

Grace and The Rich Young Ruler

The account of the rich young ruler's interview with Jesus has been the basis for many lessons that I have taught through the years. It pictures to us an admirable, sincere, and God-fearing young man who disappointed Jesus, and us, because he loved his wealth more than his soul. He should have been willing to sell what he had and to give it to the poor in following Jesus. At least, that is what I thought!

Though Jesus was warning of the peril of riches, that is not his main lesson. I overlooked the most important lesson. Even though I could belittle the fellow for unwillingness to sell everything and give it to the poor, I went on to "explain away" such an actual requirement for us except for laying a little uncertainty and guilt on my listeners. After all, Peter did not tell inquirers on Pentecost, "Repent, be baptized, sell all that you have, and give it to the poor in order to be saved!"

The main point of the recorded encounter is not concerning the use of wealth but the answer to the question, "Who can be saved?"

We have felt disappointment when the fine young man turned away sorrowfully choosing his possessions over following Jesus. At what point was Jesus disappointed by him?

This admirable person seemed to have everything going in his favor, for he was young, wealthy, a ruler, upright, sincere, God-fearing, respectful, and eager for self-improvement. He must have been handsome also! Have you ever known a nicer person? Without regard for the dignity of his position, he ran to Jesus and knelt before him inquiring, "*Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?*" (Matt. 19:16-30).

Jesus saw his need for better understanding, so he challenged his perspective with, "*If you would enter life, keep the commandments.*" "Which?" "*You shall not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness and honor your parents and love your neighbor as yourself.*" Now, we are talking! We are on the right track, are we not? Everybody must keep all his commandments in order to be saved!

The quick answer was, "*All these I have observed; what do I still lack?*" Wow! What a fine man! Who could find a more exemplary character? He seemed to have his head on straight, with everything in balance and in his favor while still eager to meet any other requirement. If he was not saved, what chance could such a person as I have?

The young man still had not gotten the point, so Jesus played the man's game with him one step further. "*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*" He was beaten in his own game, so "*When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.*"

Was this the point in which Jesus was disappointed with him? Or was it not when he asked his first question, "*What good deed must I do?*" Not, "What must I do?" There are requirements of

us, but no good deed can suffice. Perhaps he was willing to buy new cushions for the pews, build a new synagogue, or start a fund for poor widows. Great! But no one can gain forgiveness of sins through even the greatest works of unselfishness.

When Jesus further challenged him to keep the law, he must have been even more disappointed that he did not respond like this: “Jesus, you know that I cannot keep all the commandments perfectly. Besides, you know that commandments do not offer life. Our great law given by Moses did not offer life, for law cannot give life. It condemns but cannot forgive.” Instead, the young man responded like we commonly do by refusing to admit his inability to keep law. A sort of “humble self-righteousness” was his shaky claim to eternal life. His lack of confidence in that claim led him to seek confirmation from Jesus. I have been in the same boat, paddling laboriously, haven’t you?

“All right,” Jesus challenges him further, “since you keep the letter of the law by not killing, stealing, and such, how about the spirit of the law – the greatest of laws/principles – that of unselfish use of all you have in demonstrating love for your neighbor as for yourself?” “That’s too much! I give up. You are making unreal demands, Jesus.”

In reality, Jesus was not making those demands, nor have all those demands been made of us. He was trying to convince the young man that his own approach to the gaining of eternal life was wrong. The ruler, himself, had set that standard. It was beyond human achievement. The young man could see no further than his own abilities, good works, and keeping of rules. He did not even know the next question to ask!

The disciples asked the next question. After the young man went away, Jesus further emphasized that riches cannot buy the way into the kingdom of heaven any sooner than a camel can go through the eye of a sewing needle.

Seeing that a person like the young man who seemed to have every good quality in his favor could not be saved, the perplexed disciples asked in doubting astonishment, “***Who then can be saved?***”

“*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible!*” Wow! There is the long-overlooked lesson! How did I miss it so many years? Man cannot do enough good deeds, keep enough commandments, “go to church” enough, keep enough right rituals, pray enough, worship enough, and demonstrate enough benevolence to save himself. But God can save the man of such admirable qualities, or the vilest of sinners, by his grace through the atonement of Jesus.

At any point in the narrative, if the rich young ruler had asked Jesus for salvation instead of giving his resume of his own works of achievement which he thought were required, no doubt, Jesus’ answer would have been drastically different. “Believe in me, and I will give you life. Take my yoke upon you. It is light. Not a burdensome, galling load of constant demands for achievement. Fulfilling love is not burdensome. It is a joy rather than an enslaving burden. I will give you rest from such impossible demands. Thus giving your whole self as a daily, living offering you can happily use all that you are and all you possess in serving God by serving his people.”

Why did not Jesus call the disillusioned inquirer back and explain grace to him? We can only conjecture. Maybe Jesus knew that his heart and mind were not ready for such a challenging revelation. We may gain some comfort in thinking the young man later pondered and came to understand what Jesus was preparing his mind to receive. He might have been among the 3000 who responded on Pentecost. In similar manner, Jesus prayed for those crucifying him, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing," and they were convicted on Pentecost and were forgiven when they submitted to the terms announced by Peter and the other apostles. Grace was available for the best and the worst!

For all of us, like those disciples who had left all to follow Jesus, there will be multiplied and satisfying rewards in addition to the eternal life Jesus offered.

These comments are based on the account in Matthew 19:16-30 with no effort to cover each detail or to compare the accounts in Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30. []

(Cecil Hook; October 2006. This is a revision of "An Overlooked Lesson" written in January 2001.)

A NEW BOOK. During the last twenty years, Buff Scott, Jr. and I have published ideas of reform, even though not always emphasizing the same things. He has just now published an 80-page paperback titled, "Mad Church Disease" with a cover blurb, "The Blunders and Digressions of the Institutional Church" which alert you to the nature of the book.

He states, "For a number of years, I gave hot pursuit to church ministries as a pulpit minister and partisan pastor, but later discovered that my efforts to 'church' others were 'a chasing after the wind' and an emptiness that could not find an exit. That hollow part of my life was resolved in 1976 when, after careful evaluation of and research into institutional religion, I concluded that Churchianity was not the solution to sin, nor to the world's problems. It was at that point that I launched an expose of the institutional church and opened up its numerous maladies and apostasies."

That's what his book is about. You may order from Buff Scott, Jr., 12222 N. Paradise VLG Pkwy, S. Unit 443, Phoenix AZ 85032 (USA). \$5.65 postage paid.