

# *The Weight of Wealth*

Luke 18:18-30

Rev. Lorie Sprinkle ~ June 2, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>18</sup> A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>19</sup> Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>20</sup> You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” <sup>21</sup> He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>22</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>23</sup> But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. <sup>24</sup> Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

<sup>26</sup> Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup> He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” <sup>29</sup> And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup> who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Luke 18:18-30, NRSV)



Years ago, I directed the Leadership Development Program for Young Life at Whitworth University in Spokane, WA. The program prepared college freshmen to work with high school and middle school students beginning in their sophomore year. Building community was a big part of the ministry, so some years, during spring break, another YL staff person, Jim, and I would take the college students on backpacking trips.

Jim had a lot of wilderness training, and he had led lots of backpacking trips with high school and college students. And boy, did he have stories to tell!

Sometimes, a few of the guys would think they were all that. They would bolt ahead of the rest of the group and then complain that everyone else was so slow. It got annoying and made it difficult to keep everyone together.

But Jim had a good strategy for that. During the night, he would bury some heavy rocks in the bottoms of their backpacks. The next morning, they would wonder why their packs felt so much heavier than the day before, but Jim would assure them it often felt that way. And they would walk considerably slower, which made it easier for the entire group.

Once these guys got into the rhythm of staying with the group, Jim would take the rocks out and they would be none the wiser that they had been carrying unnecessary weight.

The young man in our story today is also unaware of the unnecessary weight that he carries, at least at the beginning. This story appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew tells us that he was young. They all describe him as wealthy. We don't know if this is family wealth or money he has made for himself, although given his age, one can presume that he comes from a wealthy family. He is also a religious ruler, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council that was set up as the tribunal in every Jewish city. So he is a man of influence.

In other words, he has it all. We don't know if he's married, but if not, he would certainly be one of the most eligible bachelors in town. And on top of all of that, he is a good man. He follows the rules, he does the right thing and is serious about his religion.

But even though this young man commands the respect, the admiration of his community and perhaps even some envy, he still longs for affirmation. So he comes to Jesus and he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It's a good question for his time and place. The Jews held the Torah, the Law, as the center place of their faith. To them, the Torah was based on behaviors, not on attitudes or motives. And even though you don't need to read far in the Old Testament to see that what God cares about most is the heart, that was not the focus of this man's training or environment. And as with all of us, he was a product of his culture. And he was trying to get it right.

So this was a good Jewish question that he put to Jesus, and at first he must have felt pleased with the response. Jesus quotes some of the Ten Commandments. You can imagine this young man thinking, "Yes! I've nailed it!" For again, in his time and place, it was believed that it was possible to fulfill God's righteousness through one's outward behavior. But then the axe falls. "One thing you lack, sell all you have, give the money to the poor... then come and follow me."

I've got to tell you that this is one of my least favorite verses in the Bible. In fact, when Jeff asked me to preach this Sunday, I agreed without looking at the text. Then when I started preparing for my sermon and realized what I would be preaching on, I was chagrined. But by that time I was already on the schedule. So, I made a note to self: next time Jeff asks you to preach, find out what the text is *before* making a commitment.

Because even though I know that Jesus was talking to a young man some 2000 years ago and not directly to me, in good exegetical style, I need to find my place in this story and it's into this young man's shoes that I land. For I am rich, and I have influence in this community.

And Jesus' command to this young man is incredibly threatening to me. So much so that it's hard for me to move on to the rest of the story. So right now, I am going to figuratively pluck this verse out of the text and hang it here, above the pulpit to get it out of the way. You can't see it, but it's there, and don't worry, we'll come back to it in a bit.

And so, as we move beyond the offending verse, what I find interesting is this man's response. Luke tells us that he became sad. Mark writes that he went away grieving. And I'm curious about that because that's not *my* initial response to a command to sell all I have and give the money to the poor.

My first response is anger. Why should I give all I have to the poor? I've worked hard for what I have, probably a lot harder than most of those folks who would benefit from my wealth. It's not fair.

My second response is to get defensive. Throwing money at a problem like poverty doesn't make it go away. It's much more complicated than that. You need to change unjust systems. You need to empower people. Sometimes the worst thing you can do is to simply hand money to people – it becomes toxic charity.

My final response is to rationalize. Look at all the money that we give away – to the church, to missionaries. Those folks count on our generosity. If we gave everything away, we wouldn't be able to support them anymore. In fact, we'd end up being the recipients of other people's generosity, so how is that helpful?

Nowhere in there, is my response to be sad. And yet, sadness can be a helpful tool in deepening our understanding of ourselves. We get sad when we lose something or someone who is important to us. Grief is the profound feeling of loss.

To our detriment, we live in a culture that avoids grief like the plague. We go to great lengths of denial, of self-medication, of addictive behaviors in order to avoid the pain of grief.

And yet, grieving plays an important role in the Bible. Israel was known for its psalms of lament – there's an entire book about grieving – the Book of Lamentations. Throughout the Old Testament we see people in sackcloth and ashes as a way to make their grief tangible, particularly when they are confronted with their sin.

As hard as it is to grieve, grief is an indispensable part of being human. And when we do it well, grief is a profound teacher. Grief gives us clarity about the things in life that really matter, and it carves deep wells of compassion into our hearts, which later, can be filled with joy. Grief helps us to be authentic in a world driven by appearances. Jesus confronts this man with a command that is too hard to follow, and he walks away sad.

Something else I find curious about this story is that Jesus lets him go. Think about that. Here's a young, energetic potential follower of Jesus who has lots of money and lots of influence in the community. What a great opportunity to expand Jesus' ministry! Think of the projects that the money could fund. Think of the doors that could open to people in power. At least that's how we in the church tend to think about someone who walks through our doors who has money and influence.

"Quick! Get him connected to the congregation. Put him on a committee, encourage him to become a member. How soon can we get him on Session?"

Jesus lets him go. He doesn't run after him saying, "OK, so that was a little extreme. How about you give part of your money away – we can work out a payment plan. And maybe you could follow me two or three days a week for starters." No. Jesus honors the man's decision and lets him walk away. Jesus honors the man's feelings and lets him remain in his grief.

And frankly, there are things about wealth that should make us sad; because wealth, while it opens up all sorts of possibilities, is also a liability.

For one thing, it tempts us to rely on ourselves more than we rely on God. I know that's true in my own life. There was a long period of time when I was a single mom barely scraping by. One unexpected bill – a car repair or health care cost could throw me into financial crisis. I had to rely on God daily to get us through, trusting that that the end of the month would come before the end of the money. And always, somehow, God came through. And there were times that were nothing short of miraculous – when an unexpected gift or payment would come through that was exactly the amount that I needed.

I don't live like that anymore. If something goes wrong, we have the resources to take care of it. And I sometime miss the intensity of faith that I had during those lean years. So wealth can make us falsely self-sufficient.

Wealth can give us a sense of superiority. Ron and I belong to Pipeworks, the climbing gym on 16<sup>th</sup> Street near Loaves and Fishes and the Salvation Army Center. It's a part of the city that attracts homeless people; who pitch their tents along the sidewalks of the streets next

to the gym. There are times when we literally have to crawl through the street in our car to avoid the bikes and dogs and pedestrians who have claimed that space as their own.

And as much as I try to be compassionate, to understand the myriad reasons that cause people to be homeless, to appreciate the destructive power of addictions and mental illness on people's lives, I have to confess that I am hard pressed to see those folks as my equal. I get disgusted at the filth, the trash, the waste of human potential as I drive down the street. My wealth fools me into thinking that I am better than those folks.

Wealth can also isolate us. When I was serving as pastor to Bethany PC, an African American woman in our congregation died suddenly and unexpectedly. I got the phone call, and drove over to her house right away. It was a small house on a downtrodden street in South Sacramento. The house was so crowded with family and friends of the deceased that I could hardly squeeze my way through. When they had heard that Grace died, they all dropped whatever they were doing and gathered at her home, just to be there and to be together.

Sometime later, a friend of Ron's one-year-old granddaughter died of SIDS. This family was not involved in a church community, but in their desperation, they had remembered that Ron married a pastor, so they gave me a call.

I drove over to the house, a lovely large home here in the Pocket neighborhood. There was no one inside except the distraught grandparents and parents. And as the five of us sat there in their living room, crying over the tragic death of little Abby, the house felt incredibly empty.

Now, some of that is cultural. We white folks tend to be so afraid of imposing ourselves on others or infringing on someone's privacy that when tragedy strikes, our knee-jerk reaction is to pull back rather than to lean in. And we can learn a lot from the African American community about how to do that differently. But I also think that, as we live in our large homes on large lots, wealth can isolate us.

And so the young man walks away sad, for he has great wealth. Jesus comments on how hard it is for the wealthy to be saved. And the crowd, who, in that culture, believed that wealth was an outward sign of God's blessings, then wondered, "Who, then can be saved?"

While the young man asked a good question, the question by the crowd is the right question. And the answer holds the key to the story. No one. And Jesus' response is pure gospel. "What is impossible for human beings is possible with God."

Hurray! Grace wins. We are saved by grace through faith and not of our own works. I'm off the hook! And so we are tempted to ignore the offending command, to tie the story up neatly with a bow and go merrily on our way, not worrying about the weight of the rocks hidden deep in our backpacks.

But to do that would be to offer cheap grace – grace that costs us nothing while it cost Jesus everything. And so to simply wrap things up at this point would not be theologically honest.

So I am going to take Jesus' command and look at it again, but this time, through the lens of grace. And also through the lens of Jesus promise to the young man of treasures in heaven and his assurance to the disciples that they will receive great reward for having left everything to follow him.

And what I discover when I look at the command through the lenses of grace and promise, is that it becomes less a threat and more an opportunity. That instead of feeling ashamed that I am not good enough or spiritual enough to sell all I have and give it to the poor, I can open myself up to exploring how wealth weights me down and thus find ways that I can unload that weight and claim the treasures of heaven here and now.

Because honestly, I have no intention of selling our house or our car. I'm not going to go home and post all my possessions on Craig's List. Because, along with Paul, I have had times of plenty and times of want. And I'll tell you straight up that the times of plenty are a whole lot more fun and a whole lot less stressful than the times of want. And there's no way that I'm going to

intentionally sign up to return to the lean times. I like my life the way it is.

At the same time, I want the treasure of heaven that Jesus holds out to the young man. So what to do? For me, this is where the young man's response is informative. For I too, can be sad. Instead of throwing up the barriers of anger, of defensiveness and of rationalization, I can ponder and even grieve the ways that wealth hinders my life. I can reflect on how my wealth pushes me toward false self-reliance, tempts me to feel superior and isolates me. And so can you.

For, from a global perspective, we are all rich and we all are people of influence. We are wealthy because we can drink the water that comes out of the tap. We can drive on streets that are paved and when there is a crisis we can dial 911 and get a response. We have access to good food and educational opportunities. And those things put us well ahead of many people on this globe.

We are all people of influence, because we can cast our vote at the ballot box, we can express our opinions in public without fear of imprisonment because we have freedom of speech. And again, that puts us well ahead of many people on this planet.

And so, my friends, while probably none of us are going to literally sell all we have and give it to the poor, we can all allow ourselves to be sad, because we all have great wealth.

And in our sadness, we can trust that God will move in ways that allow us to recognize the weight of our wealth. And we can trust that God will give us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to loose the grip that clings so tightly to our wealth and possessions, perhaps just enough that we can take and taste the sweet, sweet fruit of God's Spirit. Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

1. Read Luke 18:18-30 again. What do you notice here?
2. Where do you find yourself in the story of the Rich Young Ruler?
3. Do you consider yourself as rich? As influential? Why or why not?

4. How does your wealth enrich your life? How does it hinder your faith?
5. What is your initial response to Jesus' command to sell all you have and give the money to the poor?
6. What do you think that God might be telling you through this story?



**Table to Table Question**  
*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

What do you think the treasures in heaven are?