

**“The Problems of Possessions”**  
**Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom***  
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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**(Mt. 19:16-30)**

**Introduction.**

I’m a big fan of *The Lord of the Rings*, the trilogy of books written by J.R.R. Tolkien that was later made into a series of movies. In the story, the Ring of Power has magical qualities that allow its wearer to become invisible, among other things. Ironically, though, whoever possesses the Ring ultimately finds that the Ring possesses him, and the allure of its power becomes too great to resist. The more one wears it and experiences its power, the harder it is to remove it or to part with it.

There’s a scene in the book where Gandalf the wizard tells Frodo, who is the story’s hero, about the dangers he will face as the one who must bear the Ring of Power on a perilous journey. He warns Frodo of the great power the Ring has to possess the one who carries it. Frodo, of course, is skeptical. After all, it’s just a ring. So, as a test, Gandalf challenges him to throw the Ring into fire and try to destroy it.

“Try,” said Gandalf. “Try now!”

Frodo drew the Ring out of his pocket again and looked at it....The gold looked very fair and pure, and Frodo thought how rich and beautiful was its colour, how perfect was its roundness. It was an admirable thing and altogether precious. When he took it out he had intended to fling it from him into the very hottest part of the fire. But he found now that he could not do so, not without a great struggle. He weighed the Ring in his hand, hesitating, and forcing himself to remember all that Gandalf had told him. And then, with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away – but he found he had put it back in his pocket.

Gandalf laughed grimly. “You see?”

Why is it that our possessions cause us to become so attached to them, and why do we allow our possessions to begin to possess us, just like Frodo and the Ring? Think about your most prized possession. What is most valuable to you? Or what do you own which you think gives you status and prestige or helps you feel good about yourself?

Why is it that we allow these things to dictate so much of what we think about ourselves as it relates to our identity or our status in life? It's because there's a problem with possessions, and Jesus talked about this problem with a young man who was wealthy. Let's consider his story and see what we can learn from what Jesus said to him.

### **I. The Question of the Man.**

At first glance, the young man who came to Jesus was a person worthy of our respect. He greeted the Lord with abundant courtesy and called Him, "Teacher." In addition, his interest in spiritual matters is impressive. He came to Jesus in eager pursuit of spiritual help, and he was so anxious to gain "eternal life" he couldn't wait for a private conversation.

We should also note that he was a very moral person who was very ethical in every way. When Jesus reminded him of the commandments, he replied, "...all these I have kept." His life was visibly pure. He could sincerely say that he had been chaste, he was honest in business, he respected his parents, and he never slandered anyone. He was an out-and-out good guy! Verse 22 also tells us that he was a wealthy individual. When we look at the parallel accounts of the incident in the other gospels, we learn that the man was a ruler, and here Matthew tells us that he was young which makes his accomplishments all the more impressive.

What a catch for the Kingdom. He would be a candidate for "Convert of the Year"! He would be written up in all the Christian magazines, and he'd appear on all the Christian TV talk shows. He might even be a featured speaker at the Community Prayer Breakfast here in Winston-Salem! "Before Tim Keller comes to speak to us today, Mr. Rich Young Ruler will give his testimony." You and I would be so excited to see this man profess faith in Christ and join our church!

This man came to Jesus and asked Him, "What must I do to have eternal life?" That's a profound question. It's the most important question a person can ever ask.

### **II. The Response of Jesus.**

How would you have responded to this young man's inquiry? What would you have said to him? Here's an outstanding individual who is begging to get into heaven. I know what I would have done. I would have tried to come alongside the man, and I'd asked him some essential questions. I'd try to build a bridge to where he was and invite him to consider beginning a relationship with Jesus Christ, being very sensitive not to push too hard.

The irony of it all is that Jesus handled the situation in a manner that it precisely the opposite of how I would have done things. (Shows you what I know!) Jesus began with a rebuke – "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good." Then He went on the talk about the 10 Commandments of all

things. Finally, Jesus demanded immense sacrifice on the part of the man and said, "Come and follow Me." We might wonder, "What did Jesus think He is doing?" Did our Lord botch the job? Did He let the fish get away? I don't think so. Let's take a closer look.

The more closely we look at this young man, the more it becomes evident that there was something standing between him and his desire for eternal life. He was a person of great wealth, and when Jesus told him that he lacked one thing, that he must go and sell everything that he had and follow Christ, the text tells us he went away sad for he had many possessions.

The tragic decision to turn away reflected a greater love for the things he owned than for eternal life itself. Jesus saw more clearly into this man's heart than any of us could, and He put His finger on the sensitive spot in this man's heart that needed to be touched the most. The man's wealth and all it meant to him in terms of position, status, comfort, and security prevented him from gaining eternal life. How very tragic.

As the young man walked away, Jesus said to His disciples, "*How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of heaven. 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*" (vv.23,24). Why did Jesus say this?

The New Testament consistently warns of the dangers of wealth. Why do you think that is? There are at least 4 reasons. First, wealth has a way of giving you a false sense of security. We begin to think we've got it made, and our confidence rests more on how much we have in the bank than it does on God. However, it only takes a drought, or a flood, or the loss of a job, or a drop in the stock market to show us just how foolish this really is.

Second, riches can cause us to develop a sense pride and a feeling that we're better than other people. We tend to feel superior to individuals who don't have as much as we do, and we sometimes develop an inflated sense of self-worth. We judge people by what they have, or don't have, and we think we're somehow better than others who aren't as well off as we are.

Third, if we're not careful, wealth can also lead us to depend on ourselves rather than on God. We think about our possessions and say, "Look what I have gotten for myself." We tend to think that our success is the result of our hard work, or, if things aren't going well, we put too much pressure on ourselves to succeed. We take too much of the credit and too much of the blame for our financial success or failure.

Finally, riches can lead to greed rather than open-handed generosity. We begin to hoard and become selfish, and we fail to have the carefree generous attitude that Christ calls us to develop with respect to the things we own.

Many of Jesus' statements in the Bible on wealth and our responsibility to care for the poor are direct and uncompromising. Our Lord declared war on the materialism of His day when He said unequivocally, "*You cannot serve God and mammon,*" which was the Aramaic term for wealth. But Jesus' words were not meant to bring us down. Rather, they're a call to set us free from being obsessed with and controlled by the things we own.

When we read about this young man, we're reading a very modern story, aren't we? Richard Foster has written: "Contemporary culture is plagued by the passion to possess. The unreasoned boast abounds that the good life is found in accumulation, that 'more is better.' Indeed, we often accept this notion without question, with the result that the lust for affluence in contemporary society has become psychotic; it has completely lost touch with reality. ...We feel strained, hurried, breathless. The complexity of rushing to achieve and accumulate more and more frequently threatens to overwhelm us; it seems there is no escape from the rat race."<sup>1</sup>

We all have a passion to possess, and our desires often entrap us and take us away from our simple trust in our heavenly Father. When my late wife Lorie and I graduated from seminary, all we owned was a bench a friend made for us as a wedding present and a lamp. That was it. I can remember our last year in grad school on occasion having only a couple of dollars to rub together. But God was faithful, and we both made it through school debt-free. We had such an intimate dependence on God back then for his weekly, sometimes daily provision, and we had such joy whenever we saw answers to prayer and the surprising ways in which the Lord provided for our needs.

Nowadays I don't have to trust God quite as much for my material provision. I have a steady income, a beautiful home, a good car and nice clothes. I don't worry about how I'm going to make it from month to month. But to be honest with you, while I don't want to go back to my financial situation in seminary, I confess that I do miss the intimacy of trusting in God each and every day like I did back then. I think I've lost something as I've grown more prosperous. Maybe you have, too.

### **III. The Reaction of the Disciples.**

When Jesus talked about the difficulty that a rich person has in entering the Kingdom of God, the disciples were amazed at His words. They asked, "Who, then, can be saved?" Some have tried to soften the words of Jesus about the camel and the eye of the needle suggesting that the reference is to a particular gate in Jerusalem where the camel had to kneel down, be unpacked, and only then could it get through. It's suggested that the saying means it's difficult but not impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven. You just have to offload some of the things; then you can make it.

However, this interpretation doesn't align with the simple reading of the text where we see the incredulous response on the part of the disciples and our Lord's statement that with man it was indeed impossible. New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce calls this interpretation about a special gate a charming one, but there is no evidence that such an entrance called the Eye of a Needle even existed in biblical times.<sup>2</sup>

What is more probable is the following explanation. A number of scholars have said that to understand this saying of Jesus, we need to see it in the context of Judaism. The reason for the disciples' amazement was that Jesus was turning the way most Jewish people viewed the world completely upside down.

Popular Jewish belief was that prosperity was a sign you were a good person, and if an individual was rich then God must have honored and blessed that person. Wealth was proof of favor with God, and they would have argued that the more prosperous a person was, the more certain their entry into heaven would be. What Jesus said in the analogy of the camel and the eye of a needle is that it is harder for the most likely candidate you can think of to get into heaven than for a large creature to get through the smallest opening you can imagine.

The disciples responded with incredulity. If it's impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God, what hope do any of us have? Then Jesus spoke the reassuring words of the gospel, *"With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* The only hope you and I have for eternal salvation lies with God. Nothing else will save us. Not our money, our homes, our position, our reputation, our credit rating, our stocks and bonds, or even our good deeds and sacrificial giving – nothing else can save you. The only thing, the only One who is able to save us is Jesus Christ. He's our only hope.

### **Conclusion/Application.**

What does this passage mean for you and me today? Does it mean that all of us should all go out and sell everything that we have and give it to the poor? Should we liquidate our assets and give them away and go join a monastery or take a vow of poverty? I don't think so. This is the only person of whom Jesus ever made this demand, and our Lord didn't even ask Zachaeus the tax collector to make this kind of sacrifice. No, in some ways that response is actually too easy. As we think about the meaning of this passage, let me ask some questions, and then I want to close with a story.

**1. Do you possess the things you own, or do they possess you?** All too often, our lives are dominated by our possessions, and too much of our identity is tied up with what we own. We buy things we don't need to impress people we don't really like with credit we shouldn't use, and we fail to develop the carefree attitude toward possessions to which Jesus called us in the Sermon on the Mount.

How does God want you to take a hard look at your attitudes toward money and your buying habits?

**2. In what ways are you using the money God has given you for the glory of God?** How are you investing for the kingdom? Where is God calling you to donate your time or give your money? Do you really need to spend that much on your vacation this summer? How can you sacrifice and live a bit more simply so you can help someone in need? Ken Olsen, the founder of the Digital Corporation, once said, "Wealth is a tool or an idol. You will either use it to serve others, or you will worship it as your god."

**3. What stands between you and following Jesus today?** For the rich young ruler, it was his money. But for you it might be something else in your life. Living in a community where we value education and intelligence, many of us are afraid of what people might think of us if it becomes known we're a Christian. Some of us in Middle School and High School might be afraid that following Jesus will cost us our popularity, or maybe even a girlfriend or boyfriend. What is Jesus calling you to give up for Him today in order to follow Christ more fully?

I close with this. In 1520 Hernando Cortez and his soldiers were leaving Mexico City laden down with gold they had stolen from the Aztec Indians. Cortez reminded his men, "Don't take too much, for he who travels lightest travels safest." But his soldiers didn't listen, and they stuffed their pockets full of gold. Then came a part of the journey where the soldiers had to swim from the end of a bridge to the other side of a large river. Many of them drowned because the gold weighed them down, and they couldn't swim with the weight of their possessions in their pockets.

How many of us are in that situation today? We're weighed down by the things we own, and they are leading to our destruction. They're preventing us from following the Lord today. I challenge you, don't turn and walk away from Jesus like the rich young ruler did so long ago. Say yes to Jesus with your whole life, and follow Him afresh wherever He leads you and whatever He asks you to do. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, p.3.

<sup>2</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p.181.