

Session 2

THE RICH YOUNG RULER

Luke 18:18-34

Memory Verse

Jesus said, “How hard 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.”

– LUKE 18:24B-25, CSB

The Rich Young Ruler

THEOLOGICAL THEME: It is impossible for sinful man to earn eternal life by his own merits. As an x-ray machine reveals the cancerous tumor, but can do nothing to cure it; so the Law of God reveals the sinful heart of man, but it does not cure the sinful heart.

❓ Have you ever put your whole heart and ability into completing a task, but in the end came up short?

❓ What was the task? Why were you unable to complete it?

Today's passage is about the effort to complete an impossible task. When a rich ruler came and questioned Jesus about inheriting eternal life, Jesus led him to see that he must perfectly and perpetually keep the Law of God.

Of course, the rich ruler was not able and never would be able to do so from that day forward. We simply don't have the ability. As an illustration of this predicament, let's say that someone has a mango and they accidentally drop it in the dirt. It's not a big deal to simply pick it up and wash off the dirt with fresh water. Now, let's say that someone else has a mango and they cut it open to prepare it for eating. But, when they slice through it they find that the interior is putrid, rotten to the core. Maggots are already eating away at the flesh and it smells terrible. There's no washing it off

because it is filthy to the core. It is ruined. The heart of all people is like the second mango. Our hearts aren't like a mango that has been dropped in the dirt and needs to be washed in the water. Our hearts are like a mango that has been eaten by maggots and has rotted to the core, through and through. Our hearts don't need washing. They need replacing (Ezek. 36).

This is what Jesus wanted the rich ruler (and us) to understand. He was holding up the mirror of the Law to show those who are clean in their own eyes that they are not washed of their filth (Prov. 30:12).

Session Summary

In this passage Luke described an encounter between Jesus and a rich ruler. It isn't altogether clear whether the rich ruler came to Jesus with genuine humility and desire to learn or if he had ill will toward Christ and was a part of a scheme to trap him. Yet, Jesus knew and was intent on exposing this man's desperate need of a Savior.

This lesson is hard medicine if you come with a stiffened neck having convinced yourself that you are basically a good person and that God will accept you because you have lived an upright life. If you are planning to enter into heaven by your own efforts, then you will likely feel offended by today's study. But this is a great mercy if this offense will lead you to repentance. It is better to be offended for a time now, than to be condemned for an eternity after this life.

Another way to examine the account of the rich ruler is to consider the root of one's salvation. Do you believe that you will go to heaven? If so, on what basis does that belief rest? In other words, why would God allow you to enter into His heavenly kingdom? What is the root of your profession of faith and hope of heaven? Is the root of your hope for heaven and assurance of salvation the blood of Christ alone; or do you add something of your own to it? If you mix anything of your own with the blood of Christ, then you spoil it. Christ will be a complete Savior to you, or He will be no Savior at all.

1. A Critical Question (Luke 18:18-20)

In verse 18, we read that the rich ruler came to Christ and asked Him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

? Why is it important that every person ask this question? How have you wrestled with this question in your own life?

The question of how a person might be right with God and enjoy the benefits of eternal life and entrance into the kingdom of God is the most important question any person can ask. The lawyer (Luke 10), the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2:37), and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30) all asked this same question. It is a crucial question for two reasons. First, everyone must find a way to be made fit for heaven. No one comes into the world ready for heaven. No one is born in right standing with the one true and living God.

Second, no one has the answer to this question inside of themselves. The way of salvation has been revealed, written down, and preserved for us today in the sacred Scriptures. It is not, however, found in your heart; it cannot be worked out in your mind. You can't discover the way of life by looking inward or reflecting deeply. Now, the world will tell you differently. The world will tell you to follow your heart; to find your truth; to make your own way; to become your authentic self. This advice is disastrous for this life and the next. Why? Because your heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). Why would you follow a guide like that? There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end of it is death (Prov. 14:12).

? Why do you think Jesus quoted from the Law? What purpose does the Law of God serve in the life of a Christian?

Jesus led the rich ruler to the Law of God for this reason: the Law serves as a mirror by which one can see clearly. The Law of God reveals both the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. It shows us God's holiness because the holiness, goodness,

and purity of the Law is a reflection of the nature of the One who gave that Law. God is light. There isn't a trace of darkness in Him. He is clothed in righteousness, goodness, and purity. He is perfectly holy.

But the Law doesn't only show us God's holiness; it also reveals to us our wickedness. A regularly worn white shirt seems white enough until you set it next to a brand new, never before worn, unsoiled shirt. It's then that you realize that the old shirt you've been wearing is more yellow than white, and those stains are much deeper than you realized.

Your conduct, words, and thoughts may seem good enough when you compare yourself to those around you. You'll always be able to find someone to point the finger at and say, "Look what he has done!" But this isn't the standard against which we are commanded to measure ourselves. When you set your life against the divine measuring stick; when you bring your case before God's judgment seat, it's then that you realize that your good works are more like filthy rags, your stains are much deeper and darker than you ever imagined and your offenses against your creator are deserving of severe punishment.

 **Application: Why is it important to recognize the ways we have broken God's Law? How is our relationship with Him inhibited if we are unwilling to do so?**

2. The Ruler's Confidence and Christ's Scalpel (Luke 18:21-22)

The rich ruler responded, "And he said, 'All these I have kept from my youth.'"

 **How did the man show that he had missed Jesus' point by his response?**

Christ held up the mirror of the Law and it revealed this man's sinfulness, but not in the way we might expect. The list of commands didn't cause the rich ruler to realize his sin and confess it. What was the sin of the rich ruler? Was he sinful? His own testimony was that he was without sin. But he was indeed sinful. In fact, he was shown to be guilty of the most heinous and grievous of sins: self-righteousness. He believed that he would enter into heaven through his own efforts. The root of his hope was his good works.

It isn't difficult to know that this man was wrong and that he had broken the Law. For one, Jesus exposed his sin, which we'll see in a moment. But even without the rest of the story, we know that this man had sinned against God because the Scriptures tell us plainly that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), there is none righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10), and that if anyone does claim to be without sin he is deceiving himself (1 John 1:8). Our hearts are deceitful, and the most damaging lie that your heart will tell you is that you are basically a good person. There are many who are clean in their own eyes but are not washed of their filth.

? How did Christ respond to the rich ruler's self-righteous confidence? Why might His response be surprising?

Luke reported that when Jesus heard the rich ruler's response, he said to him, "You still lack one thing: Sell all you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Although Jesus knew that this rich ruler had not kept God's Law perfectly, He didn't argue with him about this self-deception. Instead, He took out His scalpel in order to peel back the facade of righteousness and expose the rich ruler's rotten interior. What did Christ expose? He exposed this man's idolatry. The rich ruler worshiped his wealth and was not willing to turn from it. In Exodus 20:3, we read the first command of the Ten Commandments. It is this: "You shall have no other gods before me." Jesus masterfully exposed the rich ruler's secret god that he adored and worshiped—his money.

? What was Jesus' point? What was He trying to communicate to the rich ruler?

Jesus was saying this: “Those who enter into heaven on their own merits can only do so through a life of perfect and perpetual obedience to God’s Law.” Jesus’ aim was to cause the rich ruler to see that he didn’t qualify and he could never qualify to enter heaven by his own merits. Similarly, Jesus’ aim today through His Word is to help you see that you don’t qualify and can never qualify for righteousness by your own merits.

So, what do we do? Who can be saved? If no one qualifies for heaven by their own merits, then all are lost. We have seen that the door of the self-righteous is closed to us. The sinners’ door, however is open. Only the humble, those who are stripped of self-righteousness, who put no confidence in their works, can enter it. The rest are too proud. No one will ever enter heaven by his or her own merits. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Those who come to Him humbly, repentant, and seeking mercy will enter on His merits.

 **Application: On whose merits do you seek to enter heaven? What needs to change so that you aren’t seeking to earn salvation through your own efforts?**

3. The Rich Ruler’s Sadness (Luke 18:23-34)

 **How did the rich man ultimately respond? How are we all faced with the same decision as this man?**

Verse 23 reads, “After he heard this, he became extremely sad, because he was very rich.” His god was too precious to him. He would not leave it for Christ.

? Why are all who seek salvation outside of Jesus ultimately left sad? How is ultimate joy found in Him, even as we realize our own efforts will fail us?

Those who have an abundance of material wealth often are blind to their spiritual needs. To place that wealth under the lordship of Christ proves a higher price than many wealthy people are willing to pay. Jesus used the illustration of something that was impossible from a human perspective—a camel going through the eye of a needle—to emphasize that wealthy people had extreme difficulty in choosing to follow Him. To come to Christ, one must recognize one’s personal need and then be willing to trust one’s life to Christ.

Jesus told the disciples that what is impossible with man is possible with God (v. 27). The fact is that those who come to Christ for mercy may enter the kingdom, but it will only be through this sinner’s door. There is a Shepherd there who keeps it. He calls to his own and his own follow His voice. This Shepherd has laid down His life for the sheep, so that the sheep may come into the sheepfold. Are you one of His sheep? If you are, then this message is a cause for rejoicing for you, for you know the rest and joy that is found on the path toward the sinner’s door.

Following Jesus provides no protection against suffering, but the reward includes eternal life. The rich ruler sought this but walked away from it. The greatest gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ. Jesus gave all He had for our sake. How could we hold anything back from Him?

? Application: What path are you currently seeking to be made right with God? How is He speaking to you about that today?

Conclusion

Like the rich ruler in this passage, we all need eternal life. The problem is, however, that neither the rich ruler nor we could ever meet the standard laid out in God's Law. But those who come to Christ humbly for mercy will find it.

 Where have you sought eternal life? How have you been challenged or encouraged in this today?

 Why is it important to know God's Word to learn both the truth of His Law and His means of salvation? How can we encourage one another in this practice?

 Who do you need to tell about salvation that is found in Jesus alone?

CHRIST CONNECTION: The Law is unable to make a hell-bound soul fit for heaven, but the atoning sacrifice of Christ is an effectual remedy.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Those who desire to show love to their neighbor and to make a lasting impact on the world labor to spread the gospel to sin-sick souls. All other efforts, as noble as they may be, are ultimately meaningless if they are not paired with the saving work of Christ on the cross.



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Last Supper

Main Passages

- Luke 22:14-23; 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

Session Outline

1. The Significance of the Supper (Luke 22:14-23)
2. Worthy Recipients of the Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-32)
3. The Purpose of the Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

Memorize

Jesus said, "How hard 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."

- Luke 18:24b-25, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Luke 18:1-8
- Tuesday - Luke 18:9-14
- Wednesday - Luke 18:15-17
- Thursday - Luke 18:18-23
- Friday - Luke 18:24-34
- Saturday - Luke 18:35-43