthy! He had *his wealth*; it had *him*¹²- proof that Christ's words had hit the bull's eye! Yes, proof that this man did not keep the Law as he had thought!

He had idols! He loved his possessions & status more than God! He transgressed the very first command!

“So, young man, do you still think you can enter heaven on your own steam? Forget it!”

Well, *Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 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.”*

My brother & sister, some people have thought Jesus could not possibly have talked about a real camel and the eye of a real needle!

So, some tried to read camel as *kamilon* – which is the Greek word for a rope. Thus, said they, it makes sense that it is difficult for a rope to go through the eye of even a big industrial needle!

But, no, all the ancient Greek texts of the Gospels have been checked. There's not a hint that we should read *rope* instead of *camel*.¹³

Well, still some other people then tried to explain that a small/low gate in the ancient city walls looked like a *needle's eye*. Surely if a camel went on his knees, he could humbly creep through. And is this not a good picture of how people can enter heaven only when they humble themselves?

My brother & sister, also for this theory there is no evidence! In no Middle-Eastern language has a low gate ever been called “needle's eye!”

So, what's the conclusion?

Well, that Christ meant exactly what He said: *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*.¹⁴

¹⁰ cf. Mk 10:22 **στυγνάζω**: to experience an emotional state of great surprise because of something which appears incredible and alarming—‘to be shocked, to be appalled.’ ὁ δὲ στυγνάσας ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ ἀπῆλθεν λυπούμενος ‘he was appalled at what was said and went away sad’ (aor ptc act m s nom of στυγνάζω)

¹¹ ὁ δὲ ἀκούσας ταῦτα περίλυπος (adj. very sad) ἐγενήθη· ἦν γὰρ πλούσιος σφόδρα.

¹² cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.835)

¹³ cf. Metzger et al (1975:169) under **18.25 κάμηλον**. “In an attempt to soften the rigor of the statement, the word **κάμιλον** (“a rope” or “a ship’s hawser”) was substituted for κάμηλον in several of the later witnesses (S 13 59 124 130 437 472 543 arm geo). The change was facilitated by the circumstance that **ι** and **η** came to be pronounced alike in later Greek (both words were pronounced kah’mee-lon).”

¹⁴ In fact, indications are that Christ used an ordinary saying of those days. You see, when the ancient Jews wanted to emphasise the impossibility of something happening, they’d say e.g., “Ah, a camel might as well go through the eye of a needle before it will snow in summer.” And this is how we know for sure, because, you see, Jews who were living in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), had a similar saying to point out the impossibility of something happening. They said: *as unlikely as for an elephant to go through the eye of a needle*. The elephant was the biggest animal in Mesopotamia, but in Palestine where they did not have elephants, the biggest animal was the *camel* – so the Palestinian Jews changed the saying (Bailey, K.E. 1983. *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: a literary-cultural approach to the parables of Luke*. Combined in two volumes. Grand Rapids, MI : W.B. Eerdmans. p.166). Also Hendriksen, 2004:835f).

And the bystanders clearly understood it the way Christ meant it, for look at their reaction (in v.26):¹⁵ “**Who can then be saved?**”

Well, this is the mind-set from which the bystanders argued:

“If ever there were people who were right with God, it must be the rich, for rich men are able to build synagogues, to financially support orphanages, to offer alms to the poor, renovate temples, and fund many other worthwhile projects. If anyone is saved, surely it is they. That’s how we have always thought! But now, hear what Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth is saying! He says that such people *cannot* enter the kingdom by such noble efforts. Well, if even the rich can’t, how can us commoners then, for we have much less - we do not have the wealth to carry out such noble deeds. Who then can be saved?”¹⁶

Congregation, amazing how Jews in modern times still think that when you’re rich, you’re right with God. You see, it is said that John D Rockefeller, American oil magnate of the last century, used to say that when God thinks about a rich man, He says, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.”¹⁷

Well, it was with this kind of mind-set that Jesus’ audience reacted, saying, “If even the rich can’t be saved, who then can?”

And to the people’s reaction, Christ gave this beautiful answer: v.27, “**What is impossible with men is possible with God.**”

Exactly the point: **salvation is an action of God!** Not just rich people, but no-one can earn his way into heaven!

No-one? Rich or poor?

Yes, no-one!

But why does Christ then in v. 24 mention only the rich: “**How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!**”?

Why does Christ not say, “How hard it is for *anyone* to enter the kingdom of God”?

Well,...

- Was it not a *rich* man who came with this problem to Christ!?
- Secondly: quite often, rich people have become rich through *exceptional effort* – exactly what is *not* needed in receiving Christ! Even this man’s flattering of Jesus was proof that he was *trying too hard* to in own effort worm himself into heaven.¹⁸
- Besides, in mentioning the rich, Jesus referred to an all-inclusive group! You see, if in the mind-set of that culture, even the rich can’t earn their way into heaven, then certainly the poor can’t either!

But the good news is: What is impossible with men is possible with God!

If this rich young man had followed Jesus’ instruction and came and followed Jesus – the greatest Love-Gift of God – then he would have had *life*!

¹⁵ According to Matthew & Mark, the bystanders were the disciples.

¹⁶ My rendering of Bailey (ibid:167)

¹⁷ cf. Wiersbe (ibid) and http://fun-with-words.com/devil_r4.html and http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Was_Rockefeller_a_Jew

¹⁸ cf. Bailey (1983:162) *Thus Jesus is best understood as responding to a tendency on the part of the ruler to “overdo it.” The ruler is trying too hard. He tries to impress with a compliment and perhaps hopes to be greeted with some lofty title in return. In the Oriental world, one compliment requires a second. The ruler starts with “Good Teacher” and may expect “Noble Ruler” in response from Jesus.*

That brings us to the last small point...

Life

My brother & sister, did you notice what Peter, stunned by what he had just seen & heard, now does?

Peter now compares himself and the other disciples with this rich young man!

The rich young man decided not to follow Jesus! But, some time ago, when Jesus called the disciples to follow Him, *they* resigned from their jobs! Yes, *they* left their homes and followed Jesus!

Says Peter, “Jesus, do You see what we have done?”

And Jesus’ answer?

Well, Jesus assures Peter & the disciples that they, and all, who have put the kingdom of God first in their lives, will receive many times more in this life and in the life to come.

My brother & sister (Dear children), what will your & my lives look like if we follow Jesus – if we put God’s kingdom first in our lives?

Well, firstly, is it not so that, even when life throws curve balls at us, we will have the blessed comfort of knowing that God is still in control?

And, secondly, is it not so that whatever wealth we have – and whatever talents we have – we will make all these available as instruments (or tools) in Christ’s hands? And is it not so that *giving to God’s kingdom* will fill our hearts with joy and *a real sense of security* which, unlike the securities offered by wealth, passes understanding?

What does this mean in practical terms?

Well does it not mean that selfish clinging onto our wealth and gifts will disappear, and that we will more easily – yet, still responsibly – give to missions; to the persecuted church; to the needy (first within the house of the Lord).

Question: Once we are following Jesus with all our heart, will it then be easier to give ourselves for the furtherance of the Gospel of Christ?

Of course! For the Christian *knows the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we by his poverty might become rich.*¹⁹

Indeed, being rich in Christ makes it easier for you & me to live detached from whatever wealth we have.

Look, is that not what this Christian hymn confirms,

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.*²⁰

May that be how you & I see life!!

AMEN (2,746 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁹ Cf. 2 Cor 8:9, ***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.***

²⁰ Refrain from the Hymn “O soul, are you weary and troubled.” Better known as: “**Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,**” by [Helen H. Lemmel](#), 1922.