

Lessons in Luke: The Rich Man

Luke 18:18-30

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My senior year of high school, we got a new football coach. And before I go any further, yes, I did play football. No, I wasn't very good, but I was in good company, no one on the team was all that great.

So, part of the task of this new coach wasn't just to improve our skills as players, it was to improve the culture of our team. It's a tale as old as time, coaches coming into programs with culture problems, with all kinds of zany ways to help us grow as a community.

Well, one day during practice, Coach Dillon saw an opportunity. It started to rain in sheets and with about 30 minutes left in practice he blew the whistle, formed us into a line, and declared we were going to have fun: we were mud sliding.

It was hilarious. Our linemen slid down the field like a bunch of greased up water buffalos. The faster guys went for distance. And all of us were unrecognizable by the end of it and, most importantly, we came together as a team.

Now, I've got to be honest, I didn't want to do it. In fact, I spent a good chunk of time watching them have fun while I tried to remember the plays we had just spent hours running before then. It was only after a lot of cajoling from my friends on the team that I finally did. And I'm so glad they did.

In some ways, Jesus can be considered like a coach approaching a team, Jewish leadership and adherents in the first century, with a culture problem. From the word "go," from the very first whistle, John the Baptist and Jesus are talking about a new thing, a new age. And here in this text he calls it an eternal life that he has come to bring to the world, to all people. And yet many people, like I did in practice that day, were too preoccupied with tradition, history, their vision for how things ought to unfold, and all of the outward ways they knew how to participate.

This rich young ruler is one more of those people and

today I want to give you some steps to avoid turning out like him and maybe, just maybe, help you get your uniform a bit dirty in the process. Let's dive into the text from Luke 18:18-30.

¹⁸ Once a religious leader asked Jesus this question: "Good Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked him. "Only God is truly good." ²⁰ But to answer your question, you know the commandments: 'You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. Honor your father and mother.'" ²¹ The man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young." ²² When Jesus heard his answer, he said, "There is still one thing you haven't done. Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²³ But when the man heard this he became very sad, for he was very rich. ²⁴ When Jesus saw this, he said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵ In fact, 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!" ²⁶ Those who heard this said, "Then who in the world can be saved?" ²⁷ He replied, "What is impossible for people is possible with God." ²⁸ Peter said, "We've left our homes to follow you." ²⁹ "Yes," Jesus replied, "and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, ³⁰ will be repaid many times over in this life, and will have eternal life in the world to come."

This is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Okay, there are a few terms and concepts we need to circle around before we can go any further. The first is this trio of concepts: eternal life, the Kingdom of God, and the age to come. It's important to know that the people who would have read the gospels were primarily Jewish to begin with and they had good reason to read it. The reason for that is that in their scriptures and in their faith tradition over many years they looked ahead to the future with great anticipation to a day when God would step into time and space to make all things new and right and as they were supposed to be when God spoke to Abraham. They had a deep theological conviction, but it was also grounded in the reality that they had eyes in their face

and brains in their head that this had not come to be quite yet. The language that they put around the time when this would happen included these concepts: They talked about eternal life, because the life we would enjoy in this space would be endless. They talked about the Kingdom of God, because it would be a situation where God would reign over all things; the Romans wouldn't be in charge. And an age to come, because it would be a hinge point in history where a new era where God is in charge would begin. It would be clear, it would be obvious. They paid attention to Jesus because from the beginning to the end of his ministry, he kept saying and associating himself with all of those ideas.

So, as you think about the reception Jesus typically received among Jewish people and their religious leaders in the first century, how would you characterize it? Well, it didn't go very well most of the time and it was especially poor for those people at the top of society. People like this rich man.

Now, I think sometimes it is easy for us to pile on this guy. After all, we sort of live in an "eat the rich" kind of culture right now as we watch these billionaires blast off into space while many of us are squished in debt. But, to overly caricature this guy isn't really that warranted. The reason is in what this first interaction that Jesus has with the rich young ruler reveals to us: He followed the law his whole life, right down to the letter. So, when he was a little boy, he learned the scriptures and he followed them. When he grew up, he didn't stray but he kept following the law. And when he meets Jesus here, it is him who initiates the conversation: that tells us that he is STILL trying to figure out how to be a good member of his faith tradition.

Sounds a lot like me and probably a lot like you. Sure, we've waived from the left to the right a bit in our lives, but for the most part a lot of us have done what is good and faithful and have attempted to follow our faith as well as we can. By most standards in the world today, you could probably say we're rich. Do you have a house, a bank account, something in retirement? Bingo. You're rich.

But then Jesus does what he often does with people he loves, he pushes him a bit further: he tells him to do what? To sell all of his possessions, THEN come and follow. So does that mean we all have to sell all our stuff? Does this mean that following the rules doesn't matter to God? Well, it's open for debate.

Something that we forget in this interaction is a detail we get in other interactions Jesus has with people. Jesus knows what is going on in our hearts. In about half a dozen other interactions, we find that Jesus' pastoral advice is predicated on his perception of the state of someone's thoughts or their heart. What I take away from that reality in this situation is that Jesus senses in this man a disconnect between his actions and his heart and Jesus feels like the remedy in this situation, for this man, is that selling or at least considering selling all of his possessions is the way forward to the type of heart change it takes to follow Jesus.

So, while we're here, I think it is worth saying that it isn't always the best thing when we read Jesus' words to people in the text to say "always" and apply it to us. To Jesus, it is the state of our heart that matters; there is nuance in the application of scripture.

And the reason that the state of our hearts matters is because the first place eternal life, the kingdom of God, and the age to come erupts into the world is right here. In our hearts. Here, in the center of our being. That's why Jesus tells us stories about good trees producing good fruit and bad trees producing bad fruit. It's why he talks about cleanliness coming from the inside of the cup, not the outside. It's why the well of eternal life is within us and not outside of us. This rich young ruler and MOST of the religious establishment had that flipped. Sincerely, genuinely, but flipped. They were wrong.

So do a lot of us.

This last little interaction Jesus has with Peter is so important. I can just hear Peter, after watching this emotionally charged interaction between Jesus and this man, kicking the dirt, half-heartedly saying, "Well, we left our homes to follow you." What do we know about Peter's story? He'll be asked to give up a lot more than that. More than he even knows. But, Jesus leaves it in that moment and simply affirms that a key element of our really following him is an exchange. An exchange between us and God where we look into our hearts to see what is taking the place of or blocking the kingdom of God from taking root there and we give it away. We trust it to God. In doing so, what we do with our lives, how we live them, will naturally change and will be a life that God honors and uses. You'll find that you want to study the Bible. You'll find that you want to serve. You'll find the fruits of the Spirit popping up in your life like fruit on a tree.

This rich young ruler and the religious wisdom of the day looked for this new age, eternal life, and the Kingdom of God to be something “out there” that they had to be put together for to participate in. Like a party where you walk through a door or a zip code where you enter in and move all of your stuff. I think today we often treat heaven like this. The really revolutionary reinterpretation of this expectation that Jesus made all throughout his ministry and here for this man and for all of us today is that it isn’t out there. The kingdom isn’t bursting in out there. It is starting here, in your heart.

As I think back to my experience on my high school team, I think that my approach to that day in the rain was that I believed deeply that we would become the team we wanted to be by learning the X’s and O’s. No doubt, that is one way to become great, but in order for us to become a team, my football team, a community, a people, there had to be something else. There had to be heart-work and that is what sliding through the mud accomplished. So, today I want to encourage you to look inside your heart to see what you need to exchange or let go of in order for God’s life, God’s kingdom, and God’s new age to begin to take root in you. Prince of Peace, as a church, I want us, as a community, to look inside our collective heart together and think deeply about what we need to give away as a community in order for God to work in us and our shared lives together. And that starts with giving your heart to God. Letting God do what God wants to do rather than trying to wrest the reigns from God constantly. It’s making yourself available.

I want you to think about what life might look like if you let God work in your heart; if you let God change the culture in your heart so that something new might come from it.