

Sermon – 09/03/2014 am

One Thing You Lack

Study Text: Luke 18:18-23

When Jesus walked in the land of Palestine he met lots of people; lots of different people, just as he would if he walked in our land today. Many came to him for healing – lepers, lame and blind people. Demon possessed people came. Widows and poor people came. All went away healed and happy.

Not many rich people came to Jesus. There were the tax collectors who were rich but also social outcasts. These went away happy to be accepted by Jesus when they repented – for example Zacchaeus. There were the Pharisees of course, men who were religious and probably rich.

The incident reported in our reading today tells of a rich man who came to Jesus and went away sad. It is perhaps the most tragic story in the Bible. A seemingly sincere seeker of eternal life came to the giver of eternal life but went away empty handed. Why? Why this failure to get what he wanted? Was it too costly? But it was free! What was the obstacle in this encounter with Jesus?

1. Life

Jesus was approached by a 'certain ruler' (18:18). We are not told his name but learn from the other gospels that he was young and that he came running along the road to Jesus and knelt before him (Matthew 19:20, Mark 10:17). This story is told in all three synoptic gospels. He was a local ruler, landowner or some sort of official, not a religious ruler. He would have been taught by the Pharisees, as indicated by his knowledge of the commandments and understanding that by keeping these and doing good works he would get eternal life.

Jesus was known as a religious teacher. He was called Rabbi or Teacher. This young man approached Jesus with respect, calling him Teacher, to ask a very important question, a question about life. In fact he called Jesus 'Good Teacher' (18:18). Jesus picked up on this because even Rabbis and Pharisees were not called good. Good was understood in the sense of 'perfect', and since no man is perfect no man was called good.

Jesus did not exactly rebuke the young man, but wanted him to reflect on what he just said. He did not want him continuing in his ignorance. His approach to Jesus was sincere but was marked by superficial thinking. He needed to understand what he was saying and not be parroting off words he did not understand, and certainly not trying to flatter Jesus, as some suggest he was doing.

Jesus told him that 'No one is good except God alone' (18:19 ESV). Why was Jesus correcting him on this point? Was he telling him not to call Jesus good – as some commentators think? But this is not what Jesus said. He was asking the young ruler to reflect on what he called Jesus. 'Teacher' describes a man's work, but 'good' describes his character. It amounts to being without sin. Jesus did not tell him to stop calling him good; he said, 'Why do you call me good?' (19:19). In other words, did the ruler understand what he had just said?

The ruler's question to Jesus was, 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (18:18). Although he was keeping the commandments, as he later indicates, he was not sure that he had eternal life. Jews, like most people, had a sense that there was more to life than just this world. They thought about life after death. It is not often mentioned in the Old Testament but Daniel writes about the resurrection and everlasting life – as distinct from shame and everlasting disgrace (Daniel 12:2). Abraham looked forward to a heavenly country (Hebrews 11:16).

So this ruler wanted to inherit eternal life. His question may be sincere but it is fundamentally flawed. Why? What is wrong with his question? It is the same question being asked by millions today all over the world. The tragedy is that if we keep asking this question we will never obtain eternal life. As Leon Morris writes, 'He assumed that eternal life must be earned and that some work he was not doing at present was required'. What was the work or ritual that he must do to get this reward?

Interestingly he was in the right track with the word 'Inherit' because an inheritance is received, not earned. But this truth appears to have eluded him. This man was kneeling before the One who is the way, the truth, and the life, the One who said whoever believes in him will have eternal life. But all he could ask was 'What must I do?'

His question is in stark contrast to the prayer of the tax collector, who went home justified and having eternal life. His prayer was God, 'have mercy on me a sinner' (18:13). This ruler was seeking reward for his works rather than mercy because of his sin. Leon Morris writes, 'The eternal life he was seeking was life in the presence of the awe-ful purity of God. If he would only reflect on what that meant, he would surely see that he was totally unfitted for the blessing he sought. He would then cry for mercy not complacently seek reward'.

2. Look at the Commandments

'You know the commandments' said Jesus, after setting him right about only God being good (18:20). He went on to list the second table of the Ten Commandments that deal with loving your neighbour. Why he put honouring your father and your mother at the end rather than at the beginning is not clear. It seems Jesus expected the ruler to start ticking them off – yes, yes, yes. This was the way the young man was thinking, as Jesus well knew, and picks up on this superficial level of thinking before going on to deeper issues.

The ruler told Jesus he had kept all these commandments since his youth (18:21). This might seem a bold thing to say but remember he was not thinking deeply. His religious teachers told him to keep the letter of the law not the spirit of the law. They only looked to outward things, so in all likelihood he had not committed adultery, not killed anyone and not stolen anything. Not having told a lie seems doubtful, but Jesus does not pursue this.

He was not the only Jew who claimed to have kept all the commandments. Paul writes of being blameless concerning the righteousness which is in the law (Philippians 3:6). But when confronted by the risen Jesus he understood all such righteousness is as dung. The only righteousness that saves is the righteousness that comes from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).

Jesus also referred to the Ten Commandments because they reveal sin. They are there as a 'tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Galatians 3:24). Let us also remember what Jesus says about the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. They are not only outward but inward. Do not murder includes getting angry and calling your brother a

fool. Do not commit adultery includes lusting after a woman. The young ruler did not think of the commandments in this way.

3. Lack One Thing

Jesus listened to what the ruler said. He did not pounce on him for his bold claim to have kept the commandments. Why? Because it would have meant going along with his way of thinking – what must I do? If you criticise a legalist for their failure to keep the law they react by redefining the law or making new laws.

You will have noticed that Jesus did not refer to the first table of the Ten Commandments. What do we read there? ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exodus 20:3). If we go to the summary of the first table of commandments it is, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind’. This ties in with God being good – absolutely good, holy and just. God is a jealous God who demands whole-hearted commitment and worship.

Jesus issued this young ruler with a challenge. He put him to the test. It was in the form of, ‘Do you love me more than these?’ (John 21:15). He said, ‘You still lack one thing. Sell all you have and give to the poor and your will have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me’ (18:22).

It was a simple test. It was not as if the man would become destitute; Jesus promised treasure in heaven. Heaven must have something to do with eternal life that he was seeking. The test included an invitation to follow Jesus, to be a servant of the King. ‘Sell all you have and give to the poor’; he would even have the joy of seeing the poor helped. This was the one thing Jesus asked him to do in order to have eternal life.

We must not for a moment think that selling everything or living in poverty will automatically mean God will bless us – like some in the Church of Rome. Nor are we to think that riches automatically mean God is blessing us. It is confusing but there it is – some think poverty is God’s blessing and other riches. The Jews, and some churches today, hold that riches are a sign of God’s blessing. Yet Jesus goes on to say, ‘How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!’ (18:24).

Jesus is concerned about this man’s heart – not his bank account. But the man was more concerned about his bank account than his heart. Therein lay his problem. As he thought about the challenge set by Jesus – ultimately the challenge of life or death – ‘He became very sorrowful, for he was very rich’ (18:23). Mark writes, ‘He went away sorrowful’ (Mark 10:22).

This is one of the saddest pictures in the Bible. A young man who came to Jesus asking about eternal life was told how it could be his, yet he went away in deep sorrow. Why? Because he was very rich. Not only rich, but he loved his money more than Jesus. He clung to his treasure on earth and refused the offer of treasure in heaven. The words of the missionary, Jim Elliot, come to mind: ‘He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose’.

You may be saying to yourself, ‘This hardly applies to me. What do I possess? I am not a rich person’. But can you honestly say you are willing to give up all you possess in order to follow Jesus? A young woman called to the mission field said, ‘But what about my job? What if there’s no job when I come back?’

What is it that Jesus asks you to give up in order to follow him. What is the one thing you still lack? He does not ask everyone to sell all they possess. There are rich men in the Bible who faithfully followed the Lord – Abraham for instance. Now it is interesting with Abraham

because he was also put to the test by God. It was a greater test than this young ruler faced. God asked Abraham to offer up his only son as a sacrifice. Abraham passed the test; he put the Lord God above and before everything in this world, even his own precious son.

One thing you lack. If it is not riches that keep you from following Jesus with all your heart it may be something else. My neighbour says he will never follow Jesus because his son died in his twenties. What if God takes your son or daughter – will you still follow him? Maybe God will ask you not to marry a person you love – as he does if that person is not a believer. Who will you choose? Maybe God will ask you to give up fame on the sporting field, in the theatre, or in some academic field. All of us must be ready to face the test. ‘Do you love me more than these?’

There are people who once came to church seeking eternal life – just like the rich young ruler – but they have gone away sad. They failed the test. They were not willing to put Jesus before everything else in their life and follow Jesus. What about you?

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