



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 18:18-30
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One Thing You Still Lack...

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Evander Holyfield is the former heavyweight boxing champion of the world. During his boxing career he earned a staggering \$205 million in prize money, \$92 million alone in his last five fights. He lives in a 54,000 square foot mansion in Fayetteville, Georgia. He's an avid collector of cars and has a stable of thoroughbred horses worth millions. His estate is situated on hundreds of acres, where he's built a regulation-size baseball diamond and miles of horse and motorcycle trails. He's also opened a restaurant in the city of Atlanta bearing his name. Though Holyfield has accomplished so much and will be remembered as one of the great champions of all time, he continued to fight after losing his boxing crown. Why? In an interview with author Gary Thomas, he confessed, "I continue to fight because I'm bored."

In Luke 18 Jesus is approached by a wealthy young man, who might have very well felt like Evander Holyfield. This guy had just about everything going for him. Matthew tells us he was young, so he had the health and vigor of youth. He also tells us "he was one who owned much property," so he was a young man of great means. Luke adds that he was a "ruler," which meant he held some kind of respected position in the community. So along with the pride of youth he had the respect and esteem of many. We know him as "the rich, young ruler." Like Holyfield, the rich, young ruler feels that something is missing from his life.

ENCOUNTERING THE DEMAND OF GOD

In v. 18 he approaches Jesus with an important question. "**A ruler questioned Him, saying, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'**" This man appears to have a great deal of respect for Jesus. He calls him "Good Teacher," which was a very unusual way

to address someone, even a respected rabbi. There might be a hint of flattery in this, but he clearly sees Jesus as something more than just another traveling sage. And then he asks Jesus the great question of the ages—what must I do to inherit eternal life? Remember, Jesus has just got done talking about this very thing. Up in vv. 15-17, he wrapped his arms around some babies and said to his disciples that in order to enter the kingdom you have to somehow receive it like a child. It's likely this young man heard that and wondered what that meant and came to Jesus with this question to find out more about how to enter the kingdom; how to inherit eternal life. His words indicate that he expected Jesus to prescribe some deed he could do which would guarantee his entrance into heaven: "What must I DO?" he says. This guy was used to DOING. He would diagnose a problem, and then fix it. That's how he approached everything, even salvation.

We might expect Jesus to be quite impressed or even flattered, but his response comes like a douse of cold water. "**And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone'**" (v. 19). Many have puzzled over this statement. Some have said that Jesus is saying that he shouldn't call him good because he wasn't God. Others have said that Jesus is chiding the man because, without knowing it, he just called him God, which is exactly who he was. I believe that Jesus is exposing this man's shallow perception of goodness. He didn't really believe that Jesus was God. But he threw that word around as if people could actually be good enough to earn eternal life.

This comes out in what Jesus says next. "**You know the commandments, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT**

BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER" (v. 20). Jesus lists five of the Ten Commandments. He focuses on the ones dealing with how to relate to our neighbor rather than the ones dealing with how to relate with God. He also leaves out the tenth commandment against coveting, which of course dealt with greed. In some ways Jesus responds exactly how a good Jew would have expected; he turns to the law. Jews believed that those who kept the law would gain eternal life (Dt. 30:15ff). But, on a deeper level, Jesus is doing more than that. Jesus is still trying to expose this man. He's setting him up. He wants to bring him to the end of himself.

Notice the man's response in v. 21. **"And he said, 'All these things I have kept from my youth.'"** This is really an amazing statement. In an external kind of way, he was being very honest. He hadn't murdered, committed adultery, stolen, lied about someone, or dishonored his parents. He was a good guy; he was a moral guy. Remember, the apostle Paul could say the same thing about himself. He once said, **"As to the righteousness which is found in the law, I was found blameless"** (Phil. 3:6). Jesus takes this claim at face value; he doesn't argue with the guy.

But even more amazing is the fact that this guy had lived that kind of life but he still felt something was missing. Otherwise, why would he have come to Jesus at all? Underneath his claim I hear him saying, "Yeah, I know those commandments and I've kept them, but there has to be something more than that. Something is still missing! It's still not enough!" I don't know what brought this man to this point. I don't know if he was just bored, but something was shaking his world view. It seems he's now really ready to hear the answer he sought.

Jesus gives him that answer in v. 22. **"When Jesus heard this, He said to him, 'One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it**

to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." Why does Jesus say this to him? It almost sounds like Jesus is angry with this guy, but he's not. It's important to understand that Jesus LOVED this young man! Actually, in Mark's gospel he says exactly that at this point, "Looking at him, Jesus felt love for him." It was out of his love that Jesus called this man to "go, sell, give, come, and follow." In some ways it seems like such an unloving thing to say, but the love of Christ is not mushy; it's not sentimental. We might say that real love would accept this man right where he was at, but that's not love. The love of God is jealous. He wants all of us. He tolerates no rivals. This man had another lover. That made him a transgressor of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods besides me." This man was an idolator and Jesus loved him too much to just let him go on like that.

This is a moment of decision for this young man. Notice how he responds. **"But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich"** (v. 23). Why was he sad? Because all of a sudden he saw that he couldn't serve two masters. Jesus had penetrated beneath the surface of this man's rule-keeping morality and exposed a heart that was attached to things. He had kept the last six commandments, but what about the first three? He had another God! He was an idolator.

You know, Jesus will lovingly put his finger on anything in our life that keeps us from following him and him alone. You see, the point is not just to sell everything, but to follow him. But whatever keeps us from that must be discarded. It doesn't have to be wealth. That's why Jesus didn't tell everyone to sell everything and give it to the poor. That's what THIS man needed to do. And there is no doubt for many of us an attachment to things has a powerful pull on our lives. But for you it may be a relationship that's keeping you from following Christ; or it may be a hobby or an interest that has become an obsession; or it may be a career that everyone has always expected you to do, but you know that's not what God wants you to do; or it may just be the American dream of owning a home and raising a family. Any one of these things can

keep us from inheriting eternal life if they prevent us from following Jesus as our exclusive Master. This is not about earning salvation; salvation is still by faith; but how do we know faith exists? Faith shows itself in obedience to the exclusive claim of Jesus upon our lives. That's what James meant when he said, "Faith without works is dead." He says the only way you know your faith exists is by your works.

Do you know what I love about this passage? Jesus wanted this man, not for his wealth, but simply for who he was. Notice that Jesus does not want this man's money! He doesn't tell him to sell everything and give the money to his own little band of disciples. I'll bet the disciples just hated this; they were ready to move in and pass the plate! But Jesus doesn't want his money; he just wants him! Even though he didn't want to let go of his money, that had to be attractive to him.

Actress Reese Witherspoon, who plays the role of June Carter Cash in the movie *Walk the Line*, says: "I was raised going to church every Sunday, and I go to church most Sundays with my kids. For me, where I'm at in my career, so many people want to put you in a place that you're not real and treat you like you're not real. For me it's a great experience of grounding, and I stand next to people who have nothing and who have everything, and we all treat each other the same, because we all are the same. It's just like a little weekly reminder."

But so often people like her stay away from the church because they're treated differently. Imagine what it's like to be her, always wondering about the motives behind people's friendship. That's why these kinds of people are usually the most insecure people in the world—they don't really know who loves them. Jesus didn't want or need this man's money; he just wanted him, but he wanted ALL of him! What do people like this need more than anything else? They need to know that someone loves them for who they are and not for what they do or what they have. Maybe you're in that place this morning. Maybe no one has ever cared about you for who you are. It's always been about your performance; it's always about your money. I want you to meet someone—Jesus. The first step to finding

fulfillment is discovering that he cares about you and wants you to drop everything and follow him.

EXPERIENCING THE POWER OF GOD

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Let's pick up the story in v. 24. **"And Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For 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.' They who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' But He said, 'The things that are impossible with people are possible with God'"** (vv. 24–27). At this point, Jesus isn't just talking to the young man, but to the disciples. There are two things he wants them to know. The first is that being overprivileged is a spiritual disadvantage. How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. There is a sense in which wealth can spoil the soul. Most of us are secretly envious of the wealthy. But Jesus doesn't view them as overprivileged, he views them as spiritually underprivileged. He even says it's impossible for them to enter the kingdom! That's what he mean when he says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. That's an impossibility. Today we might say that it's easier for a BMW to squeeze through the slot of an ATM machine than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples are shocked by this. In that day, wealth was viewed as a sign of God's blessing. If anyone would inherit eternal life, the rich would. That's why they're so shocked. That's why they say, "If the rich can't be saved, then who can?"

Why is wealth a spiritual disadvantage? Wealth is a disadvantage because it deceives us. Paul talks about "the deceitfulness of riches." It deceives us into thinking that we're the master of our own fate. Wealth usually brings a measure of power, and that power makes us believe that we're in control. It can keep us from the simple humility and dependence of a child because it creates a false sense of power and authority. Wealth also is a disadvantage because it

distracts us. The more we get, the more we need to work on holding onto it and making it grow. We get wrapped up in temporal things; things we come to believe are real and important, but they're not. And wealth is a disadvantage because it can enslave us. We can become so dependent on a certain quality of life that we can't live without it. We have to live in a certain kind of home, drive a certain kind of car, wear certain kinds of clothes, enjoy certain kinds of vacations. Of course, the wealthy may say, "I could give this up in a minute," but how seldom they ever do. Maybe the worst thing about wealth is it can make us numb to the hope of heaven.

An African student named Lawrence was giving his first sermon in a basic preaching class. He chose a text describing the joys we'll share when Christ returns and ushers us to heaven. He said, "I've been in the United States for several months now. I've seen the great wealth that is here—the fine homes and cars and clothes. I've listened to many sermons in churches here, too. But I've yet to hear one sermon about heaven. Because everyone has so much in this country, no one preaches about heaven. People here don't seem to need it. In my country most people have very little, so we preach on heaven all the time. We know how much we need it."

You can see why Jesus would say it's impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But there is something else Jesus wants his disciples to know—God can do the impossible. God can break the deceitfulness of riches and cause us to see how helpless we really are. He can make us feel a distaste for the lavish lifestyle we've lived. We can get to the point where vacations and the cars and the clothes actually make us sick. We begin to see the hollow mockery of it all and begin to search out the true realities of life. Sometimes it takes a disaster like losing a job, or a debilitating illness, or a divorce, but God gets our attention. I could tell you many stories of

how God has opened the eyes of the wealthy and how they serve him today. The pretension is gone; they don't have to always be around their own kind; they hold their things loosely; they want to learn; they don't have to be in charge. When you see that, you know there is a God.

Now the disciples are standing there listening to all of this and they're thinking, "Gee, what about us? Are we going to make it in? Haven't we given up a lot to follow Jesus?"

EMBRACING THE PROMISE OF GOD

Listen to Peter. "**Peter said, 'Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You'**" (v. 28). What's Peter feeling here? I think Peter is feeling insecure. It's true, they had left everything, and Peter needs some reassurance that it's all worth it.

Listen to how Jesus responds. "**And He said to them, 'Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life'**" (vv. 29–30). Jesus gives him (and us) a great promise here. He says when you leave what's dear to you for the sake of the kingdom, you'll end up with all these things and more in this life and the life to come. Notice that part of the reward comes in this life. I would have thought we just get our reward in heaven, but he says you get blessed here on earth as well. Has your commitment to Christ severed ties with mother, father, brother or sister? If it has, look around you. I'll show you 100 mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. I love Jesus' math. He says you will get "many times more." So if you leave one mother you may get 100 more. You thought one would be enough; you may not want 100 mothers, but Jesus has more for you! You just can't outgive God!

CONCLUSION

The question is, do we believe that? You see, the only way we can really know if we believe it is by the choices we make. I have a baseball here and many of you know that I used to play baseball and I still coach baseball. How many of you believe that? How many of you believe that I can throw this thing at least better than average? How many of you believe that enough to come up here and hold a balloon in your teeth and let me try to knock it out? Do you see what I mean? Not many of you REALLY believe in my abilities!

We say we believe in Jesus, but do we really? How do we know? The only way we know is by what we DO.

But I need to take this even one step further. Apart from God doing the impossible in your heart, you can't do anything. It's very clear here that eternal life isn't something we can earn by doing. Eternal life is a miracle. To receive it, not just a wealthy person but any person needs to experience the power of God. Without the power of God, we can be church goers and rule keepers and good citizens just like this man in our story, but we can't really break free from our attachment to this world. So we need to cry out to him: "Oh God, would you do that miracle in my heart? Would you squeeze me through the eye of a needle? Would you free me from whatever it is that keeps me from really following Jesus?" The fact that you would ask him to do it is evidence that he has already begun to answer your prayer.

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