

Sermon – 09/03/2014 pm

Riches and the Kingdom of God

Study Text: Luke 18:24-30

On a recent flight I was reading about Sadhu Sundar Singh, a renowned Indian evangelist in the early 1900's. His father was a Sikh, a rich and proud man. His mother taught him about all the great religions and sent him to a mission school, but never thought he would be converted. He was just a teenager when he told his father that he had become a Christian. Persuasion turned to threats from his father and brothers when he refused to give up his new found faith. He was cut out of the family inheritance. They tried to poison him in the way a friend of his was poisoned after confessing Christ. Sundar Singh left home and family without anything but the clothes he wore to become a wandering Christian Sadhu.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem when a rich young ruler ran up to him. He asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. After questioning him about the commandments, Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and follow him. He was a very rich man and could not bring himself to part with his riches. He wanted to have eternal life but was not prepared to trust in Jesus alone. Filled with sorrow, he turned away from the giver of eternal life. Looking at him go, Jesus said with great solemnity, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God' (18:24).

1. Needles Eye

When Jesus told this young man to sell all he had he was not joking. He was not saying it would be a good thing to sell all he had, but if he found that difficult he could still come with Jesus. Jesus did not compromise on his demand. Jesus loved him but did not go running after him begging him to come back (Mark 10:21). It was with love and sorrow that he watched him go. He saw Satan tighten his grip on the young man's heart as he went lusting after the things of this world.

Lusting after the things of this world prevented this man from trusting in Jesus. Lusting may seem a strong word but this is what we read in 1 John 2:16. You might say fear of being destitute would keep you from selling all you have to follow Jesus. Lust or fear, it makes no difference. Whatever keeps you from trusting in Jesus with all your heart must go?

You may be thinking, 'I am not rich; this does not apply to me'. But if you have clothes and shoes, food on your table every day and a roof over your head you are rich. I remember teaching village people on the subject of poverty. I was teaching along the lines of what I have just said to you. I put my boot on the bench as I spoke about having shoes to wear only to realise that most of the class did not have shoes. They wore sandals made from old car tyres. One of the ladies lived in a mud hut with a grass roof which leaked when it rained. Surely we are rich by comparison.

'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' said Jesus (18:25). Much has been written trying to explain these words. Some want to correct the Greek to make 'camel' read 'cable'. Others say the eye of the needle was the name of a narrow gate into the city. But it is just a saying, invented or adopted by Jesus. He is using picturesque and proverbial language to portray what is impossible.

The disciples understood what Jesus was saying because they asked 'Who then can be saved?' (18:26). They did not understand Jesus to be speaking of something that is difficult, but of something humanly impossible. As we will see, he got them thinking about their own attitude to wealth and worldly things, and their own position in the kingdom. As fishermen they were not considered wealthy men, and whatever they had they left to follow Jesus when he called them. But they were not immune to the temptations of the world – Judas helped himself to the money bag and the sons of Zebedee argued about who would be the greatest.

We previously said that Jesus does not ask everyone to sell all they have and give to the poor. I wonder what response he would get if he did! Think of people on the north shore (fat camels!) – and think of yourself. Would you be willing to dispose of all you have in order to follow Jesus? Remember Sadhu Sunder Singh. Remember Levi in the gospel as he left his tax booth to follow Jesus (Mark 2:14).

Remember Jesus leaving the glory of heaven to come into this world and die on the cross for you. 'He who was rich for your sakes became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich' (II Corinthians 8:9). Paul was writing about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. One commentator writes, 'It is a miracle of grace when those who have wealth do not trust in it ... man cannot but God can break the spell which wealth exercises over the wealthy'. It is hard, it is very hard, for those who are rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is impossible for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:24).

It is not money or things in themselves that are the problem – it is the love we have for these things. 'The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows' (I Timothy 6:10). The rich young ruler may have been the first to turn away from Jesus in sorrow but he was certainly not the last to pierce himself through with many sorrows because of his lust for money and worldly things.

2. Nothing Impossible For God

The proverb spoken by Jesus had a powerful effect on his hearers. They had just seen the saddest thing that a person can ever see. You might think death, especially the death of a friend, is the saddest thing you can even see. Let me assure you that to see a person turn away from Jesus is much sadder. Spiritual death has much greater consequences. I have wept over people from this church who have turned their back on Christ. I do not weep when a brother or sister in Christ goes to be with the Lord.

It is said that once people leave they never return. People who turn their back on Jesus become hardened to the gospel. People who are rich love the good life and are deaf to the gospel. You cannot get them to come to worship – but God can.

Jesus answered the despairing question of his disciples saying, 'things that are impossible with men are possible with God' (18:27). With God all things are possible. The grace of God is irresistible. God can turn a lover of money, a lover of the flesh, a lover of fame or a lover of the world into a lover a God. Let them hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and let God work in their hearts by the Spirit of grace.

If people will not sell all they have maybe God will take it from them. He permitted all Job's possessions, including his family, to be taken from him because of Satan's accusations. God

may use desperate means to bring a person to their knees because eternal life is a desperate matter.

We must guard against the dangerous teaching that riches are always a sign of God's blessing. This is what the Jews taught and it is what is taught in some churches today. It is called the 'prosperity gospel'. Far from teaching how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, they in effect teach that those who are rich are already in the kingdom because riches are a sign of God's blessing.

God looks on the heart. When he blesses us he does not ignore our heart. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace, not gold and silver or bricks and mortar.

3. No Man's Debtor

I often heard my father in law say, 'God is no man's debtor'. As a young man he left home to go as a missionary to India. He lived by faith, trusting in God to provide for his young family. When I asked my wife if she would go with me to serve the Lord to India she knew better than I did what this meant. She had grown up hearing the words 'God is no man's debtor'. The words as such as not found in the Bible but they do sum up what Jesus said to the apostle Peter when he said, 'we have left all and followed you' (18:28, ESV has 'left our homes').

Why did Peter ask Jesus this question? Was it that he was not sure about being in the kingdom of God after hearing what Jesus just said about entering the kingdom? Whatever the reason it gives us a rare glimpse into the personal sacrifice that Peter and others made to follow Jesus. They left their boats and fishing nets, their jobs as it were, to follow him. They had to depend on gifts and hospitality like Jesus. Like Jesus they sometimes slept rough (Luke 9:58). On the road with Jesus Peter must have missed his wife; he would not have been able to buy her expensive gifts like other people.

But Peter was not complaining. He was not following Jesus for any earthly gain – although another disciple called Judas was. He was simply reflecting on what Jesus had just said and what he had just seen with the rich young man turning away from Jesus. Maybe it was imprudent of him to remind Jesus that they had left their homes to follow Jesus, but Jesus does not rebuke him.

Jesus' response is to show Peter that he is more than 'compensated' for any sacrifice that he has made. He must not think that God was in some way obligated to him. Jesus solemnly assures him that whatever he has sacrificed, he will 'receive many times more' or a 'hundredfold more' from God (18:30, Mark 10:10:30). Jesus promised the young ruler treasure in heaven. He promised Peter eternal life. This is the greatest gift anyone can receive from God. However much you leave it will never be as much as the gift of eternal life.

It is interesting that Jesus promises much more 'in this present time' or in this life (18:30). This does not mean worldly treasure. He does not promise to satisfy your greeds, just your needs. As his disciple you will not have the same worldly greed. The things of this world will not attract you like they did. You will have the wisdom to know that people who live in big houses – houses plural, and own cars – cars plural – are often the most miserable people. Rich and famous people too often take their own life because of loneliness and misery.

Jesus promised Peter brothers and sisters and mothers and children, as well as a house (Mark 10:30). Relationships are the most important thing in life; a relationship with God and relationships with other people. God can supply such relationships within family, or within a

church. Peter left family but found himself in a wonderful relationship with Jesus and with the other followers of Jesus.

Though far from home, missionaries are often blessed in relationships with the local people. God is able to richly bless us (Philippians 4:19). He will bless us in ways beyond what we can imagine (Ephesians 3:20). He blesses us with things that money cannot buy. Jesus assured Peter, he assured my father in law, and he assures you today that 'God is no man's debtor'.

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