

Week 4 – The Rich, Young Ruler – Luke 18:18-27

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:17-20

Introduction

As we begin to consider our passage this morning you will undoubtedly notice that the account it contains is very much like the account we looked at last week when we considered Jesus' interaction with the expert in the Law

In fact, these two accounts are so similar that I seriously considered only preaching on one of them

But then I realized that the two accounts are also very different in some key aspects and that we might profit from studying both of them

Each of the accounts we are studying in this series represents a type of person or situation which we might expect to encounter in our efforts to share the gospel

And the differences we find, even between accounts that are quite similar, serve to instruct us as we seek to tailor our approach to the gospel with each individual in the hope of making our interactions as effective as possible

Last week, when we considered the expert in the Law I said he was an insincere challenger as he approached Jesus

I based that characterization on the fact that our text said that he asked his question about inheriting eternal life to "test" Jesus and that he asked his question about identifying his neighbor to "justify" himself

That man represents the type of person who is quite intellectual and who uses their knowledge to search for loopholes to exploit in order to rationalize and excuse themselves

And their tactic is to win over any challenger by the force and logic of their arguments

That isn't to say that this type of person is especially evil and the reality is that we need to be careful to make certain the person we see reflected in the mirror isn't guilty of this exact same behavior on some issue or another

Because it's a tendency that we are all prone to

I believe it would be accurate to say that we all at one time or another have found ourselves trying to modify one or another of God's commands to make them more attainable so that we might justify ourselves rather than admitting we fail to live up to them

And it seems that the more knowledgeable we become the greater the tendency we have to search for nuances and exceptions in God's Word that we hope to use to get us off the hook, so to speak

But in our text this morning we are going to see a situation that is significantly different even though the initial question that is asked by both men is exactly the same great question, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

And we'll see that, even though Jesus responded to each of them in a very similar manner by refusing to directly and plainly answer their question, that his responses were uniquely tailored to address each man's need

Likewise, we need to be sensitive as we try to discern where each person is so that we can adapt and shape our approach so that it is most beneficial in pointing them to the cross

If you are taking notes, we will begin by looking at the aspirant, or the questioner, to see what we can learn about him

Next, we will see how Jesus approached his situation and in Roman numeral three we will see how we can apply what we see Jesus doing to our own evangelistic efforts

If you haven't already done so let me encourage you to open your Bible to Luke 18 and to follow along as I read our passage in its entirety [**Luke 18:18-27**]

And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 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." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But he said, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

Let's begin to dig into the passage by considering this man who our text refers to as a "ruler"

I. The Aspirant

We can't be certain as to what kind of ruler this man was –

We don't know whether he was a ruler in the sense of civil government or a religious ruler in the synagogue

But what we do know is that he was a person of some position of authority and, likely, the respect that goes with it

Because Matthew, in his account of this meeting, provides us with the detail that he was a young man [**Matthew 19:22**] showing that he achieved his status early in life

Luke also reveals that he was wealthy – actually Luke says he was, "*extremely rich*"

That's why most of the time you will hear this man referred to as the "rich, young ruler" in Christian circles

Mark adds the detail in his account [**Mark 10:17**] that this young ruler "*ran up and knelt before*" Jesus to ask his question

And that tells us that this young man was both eager and respectful when approaching Jesus

Unlike the expert in the Law who we looked at last week this young fellow was truly seeking insight from Jesus on the matter of how he might obtain eternal life

We can easily picture such a person – a successful, respectable, and respectful young man with demonstrated leadership qualities but still eager to learn from those he sees as his superiors

And that seems to be the way he viewed Jesus as addressed him with what appears to be the sincere but a bit over-the-top title of "*Good Teacher*"

Evidently, the young man recognized that Jesus was special because the title "Good Teacher" would not have normally been applied to a rabbi in Jesus' day

We don't think too much of calling a thing "good" today and the term actually has come to mean something may just be okay or merely satisfactory – "good" certainly doesn't mean "superlative" in today's vernacular

But in Jesus' day the Jews insisted on calling God alone "good" because to be good implied sinless perfection and complete and total goodness – it conveyed the idea of moral excellence

Jesus and everyone present would have immediately taken note of how the young man addressed Jesus but it appears to have been a genuine, sincere address that revealed his heart toward Jesus

We also see that this young man was the product of his environment in that he asked what he must **do** to inherit eternal life – after all the Mosaic Law was all about doing and not doing certain things

But it also reveals something of a questioning spirit regarding the Law because, while we see that he obviously knew the Law and believed he had obeyed the Law fully, he still wondered if that was sufficient to inherit eternal life

So it appears that he had a sincere desire to know how he might correct any deficiency he had contrary to the expert in the Law who was trying to discover just how little he could get by with doing while still satisfying God's demands enough to earn eternal life

In light of the apparent character of this young ruler and the sincerity with which he approached Jesus with his very important question we may well find Jesus' response to him puzzling and we might wonder why Jesus didn't just answer the question directly

So let's take some time to break down Jesus' approach to this young man and his question to see if we can determine what Jesus was trying to do

II. Jesus' Approach

Just as we saw last week, Jesus doesn't respond directly to the young man's very good and sincere question

Instead, he responds with a question of his own in **verse 19 [Luke 18:19]** –

And it's a question that seems to be a bit off-track – *"Why do you call me good?"*

Then in this instance, Jesus adds the statement – *"No one is good except God alone"* which is in line with Jewish thought of the meaning of the word "good"

You may well have read that question and statement and immediately figured that Jesus' response was just sort of a roundabout way of saying that he was God – and that interpretation seems plausible

But, I believe it had another, practical purpose regarding evangelism just as we saw with Jesus' questions for the lawyer last week

By responding as he did, Jesus was seeking to reveal the young man's heart and mind – primarily to the young man himself so that he might come to understand what he believed about what it means to be labeled "good"

Notice though that Jesus doesn't come at the young ruler head on with questions like, "Am I good?" or "Are you good?" or even "What does it mean to be called good?"

No, he asks him, *"Why do you call me good?"* and then explains the rationale behind his question with the statement, *"No one is good except God alone"*

He wanted the young ruler to come to the truth on his own and there was a great deal for him to think about in that very brief and almost non-sequitur response

Of course, Jesus was hinting at his divinity and we don't want to ignore that but that was only one of his purposes in responding as he did

In order to sufficiently answer Jesus' question the young ruler would have to come to grips with the true nature of "goodness" and what it meant to describe someone as "good"

And, if it's true that God alone is good, what does that reveal about mankind in our quest to be considered righteous?

Specifically, Jesus was attempting to get the young ruler to think about his own claim to be good and, if he discovered that he wasn't good in the sense that God is good, what are the consequences of that fact?

There was a great deal for the young man to wrestle with in Jesus' simple, short, seemingly oblique response

But Jesus didn't stop there as he went on to try to help the young man see his true condition before God and in **verse 20** he pointed to the part of the Law which deals with interpersonal, human relationships as he said **[Luke 18:20]** –

You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'

Jesus knew that, if the young man understood the true nature and requirements of these commands, he would readily admit that he fell short of meeting God's standard for goodness

But that's not what happened

As we have already seen, this young man was exemplary in his conduct and manner and he had no doubt spent his life trying to live up to these very commandments – and by human standards he had proven quite successful

And, unlike the religious expert from last week who knew he had a problem with loving people as God requires, Jesus' response that he had to live up to God's commandments actually excited him and gave him encouragement

Look at **verse 21** where we see his response – and I believe we can hear his words being uttered with a voice of victory [Luke 18:21] – *“All these I have kept from my youth.”*

I don't think this was mere hyperbole or puffery on his part but that he genuinely was relieved to hear Jesus say that what he had always done was enough to inherit eternal life

And in his response we see what I believe may be the most difficult type of person to reach with the gospel – the morally good person who has no glaring faults and who is praiseworthy – a person who is rightly respected by society

This young man, along with a great many people today, believed he was okay with God because he had kept God's commandments toward his fellow man as he understood them

Again, unlike the expert in the Law, this young man wasn't trying to modify and minimize God's requirements; he genuinely thought that he had always done what God's Law required

The problem was that he had a shallow understanding of the Law

He simply didn't see huge gulf between his perception of his own goodness and what the Law actually requires in order to be judged as good

As Jesus points out in his Sermon on the Mount, the Law is about far more than externals – the Law demands purity of the heart

Adultery is not just the outward act but includes the lust of the eyes that takes root in the heart; murder means more than simply the unjust taking of a human life but includes the thoughts and feelings that lead to murder; and so forth

The young man didn't fully understand the full measure of obedience that the commandments require so he mistakenly believed he had been successful in keeping them

And he missed the point that Jesus was making when he said that only God is good and he claimed goodness for himself. He was wrong but who could blame him for his inflated view of himself?

After all, according to a horizontal standard and by comparison with other people he was good and his status at a young age showed that others thought so too

But regardless of what he and others thought, he was still far from being good enough to satisfy God's Law

I want you to notice, though, that Jesus doesn't rebuke him or even mildly contradict his claim of goodness when it came to obeying the five commandments Jesus had mentioned

Jesus didn't tell him he was a sinner who deserved judgment and who needed to be forgiven

Instead, Jesus once again tried to steer the young man to where he could recognize for himself the true condition of his heart and how he fell short of God's perfect standard of goodness

When we look at a list of the Ten Commandments we notice that the first four commandments deal with mankind's relationship with God and the last six deal with mankind's relationship with each other

And Jesus began by telling the young man to obey the commandments that dealt with his relationship to other people which he mistakenly thought he was succeeding at doing

So Jesus now turns to the first set of commandments and challenges the young ruler concerning his relationship to God and in particular he challenged the young man to put God first

Jesus understood that the young man thought too much of his wealth and that his riches had become an idol of his heart so Jesus told him to sell all that he had and to distribute it to the poor

In so doing, Jesus pulled back the curtain and revealed the condition of this young ruler's heart and where his true devotion lay

As we read in verse 23 [Luke 18:23] that the young ruler went away "very sad" because he was "extremely rich"

Clearly he failed in his devotion to God and, in spite of his claims, he didn't really treat his fellow man all that well either because he shrank away from the thought of distributing his wealth to the poor

Obviously, he wasn't yet ready to face his deficiency and admit to his need as he slumped away

But the fact that he walked away saddened and not hardened was a good thing

Had Jesus attacked him head-on the young ruler might well have dug in his heels and declared his own righteousness to be sufficient

Instead, Jesus gave him something to ponder and the young man left with God-induced sorrow which would virtually ensure that he would indeed think about his conversation with Jesus and seek to discover what it meant

Clarifications

Before we move on to how we can apply what we see Jesus doing in his encounter with the rich, young ruler, I want to be sure that we understand a few things about this account

First, Jesus wasn't saying that if the young man were to sell his possessions and give them to the poor he would merit heaven

He was simply trying to show him the true condition of his heart in a tangible way so that he might recognize his desperate need and seek salvation

Second, we err if we seek to apply what Jesus said specifically to this young man to everyone

Nowhere does Jesus say that everyone who wishes to follow him must divest themselves of their possessions and in the pages of the New Testament we see several wealthy people who were devoted followers of Christ without getting rid of their money – and the same thing is still true today

Wealth need not be a barrier to faithful discipleship and, in many cases; it can be a real benefit to the cause of Christ

The third thing we need to understand is that we err if we believe that what Jesus tells this young man doesn't apply to anyone today

There are those who are burdened by their materialism and their devotion to their possessions and the best thing for them might well be to do just as Jesus commanded this young man

The apostle Paul wrote about getting rid of everything that held him back and we would be wise to do likewise whatever form those hindrances might take

But the bottom line is this: giving up one's wealth is not a ticket into heaven and each person's relationship to material things must be considered to determine if it is a hindrance to them and corrected if it proves to be so

In this account just as in the account where Jesus encountered the expert in the Law we see no clear, direct presentation of the gospel and we see the object of Jesus' encounter walk away without being saved

So what can we take from this account that we can use to evangelize like Jesus did and especially to those who are outwardly good and successful people?

III. Our Application

First, we see Jesus once again taking an indirect approach and asking questions rather than making overt statements

This approach will prove to be tremendously more effective because of the polarizing and entrenching effects direct statement can have on those we're trying to reach

It is far better to lead them to discover and to recognize their deficiencies and needs for themselves than to boldly tell them they are a sinner deserving God's wrath and doomed if they don't repent and accept the Savior

Conviction is an inside job so we must ask God to show us how to ask good questions that will lead people to a proper understanding so that they can come to feel a genuine sense of guilt and need of grace

But we must also be the kind of people who others will take the time to listen to

When the rich, young ruler ran up to Jesus and called him "Good Teacher" that wasn't simply a cultural *faux pas* or gross flattery

Jesus had the reputation as a skilled teacher and loving person who would freely engage with people to answer their questions and meet their needs

He was winsome and approachable and he didn't beat people up unnecessarily

And we need to be the kind of people who are respected and trusted by those around us so that they will feel safe coming to us with the questions of life allowing us to engage with them and to ask questions of our own

Second, we see Jesus taking a very "hands on" approach to evangelism that gets intimately involved in people's lives

If looking at how Jesus evangelized during his time on earth shows us anything it shows us that he cared about people enough to give of himself to them

He was willing to go to the places where they were and to spend time with them

He had a real interest in those he met and truly wanted to get to know them and the condition of their hearts

Jesus' form of evangelism is costly in the sense that it requires availability and time and it incurs the risk of getting intimately involved with people who have messy lives

Perhaps one of the most pressing needs – especially for "good" people – is giving those we are trying to reach a clear sense of the character of God

People today don't really understand sin – either in the sense of what constitutes sin or in how serious sin is

We tend to think of sin as a sort of minor character flaw that needs to be patched up or even a preference that may be okay for one person but not another and that God isn't really all that strict when it comes to certain sins

It's only as we come to clearly see what God's holiness and goodness means that we begin to see ourselves in comparison and, really, contrast

And Jesus sought to show the young ruler just who God is and what he expects and it brought the young man sorrow

Just as we see repeatedly in the pages of the Bible when people see Jesus in his exalted state of holiness and they immediately become aware of their own sinfulness

Lastly, we must sometimes wound those who we are trying to reach before they can see their need for healing

But when we must wound them we must be sure we are doing so in a spirit of love that has their best interest in view

I want you to notice what Mark says in his account of this meeting when Jesus has to wound this young man

Look with me at **Mark 10:21** – And Jesus, looking at him loved him and said to him...

Jesus knew his command was going to hurt the rich, young ruler but he also knew there is a world of difference between hurting someone and harming them and sometimes the only loving thing to do is to hurt so healing can take place

If and when we have to expose someone's heart idol or other sin issue or attitude that is keeping them from the Savior we need to do so as recipients of God's grace who know what it's like to be forgiven

We aren't told how Jesus' love was communicated to the young man but it was likely his posture, his expression, his tone of voice, as well as his words that let the man know he was loved in spite of the hard thing he was being told and the deficiency it exposed

Otherwise, I think we would probably read how he stormed off in anger rather than walked away with sorrow

Conclusion

The first two cases we looked at concerned women who were outcasts because society left them no doubt about their status – that **they had violated society's standards**

And it's usually a relatively easy matter to show such a person that **they also fall short of God's standard** and that they are **in need of the forgiveness the Savior offers**

It's considerably more difficult to get the socially acceptable or, in this case, the socially laudable to see the same thing

In fact, it's sometimes hard for us to remember that everyone who is unsaved is in the same position relative to God regardless of how well they appear and how well we think of them

After Jesus spoke of how difficult it is for the rich to enter heaven his disciples were a bit shocked because they, like us, tended to forget that truth so they asked, "Then who can be saved?"

They thought, as we so often do, that those who had been richly blessed by God with material things, a good reputation, and a high position; must be okay with God

So Jesus had to make clear once more that we cannot save ourselves and we can't buy our way into heaven with money or power or fame

Only God can get them to heaven by freeing them from the things that entangle them – and that includes those things we would normally consider to be blessings from God when they become idols of the heart

So, let's pray for God to give us his guidance as we seek to help others come to an understanding of their need just as he helped us come to an understanding of our own need

And let us be mindful of how he continues to convict us of those things we allow to take up residence on the throne of our hearts keeping us from enjoying the eternal quality of life that we, as Christians, should be enjoying right now

Let's pray