

The Rich and the Kingdom of God

Caversham Baptist Church
Sunday 17 September 2017



The Bridge
William C. Ressler

Question for discussion:

If someone asked you what they had to do to get eternal life what would you say?

Matthew 19:16-30

The Rich and the Kingdom of God

¹⁶ A man came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?”

¹⁷ Jesus said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? Only God is good. If you want to have eternal life, you must obey his commandments.”

¹⁸ “Which ones?” the man asked.

Jesus answered, “Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal. Do not tell lies about others. ¹⁹ Respect your father and mother. And love others as much as you love yourself.” ²⁰ The young man said, “I have obeyed all of these. What else must I do?”

²¹ Jesus replied, “If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you own! Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and be my follower.” ²² When the young man heard this, he was sad, because he was very rich.

²³ Jesus said to his disciples, “It’s terribly hard for rich people to get into the kingdom of heaven! ²⁴ In fact, it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God’s kingdom.”

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly surprised and asked, “How can anyone ever be saved?”

²⁶ Jesus looked straight at them and said, “There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything.”

²⁷ Peter replied, “Remember, we have left everything to be your followers! What will we get?”

²⁸ Jesus answered:

“Yes, all of you have become my followers. And so in the future world, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, I promise that you will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.

²⁹ All who have given up home or brothers and sisters or father and mother or children or land for me will be given a hundred times as much. They will also have eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are now first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

Over recent weeks and months we’ve been looking at encounters people had with Jesus. It’s been a good follow up from our *Just Walk Across the Room* series earlier in the year. The theory is that if we look at the way Jesus dealt with people we may be able to learn some important tips as we seek to reach people around us.

I have to admit that when Dad asked me to speak about Jesus’s encounter with the rich young man I thought I’d been given a bit of a hospital pass because this passage is so familiar to us. I thought about standing up and preaching the shortest message in the 146 year history of Caversham Baptist Church – “You should love God more than money” – but, when I spent some time reflecting on this encounter, I realised there’s so much going on it’s more a matter of what I’m going to have to leave out!

Let’s start at the very beginning – according to Julie Andrews, in *The Sound of Music*, that’s a very good place to start. A young man approaches Jesus and asks what he has to do to get eternal life. If we’re asked this question, we’d probably talk about the significance of being put right with God by believing that Jesus’s death on the cross makes forgiveness for our sins possible. We might have the courage to tell the person we’re talking to that all they have to do is ask Jesus into their heart, by claiming this forgiveness for themselves, and then they’ll be put right with God in this life and the one to come.

However, Jesus is talking to this young man before the appalling events that took place at Golgotha. He doesn’t even talk about repentance as the means of getting right with God. Instead, he mentions five, of the 10, commandments - “Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal. Do not tell lies about others. Respect your father and mother.”

The first four commandments are vertically relational – they’re about the place God takes in our lives – You shall have no other Gods before me, you shall not make idols to worship, you shall not misuse my name and you should keep the Sabbath day holy (Exodus 20:1-11).

These commandments are summarised by the command to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27).

The last six commandments are horizontally relational – they’re about how we get on with each other. These commandments are summarised by the command to “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27). But Jesus leaves one out. Can anyone tell me which commandment Jesus doesn’t mention?

“Do not covet your neighbour’s stuff” (Exodus 20:17). I often tell Theo that I struggle with the tenth commandment every time I go to his house. I reckon the Theropouli have the best view in Dunedin – down the coast, up the harbour, into town, and over to Cargill, Swampy and Flagstaff. It’s stunning!

Why did Jesus not mention the tenth commandment? Probably because this rich young man didn't struggle with it. When you're loaded you don't need to lust after other people's stuff!

I tried to prove this on Thursday. I texted and emailed ten of the richest people I know, based on how well their jobs pay, and I asked them if they ever struggled with the tenth commandment. Five of the people I contacted are Christians, the others aren't yet... but I'd sure like them to be.

I received some really interesting responses:

Not too bad with envy, perhaps 'cos I'm pretty blessed.

Health

Christian male in his forties

I would say more than possessions I have coveted people's bodies, appearance in general, apparent ease of life, their abilities and talents, their personalities, and their overseas trips. I have also coveted possessions, but these other things have been more of a struggle.

Education

Christian female in her forties

And, yes, there's been the odd 'neighbour' with a nice husband!

Education

Christian female in her forties

Is failure to be content with your lot in life the same as coveting?

Education

Christian female in her forties

I think that when people are young they struggle more with it than when they are older. For me, there are three priorities in life – family, friends and voluntary work. Disregarding bad or good luck, you get out of them commensurate to what you put in.

Retired Property Manager

Non-Christian male in his sixties

The answer is 'Yes'. Not the husband bit, but definitely have house, job, lifestyle and car envy.

Health

Non-Christian female in her forties

Not usually.

Education

Non-Christian male in his forties

My understanding is that to covet is to have a strong desire for something that belongs to someone else. It's about what's in the heart, the motivation. It's OK to like your neighbour's new TV, but not

OK to find your own TV suddenly inadequate and devise a plan for getting one to rival your neighbour's.

Business

Christian female in her forties

Is coveting just about material possessions? Is it wrong to look at someone and wish you had their patience, dedication to prayer or perseverance? The list could go on...

Business

Christian female in her forties

It is human to want something you'd like to have and your moral compass points you to the things that you can have that are not harming or affecting someone else in a negative way. So, of the things mentioned, the answer is 'No' because I have what I want and I am rich for it.

Education

Non-Christian female in her forties

I certainly don't struggle with wanting someone else's wife! As for the rest, truthfully, only very occasionally – I've been richly blessed with material wealth and am very content with my lot. I do sometimes covet someone else's job.

Health

Christian female in her forties

I think I probably struggle with all the commandments at various times, to varying degrees, but this is not a big one for me really. I'm not particularly worried about stuff.

Education

Christian male in his forties

²⁰The young man said, "I have obeyed all of these. What else must I do?"

There's an underlying belief that brings out this question and that is that it's possible to work your way into heaven. The rich young man simply wants to make sure that he's done enough. All of the world's great religions – and I call them great not because they are true, but simply because they have so many adherents – are like this.

Islam teaches that Muslims must practise five things – the Five Pillars of Islam - to find favour with God. Hinduism teaches that Hindus have a duty to conduct themselves in certain ways if they want to be in accord with the order that makes life and the universe possible. One major branch of Buddhism teaches that the aim for human beings is to cease to exist, because when you do this you will no longer experience the cycle of suffering and rebirth, and people can do that by living lives that get progressively better each time you are reincarnated.

If you listen carefully at funerals and read the death notices in the paper you realise that most Kiwis believe they'll make it to heaven if they refrain from doing a whole lot of bad stuff, as long as they religiously stick to a self-made list of do's and don'ts.

But Christianity is different because the Bible teaches us we can never be good enough for a perfectly holy God.

Do versus Done

According to Bill Hybels, who was the main contributor to the *Just Walk Across the Room* series, this is the most simple and succinct tool there is for telling others about Christ. It gets right to the heart of the issue so many people are concerned about. That is, it addresses the question of what part our own efforts play in attaining God's salvation.

Since this illustration is verbal, without any need for props or visual aids, it's a good one to use in ordinary conversations, especially if someone asks you if you're religious!

"First you've got to realise the difference between religion and Christianity. Religion is spelled 'D-O', because it consists of the things people *do* to try to somehow gain God's forgiveness and favour.

"But the problem is that you never know when you've done enough. It's like being a salesman who knows he must meet a quota but is never told what it is. You can never be sure that you've actually done enough. Worse yet, the Bible tells us (in Romans 3:23) that we can *never* do enough. We'll always fall short of God's perfect standard.

"But thankfully, Christianity is spelled differently. It's spelled 'D-O-N-E', which means that what we could never do for ourselves, Christ has already done for us. He lived the perfect life we could never live, and he willingly died on the cross to pay the penalty we owed for the wrongs we've done.

"To become a real Christian is to humbly receive God's gift of forgiveness and to commit to following his leadership. When we do that, he adopts us into his family, and begins to change us from the inside out."

The rich young man believed he could work his way into heaven by treating other people right, but then Jesus hit him where it hurts: "If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you own! Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and be my follower." When the young man heard this, he was sad, because he was very rich.

"You cannot be the slave of two masters! You will love one more than the other or be more loyal to one than the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

Last week, Brian Andrew shared some stories with us of people becoming Christians after he and his wife, Moira, shifted into the centre of Brisbane. What I noticed most of all about the stories he shared was how conversion led to a radical transformation in the way people spent their money. This is how it should be - the way we spend our money is a key indicator of a transformed life.

Jesus said to his disciples, "It's terribly hard for rich people to get into the kingdom of heaven! ²⁴ In fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God's kingdom."

It's really interesting to read all the possible explanations for this statement of Jesus. Some people believe the "Eye of the Needle" was a narrow gateway into Jerusalem or Damascus. It was very small and easy to defend. It allowed after-hours entrance into the city without leaving the city open to attack. Since camels were heavily loaded with goods and riders, they would need to be unloaded in order to pass through. Therefore, the analogy is that a rich person would have to similarly unload their material possessions in order to enter heaven.



Other people believe a translation mistake has been made and that 'kamilos' meaning 'knot' has been mistaken for 'kamelos' which means camel. That would have Jesus saying it's easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.

However, I think the most likely explanation is that Jesus was using hyperbole, a figure of speech that exaggerates for emphasis, to make his point – Jesus used this technique at other times, referring to a 'plank' in one's eye (Matthew 7:3-5) and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24).



Verse 26

“There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything.”

Some people come to Jesus because they're sick and need healing. Some people come to Jesus because they're broken and need mending. Some people come to Jesus because they're blind and he enables them to see. Some people come to Jesus because their hearts are flooded by the love of the Father. Some people come to Jesus because the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to them. There are plenty of different ways to reach God, but they only get there if they go through Jesus.

How many people here have a friend they care about and would love to see become a follower of Jesus?

The longer you're a Christian the less likely you are to have friends who aren't Christians, especially if you're in a home group and most of your friendship group is part of it. (That's not a criticism of home groups, it's an observation about home groups).

How many people here have a family member they care about and would love to see become a follower of Jesus? How about a workmate or a neighbour?

Keep your hand up if you sometimes find it hard to see how this person will ever find their way to Jesus?

To give us hope, we have to remind ourselves that God can do anything. Down through the centuries, the 2000 years of human history since Jesus ascended to heaven, God has been transforming the lives

of individual in truly amazing ways. If someone you care about isn't a follower of Jesus yet I want to encourage you to pray that God will open their minds to the truth about Jesus and soften their hearts to the love of the Father. When you do, you'll be working in tandem with the Holy Spirit to bring about eternal change in the lives of people you care about.

²⁷ Peter replied, "Remember, we have left everything to be your followers! What will we get?"

²⁸ Jesus answered:

"Yes, all of you have become my followers. And so in the future world, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, I promise that you will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹All who have given up home or brothers and sisters or father and mother or children or land for me will be given a hundred times as much. They will also have eternal life. ³⁰But many who are now first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Peter asks Jesus a perfectly understandable question – "What's in this for me?" The underlying concern that brings out this question is one of risk and reward. If I'm going to give up certain privileges and pleasures during my time on earth there had better be something that makes it all worthwhile in the future. And Jesus promises there is. There's a link between how much we're prepared to give him on earth and how much he'll bless us with for eternity.

So what does this mean for you? What will you take away and ponder from this encounter?

Heidi has printed the following points in the newsletter so you can reflect on them this week:

- Christianity is a religion, but its point of difference is that all the hard work has been done for us.
- This life matters. Some of the choices we make while we're on earth have consequences that last for eternity.
- Evangelism must meet people where they're at in order for it to be effective.
- Soul winners are not just soul winners because of what they know, but because of who they know and how well they know them.
- Religion is spelled D-O. Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E.
- God can do anything and he wants to reveal Jesus to people you and I care about.
- People come to know God, through Jesus, in a variety of ways.
- The way we spend our money is a key indicator of a transformed life.
- The rich young man was a seeker of truth, he realised there had to be a link between his belief and his behaviour, and he had the integrity to walk away from Jesus when he realised he loved money more than truth.
- The rewards for faithful Christian living are out of this world!

Question for discussion:

If someone asked you what they had to do to get eternal life what would you say?