

28. The Rich Young Ruler

In the musical comedy, *Fiddler on the Roof*, a Jewish villager named Tevye, living in Russia, sang a song in which he says to God, "Dear God, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either! So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?... You decreed I should be what I am. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?"

Who has never wanted to be rich? Money seems to offer so many pleasures, so much security and so much prestige. Even a sincerely religious person sometimes thinks that it would be very good for him, not only in regard to his physical existence, but in regard to his spiritual life, as well. The poor person often tells himself that it would be easier to serve God if he were rich. He would have more time for the work of God. He would not need to cheat, he would not be tempted to steal to survive, and he would have fewer worries. Gone would be the shame of not being able to pay his bills. Gone would be the misery of listening to his children cry from hunger. His wife would no longer insult him about not taking care of her the way other husbands care for their wives. It would be easy to behave well!

The Jews in Jesus' time, like certain people today, believed not only that it would be easier to be righteous if one had money, but also that prosperity was proof of God's favor. We will see today that Jesus did not share this point of view. Here is the story of his discussion with a rich young man, a leader of Jews:

"Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?' So Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not bear false witness," "Do not defraud," "Honor your father and your mother."' And he answered and said to Him, 'Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.' Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.' But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had

great possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, 'Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, 'Who then can be saved?' But Jesus looked at them and said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.'" (Mark 10:17-27)

WHY SUCH A REQUIREMENT?

This young man did not see himself as a "big sinner." Nevertheless, he recognized that he might have missed something, even before Jesus told him. Other people might have been satisfied with themselves. His circle of acquaintances probably believed that he was good enough, but the young man doubted that his righteousness was sufficient. He was right.

When he told Jesus that he had kept the commandments of God from his youth, Jesus told him that what he was missing was to sell all that he had, give it to the poor and follow him. What a shock this man must have felt! And in hearing this story, we are also surprised. Yes, some people have seen all their property taken from them because they became Christians. The book of Acts tells us of disciples who "sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:45). But nowhere do we see that it was systematically required of all that they sell their property and donate the proceeds to the poor. The same book of Acts tells us of certain people such as Phillip, Mnason and Mary, the mother of John Mark, who had houses where they received groups for prayer or offered hospitality to travelers. Obviously, some Christians retained some of their possessions while donating some to God's service. It is suggested in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 that there were some in the church who were wealthy, since Paul says to the young evangelist:

"Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be

rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

Paul says that the rich should do good works with their wealth and be generous, but he does not tell them that they must become indigent. So why does Jesus tell this young man that he must sell everything and give it to the poor?

Jesus doesn't say this with the aim of pushing him away or making the conditions for salvation more difficult than necessary for him. The text specifically says that Jesus loved him. If he required something so difficult, it's because he saw into the heart of each person and he knew that, despite the love this man had for God, money still held first place for him. If Jesus looked in our hearts, would he make the same demand? For this man to enter the kingdom, it was necessary that he choose between the Lord and riches. God cannot accept a rival. Unfortunately, the rich young man did not accept what Jesus told him. He went away sad.

WEALTH AS AN OBSTACLE TO SALVATION

After the departure of the wealthy man, Jesus said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” Now here is something to astonish the disciples. As we said at the beginning of this study, there are concerns and temptations which seem to come at the poor from every direction, whereas the rich seem to be spared. Why then would it be particularly difficult for a rich man to please God and go to heaven?

By repeating this sentence, Jesus highlights a part of the problem. The second time, he says: “Children, how hard it is for those who **trust** in riches to enter the kingdom of God!” In his recommendations to the rich in 1 Timothy, the apostle Paul also told them, “Nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17). Poor people are sometimes materialistic and lovers of money like the wealthy, but is it possible that they would be less likely to put their trust in wealth which they do not possess? Not having any, they would not count so much on money to solve their problems. They would recognize more easily that God is their only support. God does not want a shared heart.

Among other dangers which particularly affect the rich is the tendency to be proud of their prosperity

and to scorn others, the tendency to use the money selfishly instead of acting as stewards of what really belongs to God, and the tendency to focus on the pleasures and comforts of this world instead of yearning for heavenly treasure.

On one hand, the Bible encourages the kind of diligent work that will produce, with God's blessing, the means to provide for our needs; on the other hand, it encourages an attitude of contentment, whatever our circumstances may be. Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:6-10:

“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

If God blesses your activities so that you become rich, use the money in a way that will glorify Him; never allow money to become your god or the object of your love. If you are not rich, beware of having the goal of becoming a rich man or woman.

WEALTH IS NOT PROOF OF GOD'S FAVOR

The disciples were astonished to hear Jesus say that it would be more difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. They had always had the idea that wealth was proof of God's favor. So if the rich could have so much difficulty entering eternal life, then what hope would there be for the poor? Who could be saved? In saying that with God everything is possible, Jesus reassured them that salvation is possible for both the rich and the poor. But what is clear is that the rich were not automatically saved. They did not all have God's favor. Their money could facilitate their entry into certain social circles on earth, but it posed a risk of being an obstacle rather than an advantage in entering Paradise.

At the end of this passage, Jesus says something that he said on several other occasions: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” In these passages, the terms “first” and “last” do not indicate an order of entry or a rank occupied in the kingdom.

The first are those whom people would expect to see in the kingdom of God—the rich, the Jews, those who apparently enjoyed the favor of God. The last would be the poor, those who were excluded from Jewish society, the pagans—many of this number would be admitted in the kingdom, whereas many of the first group would be excluded from it. This expression does not particularly refer to the amount of time a person has been in the church. “The first ones” Jesus refers to are not the ones who are converted before other people.

SACRIFICES WILL BE REWARDED

Having seen the example of the rich man who was not able to leave everything for Jesus, Peter spoke for all the apostles: “See, we have left all and followed you.” In response, Jesus said that anyone who leaves everything for him and for the Gospel will receive three things: 1) a hundredfold more in houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, property—now on this earth; 2) persecution; 3) eternal life in heaven. This means that the one who accepts being rejected by his family or who is estranged from his family or loses his assets because he chooses to follow Jesus will find that in the church, he has a larger family, often more faithful than his biological family, ready to share with him houses and other blessings to satisfy his needs. This will not exclude persecutions and tribulations, but there are compensations in this life for sacrifices made in serving Jesus. God is faithful, and He will not abandon His servant. And of course, the most wonderful reward for the one who put everything on the altar will be eternal life in heaven.

If God has not provided you with lots of money, don't be unhappy. It doesn't mean at all that He cares less for you. According to Jesus, it is possible that wealth could be the cause of your eternal loss, an obstacle to your salvation that you might not be able to overcome. But He wants to give you better blessings, which include, according to 1 Peter 1:4, “...an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you...”