

RICH PEOPLE WON'T BE IN HEAVEN?**MARK 10:17-31**

Did you hear about the Texas millionaire who insisted in his will that he be buried inside his \$90,000 Rolls Royce? Yep, car and all. When the time came, one of the two cemetery workers shoveled the last bit of dirt onto the now buried car. Apparently he was impressed by the extravagance of this unusual burial. He turned to his friend and said, "Boy, now that's living, isn't it?" But it's not, is it? Death will come to each of us from the richest to the poorest. Being buried in the finest car won't make any difference whatsoever in where or how you spend eternity. We're looking at several of Jesus' hard sayings. Not all of them, by any means. I could easily do another whole series of messages on another group of different, hard sayings of Jesus. Statements Jesus made that are hard to understand or hard to accept. Sometimes both. Again, that's true of what we're going to consider today.

What's difficult here? What's potentially offensive? There's actually a couple of hard sayings in this story of Jesus and His encounter with a very rich, young member of the Jewish elite. We're going to consider why they're hard. We're going to try to increase our understanding of what was going on. We're going to try to see how Jesus' hard sayings can apply to our lives today some 2,000 years later, because we're serious about wanting to follow Jesus. At the same time, let's resist the temptation to water down what Jesus said or soften it. Make it less demanding. Assume it doesn't really apply to us all that much. That's potentially very dangerous territory. Jesus' words were not intended for just this man alone. They present a challenge to you and me – His disciples 2,000 years later - that must not be evaded or avoided. For me, two great truths come out of this story that I must confront and deal with. Here's the first one:

WEALTH IS A POWERFUL SPIRITUAL ENEMY.

Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" (Mk 10:25 NLT) It was a colorful way to say something's impossible. In other words, if it's possible for rich people to get into Heaven, then it's possible for a great, big, old camel to squeeze its way through the eye of a needle. In other words, it's impossible! No rich people in Heaven? Really? If that makes you nervous, good. Few of us want to admit we're wealthy. But it's impossible to deny the fact that in comparison to the rest of the world and the rest of human history, every one of us here today are among the top 1% of people who have ever lived on this planet in terms of material wealth. That's just a fact. There's probably no saying of Jesus which is harder for those of us fortunate to live in an affluent country to get our heads around. All kinds of efforts have been made to reinterpret Jesus' hard saying about rich people or tone it down. True, Jesus didn't ask all of His followers to give away their wealth and property. Apparently, the twelve disciples did, but others didn't. For example, we know some wealthy women out of their own money provided for Jesus and His disciples during the time of His ministry. Or, what about Zaccheus, the short tax collector, who became a follower of Jesus? He offered to give away half of all his wealth to the poor. Jesus didn't insist he give away all of his wealth, quit collecting

taxes, and physically start to follow Jesus around Palestine. So, what's going on here and how are we supposed to apply this to ourselves?

The Bible has a kind of mixed message when it comes to wealth and money. On the one hand, in several places wealth is presented as a blessing from God to be enjoyed. Wealth honestly acquired in life is a blessing of God to be enjoyed. Faithfulness, hard work, and honesty often do result in material blessing. It's also true that financial wealth has been used and will be used to build the Kingdom of God. Missionaries get supported here and overseas, churches are funded to bring people to Jesus and help them become like Him, children and youth are reached for Christ, the hungry are fed, the desperately poor are given aid, and the uneducated are taught. How? Through the money – the wealth – God's people return to the Lord. But is wealth always and forever a sign of God's blessing? If so, how do you explain the greatest economic windfall in the history of humanity? I'm referring to the oceans of oil under the soil of countries devoted to the religion of Islam. Many of those countries persecute Christians and don't allow the good news about Jesus to be proclaimed freely. Hmmm.....

On the other hand, there are many passages in the Bible that warn you that wealth is a powerful spiritual enemy. It has a mysterious power to make you forget about God. It can make a person greedy and endanger your integrity. It can make you proud and contemptuous of other people. It can open your heart to temptation that corrupts your soul. Ironically, wealth can encourage you to keep God at arm's length. While it's true some wealthy people have promoted the Kingdom of God through their wealth, that group is actually very small. More often than not, there's just something about material wealth and what it does to those who possess it that makes them less interested in the Kingdom of God and not very concerned about advancing it. Most of the time, wealth has a way of pulling you away from God not pushing you toward Him.

The Bible says money can be both a great blessing as well as a great curse. The Jews in Jesus' day had gone to one extreme. They believed wealth was always and forever an indication of God's blessing. Poverty was always and forever an indication of God's judgment. In fact, laws were passed prohibiting anyone from giving away all their possessions precisely because it would reduce that person to being poor. What did it mean to be blessed? If people were wealthy, healthy, had lots of kids, and owned lots of goats, clearly they were blessed. If they were sick and poor, God was cursing them, because of their behavior. Being blessed back then is probably very close to what people today consider to be the life of a celebrity. You can watch TV shows that tell us how great it is to be someone rich and famous. First century people like the disciples would have looked at our celebrities today and said, "LeBron is blessed; J. Lo is blessed; Prince Harry and Princess Meghan are blessed." That's why Jesus' disciples were so flabbergasted by His statement about rich people not being able to enter into the Kingdom of God. They'd never considered such a thing. It was in complete conflict with their cultural beliefs and assumptions. Jesus challenged those assumptions.

And was there a better example of God's blessing on wealthy people than the rich, young man who had this conversation with Jesus? He was a wonderful man on several

levels. He'd faithfully kept God's commandments since the age of twelve. He was moral and upright. He must have accumulated his wealth honestly and legitimately. He was respected by other people. He also had a deeply spiritual side to his character. He approached Jesus because he was deeply attracted to and profoundly impressed by our Lord. Something in Jesus' words and actions awakened a deep spiritual hunger within this man. He was a first century celebrity! And yet, Jesus told him to get rid of the very things that, in his culture, evidenced God's blessing on his life.

All things considered, the weight of Scripture falls far more on what's negative about money than what's positive about it. It's a powerful spiritual enemy. How can we be on guard against it? First, realize money is never something neutral. Jesus called it a kind of god that demands our worship and allegiance. He said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money." (Mt. 6:24 NLT) If you remain naïve about the evil potential of money, you will be a sitting duck for its domination of your lives. Money has the power to make you fix your heart on this world and this world alone. Money has the power to obscure what is of true value.

Philip Yancey is a well-known Christian writer. He went through an interesting journey relating to wealth. For some time, he was a strong advocate of maintaining a simple lifestyle and tried to practice it personally. He admitted he was often frustrated in his attempts to do so because he realized he was still profoundly rich in comparison to the rest of the world. Then after several years, he experienced a financial windfall. His career as a free-lance writer just took off. Suddenly, for the first time, he was receiving far more money than he needed. He began to devour all these ads about ways to use his extra money: free lines of credit, tax shelters, elite investment opportunities. From all sides he heard the same advice: maximize your earnings, put aside for the future, buy stocks and bonds, set up 401K plans, be a good steward of your money.

At first, he found all these financial matters exhilarating. He read financial journals. He followed the prime interest rate religiously. But after a couple of years, doubts began to set in. Although he had more disposable income than ever, he certainly wasn't any happier. Books on investment strategy and tax avoidance tips took the place of his true interests – like reading about wildlife and listening to music. He felt a constant tug to acquire newer clothes, a bigger home, and a nicer car even when what he had was just fine. There were opportunities to build an even bigger, better financial nest egg for the future. Money became a black hole – the more he had, the more he wanted. It resulted in an ironic kind of bondage. His new affluence also had the effect of creating distance between him and other people rather than bringing him closer together with them.

How can we be on guard against money? Second, accept the fact there will always be a kind of spiritual tension between God and money in your life. Reject easy answers and one size fits all solutions. Someone has said, "The Bible does not call us to the same answers, only to the same questions." That's especially true when it comes to money, wealth, and possessions. God may very well want you and me to struggle with the issue of wealth all our lives because it has the potential to mold our character in

profound ways. Be careful of taking Jesus' words here literally. We've looked at another hard saying of Jesus where, at first glance, it looks like He wanted us to hate our families. If you take Jesus' statements absolutely literally, every last one of us should forsake our family and live in total poverty. Is that really what Jesus wanted us to do? Does self-induced poverty really help anyone else? When people are starving, lack adequate shelter, or have no access to health care, at some point God uses money to bring about relief and change. That's brings me to a third strategy.

How can we be on guard against money? Third, disarm its power by giving it away. Giving money away destroys the aura of false worth or false security that always seems to surround wealth. Now, giving is absolutely irrational if there is no God. But if there is a God who expects my undivided loyalty and allegiance to Him, then giving is the best way to remind me of what's truly valuable. We all live here by God's grace and His grace alone. Giving our money away destroys the pride that says, "I worked hard for this – it's mine!" Giving reminds me that everything in this life is on loan - each moment dependent on God's grace and goodness. When John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, was told his house had burned down, he simply said, "The Lord's house burned down. One less responsibility for me." Honestly, that wouldn't be my first response if my house burned down, but I want to move toward that attitude. C.S. Lewis said something very memorable about how much of our money we should give away. "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our [giving] does not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say [it is] too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them."

How can we be on guard against money? Fourth, realize as the giver, you receive the greatest benefit. Who benefits the most from giving? The giver. When God urges you to give to this church, or to a person in need, or to a missionary, you're the one who gets the greatest benefit ultimately. Our need to give money away in Jesus' Name is more important than the need of others to receive our gift. That's what Jesus was saying to this rich, young man. He needed to release His wealth far more than the poor needed to receive it. It was the only way to break the power of the money god in his life. Only in giving away more money than we think we can afford can the power of money be truly broken in your life and mine. Only when we grab money by the throat – so to speak – and force it to serve King Jesus and His Kingdom can we ever hope to be free of its potential to ruin our lives spiritually. A second great truth emerges out of another troubling statement from Jesus. What is that?

GETTING ETERNAL LIFE IS HARD NOT EASY.

Admit it. Doesn't that sound mildly heretical? The man asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk. 10:17 NLT) How did Jesus answer him? "There is still one thing you haven't done. Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.... It is very hard to

enter the Kingdom of God.” (Mk. 10:21, 24 NLT) From one perspective, this looked like an evangelistic dream-come-true opportunity! All Jesus had to do was hand the man a tract and lead him through the sinner’s prayer. Jesus’ response was baffling. He seemed to make it harder rather than easier to become His follower. Besides from the rest of the New Testament, we know salvation is a product of grace through faith as opposed to simply doing good things to earn God’s love. We expect Jesus to say, “Frankly, young man, your question is flawed. There’s nothing at all you can do to inherit eternal life. Salvation is not by good works, but by faith. It’s not about doing but believing.” But Jesus never mentioned faith. In fact, He seemed to do just the opposite. In essence, Jesus said, “Perhaps you haven’t done enough. Do this one more thing (and it was a very hard thing to do), and then you can have eternal life.” What?

This dialogue appears to go against what you and I have come to believe about grace and salvation. Isn’t it really easy to get saved, born again, and become a follower of Jesus? American Christianity says so. Say a little prayer. Get baptized. Believe the right stuff. But Jesus never said it was easy to be His follower, to get into the Kingdom of God, or to receive eternal life. “It is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God.” (Mk. 10:24 NLT) In another place, Jesus said, “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.” (Mt. 7:13-14 NLT) Another hard saying!

Following Jesus enables you to worship the true God and to reject every false god. Everyone worships something or someone. Jesus put His finger on this man’s real god. It was money, wealth, and possessions. He didn’t just have money; his money had him. He didn’t have possessions; his possessions had him. His wealth was his ultimate security in life. That’s what he trusted in even more than God. That’s what mattered most and was of utmost importance to him. Actually, this man hadn’t kept all of the commandments as perfectly as he assumed. The very first commandment tells us not to worship any other gods. The one true God didn’t occupy His rightful place in this man’s life. Therefore, it was impossible for him to experience salvation or get a hold of eternal life. Jesus said it was like trying to stuff a camel through the eye of a needle. Impossible. Just can’t be done. Just can’t get eternal life that way.

Getting eternal life, going to Heaven, entering eternal life can only be obtained by changing your god. We all begin life worshiping something or someone other than the real, true God. Whatever is your ultimate security in life – what you trust in most - is your god. That’s what you worship. You don’t have to be religious to have a god. You don’t have to go to church to have a god. This man’s wealth was his god. That may, in fact, be your god, too. It is for a lot of people who live around us. They may be good, decent, moral people, but their ultimate security is found in their possessions. Now, other things can function as gods, too. In fact, we human beings have an almost infinite ability to create and worship all sorts of alternatives to the one, true God. Your god might be another person, or pleasure, or accomplishments. It might even be yourself. If you are your own ultimate security, then you worship yourself as god.

Jesus' challenge to change your god is always done in infinite love. The disciples remembered, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." (Mk. 10:21 NIV) The word "look" there means a deep, penetrating understanding of someone. Precise insight. There was never anything harsh, cold, or clinical about Jesus in this encounter with this young man. He loved him. He wanted him to get eternal life. He wanted him to enter the Kingdom of God. But the young man had to admit money was his true god, renounce that god, and receive the one, true God. It's the same for you and me. God loves us so much. Jesus wants to give us eternal life. He wants us to be in Heaven for all eternity. But He will always demand that we worship the one, true, real God and Him alone.

I don't know if there's a sadder, more sobering scene in the entire Bible than this one. This man understood exactly what Jesus wanted him to do. Jesus had revealed his true god to him, but the man couldn't reject that god. He actually preferred the god of money to the one, true, real God. And even though Jesus made it very clear that money couldn't give him eternal life, he couldn't give it up. In that moment, he made the worst decision of his life. He refused the gift of eternal life. He probably stayed rich, secure, and influential in this life. But when it came to eternity, he had nothing.

Some years ago now, a Methodist bishop from the African country of Angola, Emilio de Carvalho, attended a church conference in Evanston, Illinois – a wealthy suburb of Chicago. For several decades in the late 1900s, Angola had a Marxist government. He was asked, "What is it like to be a Christian in a Marxist country? Is the Marxist government supportive of the church?" "Oh, no," the bishop responded, "but we don't ask the government to be supportive." "Have there been tensions?" "Yes," said the bishop. "Not long ago the government decreed that we would disband all women's organizations in the church." "Oh, my, what did you do?" his hosts asked. "Oh, the women kept meeting. The government is not yet strong enough to do much about it." "But what will you do if and when the government becomes stronger?"

"Well," said Bishop Carvalho, "we shall keep meeting. The government does what it needs to do. The church does what it needs to do. If we go to jail for being the church, we shall go to jail. Jail is a wonderful place for evangelism. Our church made some of its most dramatic gains during the revolution when so many of us were in jail. In jail, you have everyone there in one place. You have time to preach and teach. Yes, twenty of our Methodist pastors were killed during the revolution, but we came out of jail a much larger and stronger church." Sensing the drift of these questions, Bishop Carvalho said, "Don't worry about the church in Angola. God is doing fine by us. Frankly, I would find it much more difficult to be a pastor in Evanston, Illinois. Here, there is so much, so many things. It must be hard to be the church here."

Ironic, yes? A pastor from a communist country feeling sorry for the church here in America. But it is hard to be a true church in this country. And despite all of our wonderful freedoms, it's hard to be a genuine follower of Jesus. One big reason is our wealth and affluence as a country. I refuse to remove the tension Jesus Himself intended to create. Wealth is a powerful spiritual enemy. Getting eternal life is hard not easy. If that's not comforting, sorry. That's God's Word for us today.