

Found: When Ordinary People Meet Jesus – Jesus and the Materialist

Matthew 19:16-26

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Now let me say once again how pleased we are that you're here with us this evening, especially if you're here at the invitation of a friend. As you may know, we've been thinking on these Sunday nights about encounters between Jesus and some of the ordinary people that He meets in the Gospel records. Last week we looked together at the account of Jesus meeting with the woman at the well. Her heart was longing, we saw, for satisfaction and security and peace, but she'd been looking for those things in all the wrong places. She'd been trying to find her security and her identity in a string of relationships with men and each relationship, of course, failed to provide. Jesus showed her, however, that He offered her something quite different, something really satisfying. He called it streams of living water welling up within to eternal life. Knowing and believing in Jesus nourishes the soul, satisfies, in a way that nothing else can.

Tonight we're going to think about someone else who was also looking for eternal life in all the wrong places, not this time in a string of romantic relationships but this time in money and in material prosperity. Here's what happens when Jesus meets a materialist. So let me invite you if you would please to take a copy of the Bible which you'll find in the pockets in the pews in front of you, and to turn with me in the Scriptures to page 824, page 824. About halfway down the right-hand column you'll see the story of the rich young man beginning there in verse 16 and we're going to read together from verse 16 through verse 26 over on the opposite page. Before we do that, it is our normal practice to pause briefly and to ask for God to help us to understand His Word. So would you bow your heads please with me as we pray? Let's pray together.

Our Father, we pray that You would send us the Holy Spirit to open the Bible so that we might understand, so that we might see ourselves as we really are, and then we pray that You would use the Bible to show us Christ, the only Savior that our hearts need; one who is suitable to us, able to meet our need, able to save to the uttermost all who come to God by Him. And then would You be pleased to draw us, all of us, back to rest on Christ as He comes to us and speaks to us in His holy Word. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Matthew's Gospel, chapter 19, reading from verse 16:

And behold, a man came up to him, (that is, to Jesus) saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for you had great possessions.

And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Tonight we meet a person who Matthew describes, if you look down at verse 22, you see this in verse 22, he describes him both as a young man and a rich man. He's also a rich young man who is looking for answers. His heart aches. He wants something he has so far been unable to find. Verse 16, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Verse 20, "What do I still lack? I'm lacking something, Jesus. Can you help me?" He wants Jesus to show him the way to life. And what I want to do with you tonight for the next few minutes is to walk through Jesus' answers to this young man's questions as He shows him two ways that won't work, in verses 16 to 22, and then at the end I want to show you the one way that will work in 23 to 26. Two ways that won't work and one way that will.

I. Two Ways that Won't Work

The Way of Moral Performance

First of all, the two ways that won't work. The first way Jesus shows him that won't work is the way of moral performance. The way of moral performance. This wealthy young man had everything he needs materially but spiritually he is bankrupt and he knows it. And so he comes to Jesus to discover what to do about it. I came across some fascinating research recently. In one study the researchers tested a group of eighteen year olds and then retested them twelve

years later. They were asked to rank the importance of different goals - jobs, money, status on the one side; self-acceptance, fellow feeling, belonging on the other. Then they were given standard diagnostic tests to identify mental health problems. At the ages of both eighteen and thirty, materialistic people were more susceptible to disorders. But if in the period between the tests they became less materialistic, they became happier.

In another study, psychologists followed Icelanders, weathering their own country's economic collapse. Some people, in the wake of that collapse, became more materialistic in a hope of regaining lost economic ground while others less materialistic and turn from money instead to family and community life. And the first group reported lower levels of wellbeing while the second higher levels. George Monbiot, who's commenting on these findings, says, "These studies, while suggestive, demonstrate only correlation." So there's a correlation, a relationship, between materialism and well-being but not necessarily causation. But then he says the researchers put a group of adolescents through a church program. "Ah ha! Here it is," you say. "Here's the hard religious cell now!" They put a group of adolescents through a church program designed to steer children away from spending and towards sharing and saving, and what do you know, the self-esteem of the materialistic kids on the program rose significantly while that of the materialistic children in the control group fell, those who had little interest in materialism before the program experience no change in self-esteem. So there you have it. Send them to church to learn how to be nice and self-esteem will begin to rise. You'll like yourself better. You see the equation: Materialism - bad; it makes you crazy. Learning how to share and care at church - good; it makes you think of yourself more highly.

I rather suspect that when the man in our passage tonight came to Jesus looking for eternal life, he was anticipating a solution like that last one - a church program to help him be nicer. That's the assumption, certainly, behind the way he frames the question in verse 16, isn't it? Look at it; verse 16 - "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He's young and rich and soul-sick, and the assumption behind his question is that the solution to his soul-sickness is a moral one. "What good deed must I *do* to have eternal life?" And that, I think, is quite often how we expect Jesus or the church to respond to us with our questions. We think the answer's got to be something for us to do, some duty for us to perform, some moral code to maintain in order to gain acceptance with God.

Consistent keeping of the Commandments?

Well if you think that way I'm confident you'll find Jesus' reply to this young man's question really quite surprising. Would you look at it with me? Verses 17 to 20 please. He starts out, doesn't He, with a sharp rebuke. "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good." Right away the young man is being reminded that goodness is a standard attained perfectly in only one place - in God Himself. God is good. That's the standard, the very character of

God. It's a warning. If you think to find a way to heaven on the basis of your own goodness, it had better measure up. The standard is God's own moral perfections. And with that rather solemn warning in place, He then tells the young man, in effect, to go ahead and give it his best shot. "If you really think your obedience can perfectly reflect God's goodness, well, have at it! If you would enter life, keep the commandments." It's at this point that the young man's *chutzpah* really starts to show through, don't you think? He's not at all put off by Jesus' rebuke. In fact, he says rather boldly, "Well which commandments do you have in mind?" Rather cocksure. So Jesus directs him to the Ten Commandments specifically.

Look at the passage. Commandments 6, 7, 8, 9 and 5, in that order. If you were to go back to Exodus chapter 20 where the commandments were first given, you would see them all there in that order - Commandments 6, 7, 8, 9 and 5. And then He adds the Golden Rule as a sort of summary of the second half of the Ten Commandments from Leviticus 19:18 - "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Now in all likelihood, this young man may well have been looking for some extraordinary work to do, perhaps some unusual act of sacrifice, something that would demand unusual and uncommon moral courage perhaps. That's what he's thinking Jesus is going to give him. But what he gets instead is the good old Ten Commandments, and he is not impressed. In fact, he may even have been a little relieved. Verse 20, "All these I have kept." He's a good guy - moral, upstanding. He does not think ill of others. He doesn't hold bitterness in his heart towards them. He's not a liar. His word is his bond. He is not sexually promiscuous; he's not sleeping around. He loves mom and dad. He's a good guy. But no sooner do the words escape his lips then he immediately feels them ringing hollow. He feels their inadequacy, doesn't he? "All these I have kept. What still do I lack? It's not working. Life is not mine. My morality is not leveraging the blessing and favor of God. What do I still lack?"

Striving in Vain

Rather skillfully, carefully, Jesus is leading this young man to see the futility of his morality, isn't He? The way of moral performance cannot leverage from God eternal life. There is only one who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments, but your commandment keeping better measure up to the standard and God's goodness stands alone. You can never measure up that way. Isn't that a surprising answer from Jesus? Don't you expect Him to recruit this young man? After all, he's young and he's rich and he's good - the complete package! An energetic moralistic with money to burn. We expect Jesus to plug him into the church program quick-smart to learn how to be nice with all the other kids. What we don't expect for Jesus to say to us is, "You know what, no matter how hard you try you will never, never, never be good enough to earn eternal life. Never. The way of moral performance does not work."

The Way of Material Prosperity

And then Jesus moves on. If the way of moral performance doesn't work, what about the way of material prosperity? Moral performance, now material prosperity, secondly. These are the two go-to methods for this young man. He wants life, abundant life, eternal life, and he's been looking for it morally but he's also been looking for it in his materialism. He seems to grasp, at this point at least, that the way of morality is futile; it's a dead end. What about the way of materialism. Look at verses 20 to 22 please. "What do I still lack?" That's his question of Jesus. Listen to the answer. "If you would be perfect, go sell what you possess and give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. And then come and follow me." It must have hit this young man like a thunderclap. "Sell it all, give it away, follow me." That's pretty radical, isn't it? "Sell it all, give it away, follow me."

Why is Jesus being so radical? Well part of the answer actually has to do with the Ten Commandments that He has quoted earlier. What Jesus didn't say at that earlier point in the conversation was just as important as what He did say. You see, the Ten Commandments are divided into two sections - the first four commandments deal with our love to God and the second six that Jesus has quoted to the rich young man, the second six deal with our love of neighbor which is why Jesus appeals to Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," as a summary of them. When Jesus quoted from the final six commandments, however, He omitted the last commandment all together - "You shall not covet." And He did so for a reason. It turns out that that is the one area of this young man's life where he is unwilling to submit to God. And so in verse 21 Jesus circles back around and puts His finger right there on his materialism, on his love of money, on his covetousness. And as He does, He exposes its terrible and enslaving power. And the young man, confronted with a choice between following Jesus or the love of his money, verse 22, "went away sorrowful." He was grieved and he left. Either Jesus or money; that's the choice set before him. "Sell it all, give it away, follow me." Either Jesus or money. And he chose money.

A Slave to the Superficial

With a single blow, do you see Jesus has unmasked the superficiality of this young man's earlier confidence that he had kept the Ten Commandments after all? His love of money actually had not only broken the last six commandments dealing with the love of neighbor but had in fact risen so far as to break the first four commandments as well dealing with our love for God. His money, you see, has become for him an idol, a false god, to which he has devoted his whole life. His covetous heart means he'd rather pursue money than follow Jesus Christ. He worships another god; he breathes out another name in devotion. His eyes are filled with the images of a different deity. His time is spent chasing it more and more. He wants money. He's a materialist. And so with Jesus' summons to him, do you see, "Go sell it all, give it away, and follow me," the twin solutions to

which this rich young man had so far been turning to find life, abundant life, satisfying life, eternal life, have been shown for the bankrupt things they always were. His morality and his materialism, they come crashing down like a house of cards. Not only is the way of moral performance futile, so is the way of material prosperity. You can neither earn nor buy your way into acceptance with God. If you look to your wealth for your peace and your rest and for ultimate satisfaction in your life, you have made of your money an idol and you will find in the end it will let you down. It will never give what only Jesus really offers. So here are the two ways that won't work. If you're looking for life, abundant life, eternal life, you won't find it by being good enough. You can't be good enough. Only God is good like that. And you won't find it by means of riches. Your riches, actually, in the end will enslave you as an idol. They will never set you free.

II. One Way that Will Work

But then finally, Jesus tells us the one way that will work. Two ways that won't; one way that will. The young man leaves sorrowfully, doesn't he? He loves his money. And then Jesus turns to His disciples and says, verse 23, "Truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." There's grief in the Savior's voice as He watches this young man turn his back on Him and walk away. And the disciples, for their part, are quite dismayed at Jesus' statement. For them, you see, and for the culture they inhabited, riches were one of if not *the* great evidence that God loved you, that you were in God's favor if you were prosperous and wealthy. And so they're thinking, "If the rich have a hard time entering the kingdom of God, well what hope is there for the rest of us? If they've got a problem, then who can be saved?" That's their concern.

But look at verse 26. Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, you're quite right, with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Jesus called a rich man to follow Him and he left to pursue his riches instead. It's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But there is hope. And that hope does not lie in you and it does not lie in me and it doesn't lie in Jesus, the Teacher, either. That's how the rich man approached Christ, wasn't it, back in verse 16? "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" If you come to Jesus as a teacher looking for instruction, you will never have eternal life. That's not what Jesus offers; not instruction merely. It's not why He came. I think we sometimes approach life like a piece of self-assemble furniture. You buy a new chest of drawers, let's say. It comes in those great big cardboard flat-packs. You've got the tools, you've got the basic idea, you've got the elbow grease to get the job done. All you need now is the instruction booklet which you're hoping isn't in Japanese, and you can take it from here. Right? You can do it; all you need is for Jesus to be an instruction booklet, to give you direction, and you can

take it from here. “Good teacher, what must I do?” No, no, that won’t work. “Good teacher, what must I do?” That won’t work!

A Call to follow Christ

“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Follow me,” Jesus told the rich young man. “Leave your money.” Why? “Because I’m more than enough for your heart. I am more than enough for your heart. I will do for you what neither your morality nor your material prosperity can ever do. The God who is so good that you will never measure up to His standards is also so loving that He will stoop down to do it for you in Me!” That’s what Jesus is saying. If you try to DIY your life, you will ruin it for time and eternity. “Let Me. Let Me. With God all things are possible. Follow Me. Come to Me.” That’s His message. The good God, the holy God, whose commands truth be told you and I break all the time, every day, gives us as a gift what we scurry around trying to earn and buy for ourselves, and He does it in Jesus Christ. When Jesus called the young man with that radical summons to leave it all and follow Him, it was not a call to monastic, aesthetic, self-denial. It was a call to find at last what he’s always been looking for in all the wrong places. “Follow Me. I’m the one you need,” Jesus is saying.

I wonder if tonight you too will go away sorrowful because you much prefer your own efforts and the security of your pet idols. Or I wonder if you will enter life, abundant life, eternal life, the kingdom of God, here, right here tonight, not by your own works but by faith in Jesus Christ. He wants you to trust Him, to follow Him. He will do it because you cannot. If you have questions and you’d like to talk about it, I’ll be down front after the service and I’d love to chat with you and talk through some of the issues. Alternatively, as Billy pointed out at the beginning of the service, you can fill out the response page in the bulletin and tear it off and leave it in the baskets at the door before you go home and we’ll get in touch that way. But more than anything else, I want you to know that we are praying for you that you will not go away tonight sorrowful, choosing your bankrupt best efforts and your lifeless heart idols instead of Jesus Christ when it’s Jesus you most urgently need. Won’t you come to Jesus and trust in Him? Will you pray with me please?

O our Father, we confess to You how prone we are to run to all kinds of other things, to our moral performance and to our material prosperity to satisfy, when in truth only Jesus will do. Please help all of us, every one of us, to get real about our own hearts and to run to Christ to see that what He offers is worth more than all the riches we might every attain, worth relinquishing them all to obtain Him, that He will do what nothing else can. He will satisfy and save. So draw us to Him, we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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