

Session 3

April 28, 2019

“SELL EVERYTHING YOU OWN”

Matthew 19:21-30

From the beginning, having riches has been associated with God’s blessing. Does that mean being poor indicates God’s rejection? If so, then why do religious monks often take a vow of poverty? And why—as Job asked—do the wicked seem to prosper? (Job 21) What exactly is the relationship between earthly possessions and heavenly blessings? The Lord’s encounter with the rich young ruler is quite instructive, but only if it is properly understood. The drama unfolds in three simple scenes.

An unfortunate error (vv. 16-22). Without a doubt, the most common religious belief in the world is also the most dangerous: that salvation is the result of good works. Hindus strive for good karma, Muslims must tip the scales in their direction, and as we see in the text, Jews felt they must keep the law. The man who approached Jesus was a “ruler” (Luke 18:18), a respected Jewish leader. Luke says he called Jesus *Good Teacher*. Matthew adds that his inquiry involved *good works*. I believe verse 17 depicts some verbal sparring in the Lord’s reply. “Why do you ask me about what is good?” and “there is only One who is good” was aimed at this man’s understanding. I believe Jesus was asking, “Do you know who I really am?” (see Mark 10:18). The suggestion that he keep the commandments was not offered as a means of salvation, but rather aimed at getting this young man to admit his failures. Instead, it highlighted the young man’s arrogance! (v. 20) At this point, Jesus moved to the heart of the matter: salvation is not based on any good work, but rather on dying to self and committing one’s life to Christ. This young man was clearly not ready for such a commitment. His god was himself, and his idol was his wealth (v. 22).

An unusual explanation (vv. 22-26). At the rich man’s departure, Jesus turned to His disciples, who had witnessed the conversation. The phrase “it will be hard” (v. 23) means *with much difficulty*, or *with great struggle*. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Eighteenth-century Bible commentator Matthew Henry put it this way: “Few that have riches do not trust in them.” The rather strange illustration of the camel passing through the eye of a needle was likely a common proverb (it shows up elsewhere in Middle Eastern literature); but even if not, the meaning is clear. The disciples’ acceptance that earthly riches indicated divine blessings was shattered. They were not simply surprised, but “utterly astonished.” So much was their shock that they wondered, “If the rich cannot be saved, then who in the world can be?” Christ’s reply could be paraphrased this way: “Men, left to their own devices, are so wrong that they could never be saved. But with God, even the most warped sinner can be saved.”

An assuring example (vv. 27-30). Peter, once again assuming the position of spokesman for the rest, now asked for clarification. The rich young ruler had much but refused to give anything up. The disciples had little but were willing to give *everything* up. What did all this mean? The question was legitimate, and Jesus’ reply was not a rebuke, but a warm reassurance. Those willing to forsake all and follow Him in this life would in turn to be given position and honor and treasures in the next life. The final verse, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first,”

functions as both a concluding principle to our text in chapter 19, as well as an introduction to the parable that begins chapter 20. In both cases, it turns the natural logic of man upside down, illustrating the classic words of Isaiah 55:8, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord.”