

## **Windows on the Word: The Rich Young Man**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 19:16-26

In one of his books, the Church Historian and missiologist Andrew Walls notes that among all the religions of the world, Christianity is a decentered religion. Muslims are centered in Mecca and Medina. Jews are centered in Jerusalem. These physical places are the center of their faith. But Christianity's center has been mobile. Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Northern Europe, North America...the center moves around. Christianity is an incarnational faith. It looks different in different cultures.

Walls suggests that when you look at how the center of Christianity moves, you see that it tends to migrate away from power and wealth. This is an observable historical trend. Christianity tends to migrate away from places where power and wealth grow. Rome gets wealthy and decadent, and so faith migrates to poorer regions, in this case Northern Europe. Faith begins to dwindle in Europe as wealth grows, so North America becomes a hub of Christianity. Based on statistical measures, faith seems to be ebbing here too. Now everyone agrees, the center of faith is moving South of the equator into Africa and central America. The Christian faith originally took off among the poor and the weak, slaves and the marginalized. It's not that there weren't any rich Christians, there certainly were, but the faith blossomed among small folk and slaves.

Jesus predicted the trend. He predicted it in our passage when he said, "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." Why is that? It's not that wealth is inherently evil. Jesus doesn't say that and I don't think scripture says that, but he is saying that there's something about wealth that makes faith hard. Why is wealth a potential obstacle to the way of Jesus? It's an important question. It's an important question because by historical standards AND by present global standards, we are fabulously wealthy. We have privileges and amenities the rich young man in our story could only dream about.

It's also an important question, because Scripture raises it repeatedly. The Bible is concerned about the perils of affluence. The Bible is full of warnings about wealth. Bob read one of those warnings earlier in the service. A man spends his whole life building barns and then he dies. Jesus condemns him for being rich towards himself but not towards God. Then there's Jesus' parable of the beggar and the rich man. The rich man ends up in hell because he ignored the beggar at his gate. The rich man begs Abraham to relieve him of his torment. Abraham refuses. Do not store up treasures on earth, says Jesus. In the sermon on the plain in Luke 6 Jesus says, "woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." And then, in case you missed the point, "woe to you who are well fed now, for you shall go hungry." Woe to you who lounge on couches, who dine on choice lambs and fattened calves, says Amos. Now listen you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you...you have hoarded wealth in the last days says James. The love of money is the root of all evil says Paul. I could go on. The Bible pulls no punches on this topic. Yes, the Bible never calls wealth and money

in itself evil. Yes, the Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil, but if that's all you hear God saying, if you read through all these passages and your conclusion is, "Phew! God does not say wealth in itself is evil, Honey, where's my 401K statement?", you aren't listening. Because Jesus is warning us. Jesus is challenging us. Jesus is saying 'Watch Out!'

Part of the reason the Bible is so pointed about wealth is that it's one of the strongest idols out there. How strong? This is story is the only time in scripture where Jesus specifically tells someone to follow him, and the person refuses. In all the other gospel stories, when Jesus says, follow me, the people leave everything and follow, but this man cannot let go of his stuff. Wealth is a strong idol because it claims to give you all the things we humans want. Wealth says, "Give me your sweat and your attention, give me your 65 hours a week and I will deliver you happiness." And, at a certain level, it really can deliver a lot of things. Security, pleasure, entertainment, romantic attention, respect, power – give wealth your 65 hours a week and it will deliver a form of all these things.

But, it can't deliver you real, fulfilled, satisfied, eternal life. It gives you a version of pleasure and romance and attention, but leaves you hungry. Abd al-Rahman III, the emir and caliph of Córdoba in 10th-century Spain, summed up a life of worldly success at about age 70: "*I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call.*" And the payoff? "*I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot,*" he wrote. "*They amount to 14.*" He sounds a little like the young man in the story. Teacher! What must I do to get eternal life? Can you hear the dissatisfaction in his question, the restlessness, the hunger? Jesus I've tried everything. I've kept all the commandments, I've achieved great business success, I've had the table of honor at the banquets of the wealthy, I've tasted the delicacies of the finest restaurants, I've had beautiful women on my arm, but something's missing. What must I do to get eternal life? It's not just eternal assurance that this young man is looking for, though he's certainly looking for that, he's looking for life.

But pay close attention to the way he asks his question, and you begin to see why wealth culture sometimes makes it hard for the gospel to grow. "What good thing must I do to get to eternal life?" To get it. To possess it. Like eternal life is something you own. Like eternal life is one of your holdings, your assets. "*Jesus I have a mansion on the Mediterranean, but I'm looking to upgrade. How do I acquire one of those heavenly mansions of glory that I hear so much about, because that sounds like some good real estate!*" He wants to get eternal life. The verb that Matthew uses here is the same verb used in verse 20 when we hear that the man went away because he *had* great wealth. It's all about getting and having for this young man.

And here's where we can start to see where wealth can be an obstacle to faith. When you live in a wealthy society, you get trained in a kind of rhythm. You learn a rhythm of getting and having and working and achieving. You see people around you working hard, getting wealthy, and getting cool stuff. It's a simple formula and it seems to work. Work and achieve and get and have. Work and achieve and get and have. That's growth. That's how you move forward. The rich

young man's approach is actually a very 21<sup>st</sup> century rhythm. Lots and lots of young people are all in on this road of working and achieving and having and getting. The rich young man would fit in perfectly in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

Did you notice that when Jesus responds, he changes the verb. Jesus doesn't say if you want to get life, if you want to have life, keep the commandments; Jesus says if you want to 'enter' life you keep the commandments. It's not a thing you possess, it's a community into which you enter. What's the difference? When you get something you possess it, it's within your circle, you are the master. When you enter into something, you are subject to it. It possesses you. This young man is earnest, he's diligent, Lord knows he's hard-working, but he needs to learn a whole new rhythm to his life. Having and getting is all he knows, but life with Jesus is not a having and getting story, life with Jesus is a love story. You don't get it by working and achieving and having and doing; you get it by surrendering. Like a child.

The story of the rich young man is in all three synoptic gospels – it's in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And in each of the gospels it follows the same story – the story of the little children who come to Jesus. This is no accident. The children don't come to Jesus asking what must I do to get...they come to Jesus and say, Jesus pick me up. Jesus wants to break this man out of his working and having and getting rhythm, but it's going to take radical surgery, it's going to take a major intervention. He calls on the man to give up everything he has. Give up the having and getting and follow Jesus on the path of life. Stop the working and achieving and having and doing and surrender your life to Jesus. Enter into the scope of his love and his life. Throw up your arms and surrender, like a child.

I said earlier that this young man would fit right in with modern young people. And it seems to me that our children are trained in to be like the young man in this story. They are trained in the rhythm of working and achieving and having and getting. Most of the commercials and advertisements they see are training them this way. Buy this, your life will be better. But it's not just the ads that are forming them this way; it's the activities we choose for them too. We parents (myself included) hyper schedule our kids. Sports, music, the arts. We upper middle class parents make sure our kids stay involved and busy. Why do we do that? Some of it is for community. The joy of sports. The joy of music. The community that comes with those. But a lot of it is about preparing our kids for success. Making sure they have the tools to succeed. Making sure that they develop talent and poise. Making sure that they have the talent and the ability to get into that school, get that scholarship. So that they can work, achieve, get, have. A lot of what our kids are exposed to, a lot of what we train our children to do, forms them in the rhythms of this young man.

But what if the central skill of life has nothing to do with getting, having and doing. The central skill, the central rhythm of a life with Jesus is love. Love is not getting and having and doing. Love is surrender, love is sacrifice, love is giving yourself. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. That's the rhythm we want our kids to learn. I was trying to think of a picture of the rhythm and I thought of an old parishioner of mine, Tom DeGroot. He was at my previous church and all the time I knew him there, he suffered from the effects of a stroke. In his strength he'd been a school principal, but he lived the last 18 years of his life

with the effects of that stroke: a limp and almost complete aphasia. At his funeral his daughter told a story about a visit she'd had with him in the hospital the day after his stroke. She admitted that she'd had a difficult relationship with her dad, and so when her Dad had the stroke and she almost lost him, she wanted to put the conflict behind them and so she tried to think of something she could give him to demonstrate her love for him. She settled on a bag of Hershey's kisses. She knew that they were her dad's favorite candy, and what better way to show your love than with a kiss. So she came to the hospital and sat down and gave her dad a hug and they cried a little together, and then she said, 'Here dad, I brought something for you,' and she pulled out the bag and gave her Dad one of the Hershey's kisses. What she didn't anticipate was how his stroke had diminished him. He had very low fine motor skill in his hands and so doing something like taking the foil off of a Hershey's kiss was terribly hard for him. But he was determined to do it! With quivering hands that struggled to hold the candy he removed the foil from the candy bit by bit. It took him more than 15 minutes. It was painful to watch. And when the foil was finally off, instead of putting the candy in his mouth, he took the kiss in his shaky hand and held it out to her. All that painful determined unwrapping was not for him.

That's a picture of cross shaped love. When we love, we make that move over and over again. That's the move we want our kids to learn. We want our children to be formed in that kind of sacrifice. Where will our children learn this love? Where do our children learn this essential skill? They learn it here in the community of Jesus. They learn it here, gathered with the people of God around the cross and listening to the stories of Jesus, listening to the word of Jesus, eating the food of Jesus. Our children will not be formed in this central skill on their travel teams and in their community orchestras or on their debate teams or at their proms (as great as those things are). Because the fullness of life, eternal life, the love that our soul needs, the love that caused the universe to make this world in the first place, comes from God. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul. What good is all the having and getting and achieving in the world if your soul does not belong to Jesus Christ and if your soul has not been formed in the ways of his love.

Jesus seems hard on the young man here, but he's not asking the man to do anything he wouldn't do himself. In fact, Jesus is in the middle of doing exactly what he asks the young man to do. Jesus was in very form God, but he didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. Jesus was sitting at the right hand of God with cosmic power in his hands, it wasn't a thing to have, a thing to get. Instead he gave all of that up and took the form of a servant. He walked this earth as a servant to the needs of others. He healed and blessed and told truths and said hard things to powerful people. He unwrapped is power and gave it away to the weak and the wandering and the lost. Little by little he let people strip him of his stuff until he was stripped naked hanging on a cross. Jesus gives himself away and says take it all of you, it is for your life. Jesus sold everything he had and gave it to the poor. The everything was his life and we were the poor. Why did he do it? For love. For love. Because he loves us so much, and he wants his love and his life to live in us.