

The Rich Ruler
Luke 18:18-23

As we begin our study of these precious scriptures today, may I again call to mind two of my favorite passages that give us clarity about all those many people that Jesus encountered and engaged with as He traveled about in the towns and villages of His beloved Israel.

Both of those passages are given in the Book of John chapter 6. The first is John 6:44 where Jesus tells us that,

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.
(John 6:44)

And then the second is similar, John 6:65 where the Lord Jesus tells us that,

⁶⁵ . . . no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."
(John 6:65)

And nothing could take place in the moments of His day that was by chance or was unplanned. Each and every encounter was carefully orchestrated and carried out in exactly the way God ordained it to be.

And that is exactly what took place with this encounter with this wealthy "Ruler" that we'll study about in our scripture passage today.

Folks, while the Lord Jesus probably looked very much like most all the other men of His day, ordinary in most ways, we need always to remind ourselves that He was so much, much more. As He walked this earth in ordinary human flesh, Jesus was also, at the same time, the Almighty Son of God, with all of the attributes, all of the power and authority of God the Father.

And as this wealthy Ruler came to Jesus seeking to find eternal life, we know from the words of John chapter 14 that He, the Lord Jesus, was the way, the only way by which this man or any other person could find eternal life. Jesus is the only entranceway into the kingdom of God. Those words in John chapter 14,

⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

And may I add that this occasion and this man that we'll talk about today is one of my most favorite of our lord's encounters. That's because within this occasion,

Jesus is able to clarify and to explain some of the most common of misconceptions that those religious leaders of Jesus' day were confused about. And also, and sadly so, we see those same misconceptions taking place with many of the Christians of our day.

Here, as we'll read in a moment, a man approached the Lord Jesus and asked Him the most important question that any person could ever ask of our Lord. He asked Jesus how he could gain "eternal life".

The man is described here as being wealthy and also as being a "Ruler", whether a civil magistrate "Ruler" or a Pharisee or Scribe, we don't know. But we do know that he was a man of considerable authority and wealth. And as we will see, it will be his attachment to his wealth and his position in life that will be his undoing.

Let's pause for a moment and listen to Jesus' response to this man's question about eternal life. These words given to us in the Book of Luke chapter 18 beginning in verse 18,

¹⁸ Now a certain ruler asked Him, (the Lord Jesus) saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹ So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.

²⁰ You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother.' " ²¹ And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

²² So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." ²³ But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich. (Luke 18:18-23)

Firstly, do you not love the way the Lord Jesus establishes who He is with the man's own words, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God."

Again, the understanding about who Jesus really is should always be at the forefront of our thoughts. He is the Almighty God, the One described in John chapter 1 as being the very creator of all the heavens and the earth, and the Savior of all mankind. The exact One that this man, this Ruler needed to ask the question he was asking.

Here, as this man approached the Lord Jesus, He seemed from his words to be “very devoutly religious”, here declaring that for most all of his life he had been “going by the rules” of his Jewish religion.

I can't help but think how this man's claims about his own goodness are similar in many ways to those given by modern day Christians.

If this were an encounter by the Lord Jesus with one of our modern-day Christians, we would hear a response like, I go to Sunday School and Church most every Sunday. I even attend a midweek bible study. I don't cheat on my wife and I don't cheat on my taxes. I try to treat everyone like I would like to be treated and I am honest in my business dealings.

But note here that Jesus wasn't satisfied with the response of this Rich Ruler. And oh dear Christian, Jesus would probably not be satisfied with some of our similar responses now in our day.

Why would that be so? Why would Jesus not be satisfied with our claims about our Christian walk. It all seems so good and so right to us as we make our claims.

The answer is such a simple one that most all people, men and women of Jesus' day and now men and women of our day miss out on it.

The answer is, we each, that Rich Ruler then, and you and I now, have a sinful nature that can't be simply wiped away by some of our good religious behavior. Sin is a much bigger problem for our soul than that.

You and I, and every other person, came into this life with a nature that really is wretchedly sinful. And though we might not be as bad as we could be, we are still sin-filled and in need of something more than just some “coverup good deeds”. Our sin-filled nature and habits need what only the Lord Jesus can offer. We need a redeeming and atoning Savior who can cleanse us from all our sins.

And yes, the Rich Ruler asked the exact right question when he asked about “eternal life” because that is when and where all of our life-circumstances will be measured against the “plumbline” of God's Holy requirements regarding this matter of eternal life.

And no one, not even one person will be allowed to enter into God's eternity in heaven with even one iota of that old sinfulness remaining in them.

Before a person crosses that line into the eternal kingdom of God, they must first be washed completely clean, every sin wiped away so completely that it will be as if the sin had never taken place. And that kind of cleanness can only take place through the cleansing washing of the Blood of Jesus.

I mentioned a moment ago that the Rich Ruler asked the exact right question when he asked about eternal life. May I add that though he asked about the right thing, he actually asked the question in the wrong way. He asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life"?

There are two very important misunderstandings being revealed in this man's words. First, we can never inherit eternal life, at least not in the traditional manner of inheritance, through our human bloodlines. No matter how "good" our parents or grandparents were, the only thing we inherit through them is a "sinful nature".

No, the inheritance of eternal life can only be received if we have been adopted by God The Father. And yes, then, but only then can we inherit eternal life.

Secondly, the Rich Ruler, believing that he would have to "do" something, asked what he must "do" to inherit eternal life. And therein is a very serious misunderstanding that not only the people of Jesus' day were in error about, we in our day also seem to really get this wrong.

Folks, neither you nor I nor that Rich Ruler can "do" anything to gain eternal life. It is only through what the Lord Jesus did by shedding His blood on the cross that we can have eternal life.

Let me say that again. There is nothing "we" can "do". It is only what Jesus did that can gain us eternal life. No other way. No other person. Only the Lord Jesus.

And dear Christian, that is where "Grace" takes its rightful position within this matter of eternal life. It is by Grace and Grace alone that you and I and anyone else can be saved and have eternal life in God's Kingdom.

There's a song that I've mentioned to you often, and in it are the words, "Grace flows like a mighty river". And it does! it really does.

God's grace is mighty and it is powerful, is able to reach into every activity and every venue of life, able to touch every soul and able to bring about God's Will at every encounter.

Sometimes, God's grace brings about dramatic, fore-ordained life-changes within a person's soul. At other times, His grace simply reveals who a person is to themselves so that they can begin to deal with the sin that resides within them.

But ever and always and without fail, God's grace does flow, reaching deeply within every soul so that we are without excuse.

Here in these words, we are able to see that precious grace as it is being worked out in the life of a "Rich Ruler".

Most often, and especially in today's culture, it seems that the busyness of wealth and the enjoyment of riches so occupy the time and the minds of those who are successful that there is very little time left for spiritual considerations. And Jesus will go on to say here that it is so very, very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. And if it were not for that "drawing" by the Holy Spirit, everyone would be lost.

In other places in these scriptures, we are told that it is the nature of our hearts to be deceitful and desperately wicked within us, luring us away from the precious grace of God in favor of things more appetizing to our carnal tastes. And that does seem especially so as it regards wealth and success.

I am reminded of one of the "soils" in the "Parable of the Sower" given in Matthew chapter 13 where Jesus said,

²² Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. (Matthew 13:22)

And then also, recall Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 7 where He warns us to ¹³"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. ¹⁴ Because

narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Those words are so very true. And folks, that is often daily life as we know it to be. Sin and the compelling ways and temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, swirl all about us each day, pulling at us from every side. But thankfully, so also does God's "Grace" flowing and swirling like a river all about us and within us.

And thankfully also, God's grace is not passive, simply there and available to us as so many of our Arminian friends believe, only there if we choose to reach for it.

No, thanks be to God, His grace actually pursues after us, like "The Hound of Heaven", always reaching out to us. And, not desiring that any of us should perish, for His "elect", His grace can become even more compelling than the lure given off by sin and temptation.

And here in today's passage, we can clearly see God's grace at work in the heart and in the words of this man. Again, though it seems that for most of his life this man had concerned himself with temporal and secular things, and had become very wealthy and successful from his efforts, this man also, by his confession, had deeply-held concerns and desires for His eternal future with God. Throughout his life, it seems that he had genuinely tried to follow after the teachings of God.

Yes, some bible scholars might question the man's genuineness and faithfulness in following after the law. And yes, the man might have overstated his faithfulness. But Jesus did not choose to dispute with him on that point. Why would that be so with Jesus being able to know that no one can observe all the requirements of the law all of the time?

The simple truth is, when it comes to gaining eternal life, whether this young man did or did not earnestly seek to follow after the law does not really matter. Earnestly obeying most all of the laws of God will not save a person. Only the shed blood of Christ can satisfy the debt of sin.

But at that moment in time, the young man did not know this miraculous truth about Jesus. He just knew that even after having "attempted" to obey the law

faithfully, for most all of his life, there still remained a gnawing hunger within his soul. And not knowing why he still hungered, he came to Jesus for the answer.

And may we say again that we can clearly see the precious grace of God at work! That man was standing there that day asking that question of the exact right person, because God the Father had “drawn” him to be there.

Did he know that it was God who had drawn him to be there? Probably not! Probably not! He just knew that he hungered for something more from God. And folks, may we also know that even that “hungering” was put there by God’s Holy Spirit. It is all of God! All of God!

But then note here, as this man came to Jesus and as he asked his questions, he quickly found that the solution to the hungering within him would not be an easy one. It would instead, be a very, very difficult answer to receive, to accept, and to follow.

Just because we hunger, and just because we are brought to Jesus, we cannot expect for our problems to all be solved immediately with one simple wave from Jesus’ Almighty hand.

Yes, some things can be immediately helped, or cured, or wiped away, but not all of them. Not all of our problems can be solved so easily. Grace often has other things that it needs to work out within us.

And as this young man came to Jesus, his sin nature was still fully intact within him, and probably working more strongly at that moment than ever before. That’s because when satan is about to lose one of his own, he uses every means available to reel his wandering ones back in.

And no doubt, as we can see by the man’s response, all the forces of the world, the flesh and the devil went to work immediately within his soul to keep him from taking that final step that would bring him the eternal life that he so desperately sought to find in Jesus.

A question . . . “What would that final step be like? What would be the necessary response required of this man for him to have the eternal life that he had asked Jesus about?”

The final decision, the final answer, the final step, the key word that would unlock the door to eternal life for this man would be “surrender”! Surrender!

As we have spoken about on other occasions, a common error that is being made within the church today is the same error that this young man had been making most all of his life. That error in thinking is that all we need to do to have eternal life is to make a “commitment” to God.

And I have no doubt that this man had a very deep and sincere commitment to God and to all His ways. But the problem with “commitment” is that all along the journey of our day, the nature within us makes compromises with that commitment. And often, our compromises are so insignificant, or so seemingly necessary that we don’t even realize we have broken our vows of commitment to God. But we have!

And again, the words given in the Book of James chapter 2 remind us that,
¹⁰ For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all. (James 2:10)

Keeping the commandments of God is a good thing, a very good thing. But attempting to keep it perfectly is impossible. And as these simple words remind us, one misstep in a lifetime of “commitment” causes all the rest of what we have done to end in failure.

But “surrender” is a whole other path to salvation and to eternal life. Not “commitment”, but “surrender”. “Surrender” acknowledges that “no one can come to the Father except through Jesus”. Those words in John chapter 14 again.

⁶ Jesus said . . . “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Those are simple words, but they are absolute. No amount of genuine personal commitment and effort can bring us to God and to eternal life with Him. There is but one path, one way, one truth that leads us to eternal life, and that way is to give up all our ties to this world and to come and follow the Person of Jesus Christ.

And we must know and accept that the path that Jesus offers to us is often very difficult for us, as it was with this rich man. It is the “narrow way” that Jesus spoke about.

For this man, his wealth, his position, his success was satisfying and delightful to his soul. But as God tells us on several occasions, He is a very “jealous God”, giving no quarter to any other form of god that can control us. And wealth, and position, and success can often be a kind of “god” that controls us.

And remember also that Jesus knew the thoughts of the people He encountered. He knew well that this man was controlled by his wealth, his success and his position in life.

And without hesitation, Jesus went straight to the core of what would be required for this man to gain eternal life. This man would have to humble himself, give up his love for his wealth, his success and his position in life. He would need to do as 1 John 2 admonishes us to do and to,

¹⁵ Love not the world, neither the things *that are* in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. ¹⁷ And the world passes away, and the lust thereof: but he that does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

Before we close, may I ask each of us to take a personal look inward, into our own souls? As with this rich ruler, have we perhaps unknowingly placed our faith and our trust in our own ideas, our own principles, our own desires and hopes and dreams? Do we perhaps still hunger for many of the world's wares, a better job with more money, a better position in life.

Folks, that kind of hungering can never be satisfied. All of those things come from the world and the world will never love you and me enough to satisfy us.

Our satisfaction can and will come only through a personal and intimate and loving surrender to Jesus Christ. He truly is our only way, our only truth, our only life.

As we close, may I confess to you that I have often, over the years, prayed that that Rich Ruler later returned and gave his life to Christ.

Is there someone that you need to be praying for, yourself or someone else? As the words of the Lord Jesus called out . . .

Sell all that you have and (give) to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.

Pray with me.