

## I. Introduction

A. Those who want to follow Jesus – who look to him for a way forward in this life and for eternal life to follow – are expected to be generous. And to do so across the board - with our heart, with our home, with our time and talent and gifts and with our money.

B. Out of a recognition that God is being generous with us – giving us what we do not deserve, granting us eternal life - we are expected to be open-handed. To pay it forward.

C. And money is the one that gets the most attention:

1. Because Jesus talks about it more than the others

2. And because money is almost never actually about money – little green and white pieces of paper. Those are a placeholder for power and security and status and comfort.

3. And because it's pretty objective. Assessing how generous we are with our heart is much more subjective than assessing how much money we have given away.

D. Much of this is unpleasant, but Jesus hammers away at the topic. He talks about it all the time, identifying money as an idol and as a barometer of our heart and as a roadblock in our growth

E. In today's passage a young man looks to Jesus for some assurance that he is OK. That he's checked all the boxes – that He is right with God. And Jesus – who sees right into the guy's heart – tells the man that he is not OK. And He goes after the hold that money has over him. And the man is very upset by this. Because this guy will do almost anything to get ahead, to get ahead, to rise to the top. But his definition of success and God's do not line up. This man appears to have a 21<sup>st</sup> century American Dream version of faith in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. He sees God as a way for personal gain. But that sets up a clash. It was not obvious to him but it is obvious to Jesus.

F. I remember this sinking feeling I had in a conversation with a young professor a while back.

1. He was very bright. He was rising quickly. He had just finished his PhD. He had a book coming out. He had been on 60 minutes. He was a rising star. And our paths had crossed somehow and we ended up having a number of conversations about faith.

2. He had spent a lot of time in Russia. And it had shaken his view of atheism. He didn't like what he saw there among those who embraced it and now he was rethinking all of this.

3. And after several conversations one night he decided to place his faith in Christ. And we prayed together and it was if he was shot out of a rocket for about two weeks. He couldn't get enough.
4. And then he said to me one day, "I want to check this faith box so I have every area of my life working well and I can get back to my career."
5. And I remembered thinking, "Uh oh. Houston we have a problem."
6. He is not seeing God as God. He is seeing God as an aid in the quest for another god. And that doesn't work. God doesn't play that role even if we think He is.
7. It's a pretty common issue.

G. Some of what we have in this conversation between Jesus and this young go-getter is unique to him, but there is a lot here for all of us because this is a pretty common issue.

H. One final note: As far as the Rich Young Ruler goes, we have every reason to believe that this guy has been technically generous. He has kept the law, which means he's given away at least ten percent of his money to the Temple and more to the poor. But it is possible to be technically generous with our money and not radically generous with our heart. It is not possible to be generous with our heart without being radically generous with our money. But it is possible to be technically generous with our money but not with our heart, and that is what we are called to.

II. **A certain ruler** (Matthew and Mark identify him as young as well) **asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"**

A. This is an important question. I wish more people were asking it. It seems we are finding more and more things to focus on other than the things that really matter.

B. I am working on the book for the fall. I spent a few days at a cabin in Wisconsin writing this week. Looking at the accelerating pace of technology and the effect it is having on us.

C. It's pretty shocking. We actually have more free time than people in the past. We have less to do and more gadgets doing things for us, but we keep moving faster and faster and not pausing to ask questions like this: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

D. Now for the record, this question is framed in a religious way. What must I do? And as Paul says in Ephesians 2, eternal life is a gift of God. It is free. It comes our way by grace through faith, not of ourselves. It is not a result of works. We do not earn it. But it's a great question all the same. Most of us have a pretty solid sense that we live after we die. How do I secure that?

**III. Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.**

A. Lots of people want to relegate Jesus to the “good teacher” category. He is not willing to be labeled that way.

1. He is a good teacher. A master of the craft. Both in content and delivery He is at the top of the craft. His parables alone qualify him as a master teacher.
2. But He is not simply a good teacher. He is God. He is Lord. He is the Savior of the World.

B. So we get a little push back here. No one is good but God. Recognize who I am.

C. And then we see Jesus not simply as a great teacher but as a brilliant counselor. He draws this guy out.

**IV. V20 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”**

A. Jesus rehearses the Ten Commandments, which serve as the foundation of The Law.

B. There are 613 commandments in the first five books of the Old Testament. Jesus sets up the list. And this guy states that He's got all of those under control.

**V. “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.**

A. No he hasn't. But such is the power of denial and delusion.

B. In fairness to this guy he may not have been there when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, in which He interprets the Law, making it clear that we not only have to keep them externally but also in our heart.

1. It's not enough not to kill someone, we are not to get mad.
2. It's not enough not to sleep with someone other than your spouse, we need a clean heart.

C. One of the purposes of The Law is to help us see that we are broken. Fallen. Sinful. This guy does not see that. He thinks he has got it all down.

**VI. “All these I have kept since I was a boy.” I am good as far as the Law goes. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”**

A. If you come up to me after the service and ask, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” I can tell you what I am going to say. Based on John 1 and 3 and I John 1 and Gal 3 and the book of Romans, I am going to say: you need to repent; you need to lean into Jesus. Put your weight down on him. Accept him.

B. So it’s a bit odd that Jesus doesn’t say that. In fact, given that just prior to this he has chastised the Pharisee who was working hard to keep the law – the one who prayed, “I thank you that I am not a thief or an adulterer or a tax collector like that bad boy over there.” Jesus let that guy have it for thinking he was good for keeping the law. Given that it’s crazy that he says to this guy, “Keep the Law” as opposed to, “put your faith in me.”

C. What he should have said is, “I’ve come to die for your sins. I will pay a ransom. Believe in me and you will have eternal life.” Why didn’t he say that? Because He gives the answer this guy needs to hear. He doesn’t work off a set of talking points. Same Gospel but he doesn’t approach it same way.

D. The answer we expect wouldn’t make sense to the rich young ruler because he doesn’t think he needs a rescuer. He thinks he’s kept all the commandments.

1. There are a lot of people in that camp today. Polly Toynbee, who writes for *The Guardian*, a British daily, is one of them. She is antagonistic to faith. In fact she writes: Of all the elements of Christianity, the most repugnant is the notion that Christ, who took our sins upon himself, sacrificed his body in agony to save our souls. Did we ask him too?

2. She is offended. She doesn’t want to be rescued. She is not perfect but not so bad that he needs that kind of help.

3. Years ago Ted Turner said something similar, though he now says he regrets it.

4. It’s a pretty common sentiment. We live in a world that doesn’t really understand a transcendent moral code. Truth is personal. It is whatever we want truth to be.

E. Jesus perceives that although the man presents like he thinks he's got everything solved, he is not secure. If he was settled about things why would he be asking. But he is not seeing things clearly. He does not understand his sin.

F. So Jesus gives an answer designed to help this guy see reality. And reality is: Jesus is good but this man is not and he is not able to keep The Law.

1. If you think you are good, righteous, without sin, then the Gospel doesn't sound like Good News.

2. Jesus says, "Sell everything you have and then follow me" to get his attention.

G. It's worth noting that this is not the answer Jesus gives to others.

1. When Zacheus the tax collector converts he says he will give away fifty percent of what he has and Jesus says great.

2. When He talks to the Samaritan woman in John 4 he tells her to "Go get your husband." No talk of money. Why? Because she had a different issue. She kept putting her hope in men. Money wasn't her issue.

3. Jesus is attacking money here because money was this man's idol. His security. His God.

H. As a rule, most people would welcome God in their life as long as He doesn't mess with the other gods already there: money, power, sex, family, leisure.

I. As a rule, the idols in our heart – the things that compete for first place with God – are good things. They just get promoted a bit too high. And when that happens they become a problem.

J. Money is a popular idol.

1. The bad news is, if you are feeling really relieved by hearing me say this is not required for all of us, then Jesus might be saying something similar to you.

2. Money is a popular idol. It is a common spiritual stumbling point. And it holds lots of people back.

3. Let me say again, money is not money. It is not slips of paper. It is power and security and independence. Money may also be what feeds our need to be admired because of our success – which is demonstrated by all the money we have made.

K. Jesus is pretty clear. When it comes to money, few can handle it. It has big upsides but it has big downsides.

L. So, here's the deal. If we take all that Jesus says about money – and all Jesus says about everything – the way to be right with God is not to sell everything you have and give it to the poor. However, if hearing that makes you want to dance a little Irish jig in the isle, then what Jesus is saying to you is the same thing.

M. We have to break the idols in our lives. And one of the ways to break the power of money is to give it away.

**VII. So, Jesus has said to this man, give away all you have and follow me. V23: When he heard this, he became very sad (the word means disoriented) because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 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.”**

A. For all of you Bloom County fans, it's back: Opus, Steve Dallas, Milo and the Bill the Cat. It's only online, but you can get it there. And last week there was a section of Deep Thoughts with Opus in which he said, “It's easier for camel to pass through the eye of a needle if it had been through a blender first.”

B. A lot has been written about this metaphor and what exactly it means.

1. In the first century cities had walls to protect people from bad guys. And the history of warfare is in part a history of ways to break through walls and then ways to build stronger walls. So, you have high walls and thick walls. After battering rams you end up with motes – so you can't use a battering ram, and you also get inclines, so you are running up hill with the battering ram. One of the things they also started to do was put the door on the side. And another thing they did was have a door inside a door. Some say that this was called “the eye of the needle.” If so, the point is, that just as a camel had to kneel down and have everything on it taken off in order for it to fit through the eye of the needle, so do we.

2. Others think it's a joke. A camel was the largest animal they knew of. There were no elephants in the Middle East. So this is saying, if you are rich, you've got “a snow balls chance in Miami” of getting into heaven.

C. I'm not sure which it is. But there are things we can say. If we set this statement in the broader context of what the Bible says (and Jesus teaches) about money we see that it is not impossible for wealthy people to go do Heaven.

1. There are some fabulously rich people noted for their relationship with God : Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon, Job, Joseph of Arimathea. Some of these people were given money by God for their faithfulness.

2. Proverbs talks a great deal about money – and in some cases it has very positive things to say about it: work hard and you’ll make money.
  3. But it also puts lots of red flags around it. Like fire it can be really good or really bad.
- D. So let me make a few observations about money and why Jesus would say something like this.

VIII. Let me note why money can be a spiritual problem.

- A. Number one: it shields us from the truth.
1. The reason Jesus singles out money here is that it insulates us from who we are: from bad decisions; from consequences; from hearing the opinions of others.
  2. People who have a lot of money do not always hear the truth because people want to stay close.
  3. In those settings often the only person who will say the truth to them is their spouse. Which can be rough.
- B. It takes a lot of time.
1. It takes a lot of time to make money. It takes some people all the time they have. Because we always feel like we want a bit more, we need to keep working and keep working.
  2. It takes a lot of time to spend it and manage it.
  3. Money gives us options and that fills up our time and as a result we never end up getting around to asking questions like, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”
  4. I was talking with a guy not long ago. He has a big job and was noting that he simply did not have time to do the things I was suggesting he needed to do to strengthen his relationship with God. I think this passage was written for him and perhaps you.
  5. And so I did what I could to argue, your job is an idol. It’s not a bad thing but it is coming between you and God. You can’t let that happen.
- C. Third problem with money: It is worthless in the end.
1. Proverbs 11:4: Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath. Money can’t pay for our sins. Money is worthless in the face of death.

2. Money can provide the delusion that if you have it you are safe. But you are not.

3. And let's be clear, it's not just our death where we end up aware that money isn't going to work. It's the death of those we love.

D. Four: Money does not provide peace

1. I was initially surprised to meet with people who had lots of money and hear that they couldn't sleep through the night because they were worried.

2. And in this case they were worried about losing it.

3. That was a bad day for me. I thought, so when you are on this side of the line you worry because you do not have enough to retire or whatever. But then when you get over the line you worry about losing it.

E. Number Five: Money distorts our sense of self

1. People with money think they are smart about just about everything

a) Prov. 30:8: "Two things I ask of you, Lord do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

2. If you are world's expert in physics, philosophy or chemistry you will necessarily think that you are smart about everything. If you have a lot of money you likely will.

a) I will say that when I worked as a management consultant, medical doctors often do. I did a lot of work with the hospital and insurance companies and doctors were a real challenge because they always assumed they were the smartest person in the room. Professors were only modestly better. Rich people often go to the front of the line.

3. If you make a lot of money you will start to think that you are smart about everything. It brings pride. "Who is the Lord and why do I need him?"

F. The sixth problem with money: It can lead you to make foolish decisions.

1. For instance, a love of money leads some people to make foolish career decisions.

2. I really want to do this but it will not make me any money. So you do something because it helps you make money, and money will fuel you for 10 plus years. Lots of adrenalin. But at some point it wears off. But at some point it will feel empty. Money distorts your view of yourself.

G. Men and women, having money – or loving money whether you have it or not – can blind you from what matters.

IX. Let me offer two pieces of advice. This man asked the right question. Jesus gave him an answer that forces him to assess his own heart.

A. Ask yourself where your heart is? What you really love. And assume that you are in denial.

1. Jesus said to the man, “It’s easier for camel to go thru...”

2. He is not always that strong with others. He is treating this man as if he is under the influence. We are all under the influence. Living here – the amount of money you think you need is more than you need and the amount you think you can give away is less. Trust me on this.

B. Look to the rich young ruler

1. Why? He isn’t converted as far as we know. He did not do the right thing and is not a good example. Keep looking. Who is the real Rich, Young Ruler here? It’s Jesus. Jesus is 31 or 32 years old. And he came from heaven.

2. No doubt the guy asking Jesus about eternal life thought, “I’m far richer than you. I can’t give up what I have. You didn’t have much to give up. And in that he got it exactly wrong. Jesus was likely looking at this guy and thinking, I know your struggle because I was rich. I had everything. And I went into poverty you cannot imagine. I’ve been stripped of my glory. Soon I will lose my friends, clothes, life.” Jesus didn’t tithe his blood, he gave it all. 2 Cor. 8 – Jesus although he was rich became poor

C. Have a plan. Here’s a plan. Sit down and ask myself, “What % of my money am I giving away to Xn ministry and the poor. If it is not 10 percent – the floor, really – then ask yourself how you can push towards that.

1. Figure out what sacrifices you will make to give it away. No sacrifices necessary then you are not giving enough. Then find a way to be accountable. I’d encourage you to have the courage to do that.