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Luke 18:15–30

62nd Message

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# WANT TO GET RICH?

SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE

In the classic musical “Fiddler on the Roof,” Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman, is struggling to survive, while raising five daughters in the Russian village of Anatevka. As he is feeding his animals in the barn, he dreams of the material comforts that wealth would bring him and breaks out into the now famous song, “If I Were a Rich Man.”

Dear God, you made many, many poor people.  
I realize, of course, that it’s no shame to be poor.  
But it’s no great honor either!  
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?”

If I were a rich man...

I’d build a big tall house with rooms by the dozen,  
Right in the middle of the town.  
A fine tin roof with real wooden floors below.  
There would be one long staircase just going up,  
And one even longer coming down,  
And one more leading nowhere, just for show.

The most important men in town would come to fawn on me!  
They would ask me to advise them,  
Like a Solomon the Wise man  
“If you please, Reb Tevye...”  
“Pardon me, Reb Tevye...”  
Posing problems that would cross a rabbi’s eyes!

And it won’t make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong.  
When you’re rich, they think you really know!

What do riches represent for Tevye? The answer is ease, security and prestige. But the Bible gives a different view of riches and sets forth that true wealth that endures and satisfies is not found in money, ease, or power, but in the personal relationships that we have created, nurtured and invested in.

**Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the children of one’s youth.  
Blessed is the man  
who fills his quiver with them!  
He shall not be put to shame  
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Ps 27:3–5 ESV)**

The psalmist writes that “blessed is the man (*geber* = “man” in his strength, “warrior:” from the root “to be superior, strong”) who fills his quiver with these.”

He has made a choice to make it his life’s purpose to invest in sons and daughters (spiritual as well as physical). And the result is that when he is attacked, he finds a broad base of loving support of protection that is far better than money.

“Want to Get Rich?” is our theme this morning and we will examine three aspects of wealth:

I. The Riches of the Poor

II. The Poverty of the Rich

III. The Low Road to Eternal Riches

## I. The Riches of the Poor

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15–17)

The picture of Jesus welcoming “children” is so familiar to us that it is difficult to break through centuries of our idealized depictions to capture the original context. The mood is much more desperate than our serene Sunday school images. Dr. Luke identifies those who are brought to Jesus not as “children,” but as “newborns” (*brephos* “infants,” “babies”). Joel Green notes,

In Roman antiquity, babies were susceptible to adverse conditions of all kinds, resulting in a high mortality rate among children... [and] possessed little if any intrinsic value as human beings... perhaps accounting for the widespread practice of infanticide and child abandonment.<sup>1</sup>

Given the high mortality rate among children, “the picture is one of peasant women, many of whose babies would be dead within their first year, fearfully holding them out for Jesus to touch.”<sup>2</sup>

The disciples, eager to protect Jesus’s pilgrimage from an invasion of children, respond like holy policemen and land a harsh rebuke over the whole operation. It is likely that they spotted an important ruler standing in the wings who wanted a word with Jesus. Like the President’s Chief of Staff who, seeing a foreign minister arriving at the Oval Office, quickly clears out all the administrative staff, interns and janitors to make way for the arriving dignitary, so the disciples try to give this ruler easy access to Jesus. Sadly their actions are a violation of everything that the kingdom stands for, so much so, that Jesus summons them (*proskaleomia* “to call to oneself,” “to call in a legal or official sense”) to an executive meeting to set them straight. The work of a disciple is to “enable” not “hinder” people from coming to Jesus; and children—particularly newborns, who represent the most vulnerable and needy of intercession and help.

Jesus expands the category of the vulnerable by using the term *paidion* (“household servant,” “child” frequently used to emphasize the serving capacity of young people), which referred not only to young children, but also to household slaves, who lived in perpetual subordination within the Greco-Roman household. Jesus is telling the disciples that those they deem of little or no social significance are in fact the card-carrying members of the kingdom! Don’t shuffle the children off the stage to some back room to make way for the VIP’s, for “to these belong kingdom of God.”

Secondly, children play a vital role for the rest of us. Keeping children in our midst serves as a constant reminder of *how* one receives the kingdom. David Garland expands the thought:

Jesus does not say that we are to become like little children, and he does not refer to some inherent quality in children, such as their imagined receptivity, humility, truthfulness, lack of self-consciousness...or any other idealized quality that commentators often attribute to children. None of these virtues were associated with children in first-century culture, and they reflect a contemporary, sentimental view of children. In light of the preceding parable of the tax collector who pled for mercy from God out of his helplessness, so infants are utterly helpless for survival...[and] cry out for help, even when others object to their cries. They are not self sufficient, but receive everything as a gift. Likewise disciples are to receive the reign of God as those who are totally helpless and recognize their total dependence on God for their salvation.<sup>3</sup>

David writes that he learned this kind of trust and total dependence right from the womb, as he lay limp in the loving arms of his mother as he nursed.

**Yet you are he who took me from the womb;  
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. (Ps 22:9)**

And Peter explains that the poor have a spiritual edge over the rich, because they are utterly dependent upon God for their daily needs and are therefore forced to exercise their faith continually in their cries to God.

**Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? (Jas 2:5)**

Kenneth Bailey concludes, “No one unaided enters the kingdom. No one achieves great things and inherits eternal life. An inheritance is a gift, not an earned right.”<sup>4</sup> One can only approach God like a child who is helpless and dependent.

## II. The Poverty of the Rich

### A. Unmasking flattery

**And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” (18:18–20)**

A ruler, who has been patiently waiting in the wings has just heard Jesus say that “whoever does not receive the reign of God like a little child, will never enter it.” Therefore he asks, “Good teacher, what will it take for someone like me to inherit eternal life?” “What must I do to have a share in the age to come?” Jesus’ abrupt and harsh response takes us aback. Like an Old Testament prophet, Jesus exposes the ruler’s hidden motives. The ruler’s question isn’t really a question, but a ploy for public praise by one who is proud of his record. As Bailey explains,

The ruler is trying too hard. He tries to impress with a compliment and perhaps hopes to be greeted with some lofty title in return. In the Oriental world, one compliment requires a second.<sup>5</sup>

If he expects Jesus to reciprocate with a similar compliment, he is quite mistaken. Jesus takes offense and refuses to participate in this word game of flattery that elevates one person above another. The

only one we should seek to honor with praise for his goodness is God. Jesus’ rebuke reminds the ruler of the first commandment that we put no other gods before the one true God, and to acknowledge him as the source of life for all that we need.

The answer to “what” must he do to inherit eternal life is quite simply “keep the commandments.” The fact that Jesus says “you know the commandments,” suggests that this ruler “is not only a person of elevated social status, but one who exercises his leadership within the context of the synagogue.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus lists five commandments that all address covenantal love within the community, which suggests that Jesus is primarily concerned with how the ruler treats his neighbor.

#7 Do not commit adultery,	loyalty to family
#6 Do not murder,	protecting life
#8 Do not steal,	property
#9 Do not bear false witness,	protecting reputation
#5 Honor father and mother.	loyalty to family

And their chiasmic arrangement moving from (the outer rings to the center) loyalty to family, to protecting life and reputation, to the center – the issue of property, “You shall not steal,” reveals the ruler’s Achilles heal.

### B. Unmasking Idolatry

**And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Luke 18:21–22)**

Despite Jesus’ initial rebuke, the ruler continues to stand proud and self-assured that he has more than made the grade. Carefully removing the word *‘good’* from his address, he confesses that he has kept all these commands since his youth. Like the Pharisee in the earlier parable, he thinks he is going to graduate at the head of his class. And then the hammer falls. He is an absolute failure. Jesus explains that he’s lacking just one thing. Yet that one thing is everything.

This is an invitation to discipleship, the same invitation that was given to the twelve. We might be turned off by the man’s self-sufficient pride, but Jesus isn’t. Mark tells us “Jesus, looking intently at him, loved him.” Jesus loves him, loves him deeply and wants him to be a disciple. But before he can be a disciple he has to know the truth, the truth about himself. Jesus hits his one weakness—he is a man of great wealth, and sadly his wealth had stolen his affections away from God. “If the rich ruler had truly kept all those commandments, he would not be ‘exceedingly rich.’”<sup>7</sup> The man is guilty of violating the second commandment, others gods had replaced his love for Yahweh.

To deal with the idolatry and have a share in the age to come, he must completely give up his idolatrous relationship with wealth—he must **sell** all his possessions, **distribute** it to the poor, and he will have his **treasure in heaven**. “Entering the kingdom of God is the result of wise spiritual investment, and Jesus asks persons to exchange their present possessions, securities, and status for something better.”<sup>8</sup>

Think what would have happened if he had obeyed. On the one hand, if he were to identify with the poor by becoming poor, he would lose his social standing and most likely incur the shame of his family by selling the family estate. One never parted with ancestral land in Israel. Even when property rights were lost through incurred debt, they reverted back to the original heirs in the year of Jubilee.

Maintaining land meant securing your rights to inheritance and your continuity as the people of God. Now when Israel has returned to their land after exile, Jesus tells this ruler to sell his own, walk away and follow him. This would not be possible were not it for the fact that Jesus was indeed creating a “new land” of which the original “holy land” was a mere shadow.

But on the other hand, as he distributed his wealth to the poor, he would come to know what true riches are — receiving the love and embrace of a new family, whose lives he had saved. And he would have experienced what Jesus means by having his treasure in heaven.

Last month “60 Minutes” broadcast the amazing story of Nicholas Winton.

Winton was a 29 year old stock broker, building a career in Britain, when a friend working with Jewish refugees in Prague extended a plea for help. Winton responded immediately. Winton recognized the German threat to Jews throughout Europe. He’d already left a position in a German bank to return to the safety of England. He was the child of Jewish parents, born Nicholas *Wertheimer*. They changed their surname to *Winton* and baptized him in the Anglican Church to ease their integration. Upon arriving in Prague, he visited some refugee camps, filled to capacity with Jewish families and people who’d spoken against the Germans. After witnessing their desperate living conditions, he was particularly struck by the vulnerability of the children.

Without waiting for proper authorization, Winton began to organize for the safe transport of Jewish children from Czechoslovakia and for their subsequent care in the homes of British foster families. He masterminded the operation from scratch. His parents were already helping Jewish families to escape the Germans, he told an interviewer years later, so he had insight into how to begin. He made applications for transport available to any interested families—not only those living in refugee camps.

Next, he returned to London to set the stage for rescue. There were administrative pieces to set in place before the children could be transported. He maintained a record of each child with meticulous precision, in the hopes that they would return to their families after the war ended. Careful record keeping was also necessary to satisfy government requirements for the children’s entry into the country. Winton worked as a stockbroker during the day, and in the evenings, he fundraised the \$50 per child guarantee required by British law. With the help of a small team of volunteers, he prepared packages that included photos and personal information about each child. These packages were presented to the British foster families who expressed interest in taking in child refugees.

Nicholas Winton, the model of humility, told no one about his WW2 exploit and what he’d done for the Jewish children. Had his wife, Grete, not discovered his trunk in their attic, packed with scrapbooks of carefully documented details about the children, not even she would know the story. It is estimated that there are about 7,000 people today who owe Winton their lives.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Breaking the Barriers

#### A. The impossibility of access

**But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth 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 person to enter the kingdom of God (18:23–27)**

Hearing the requirements for discipleship, the rich ruler “became very sad,” the same word to describe Jesus’ overwhelming grief in Gethsemane. Bailey comments that if Jesus had given the ruler a checklist of expensive good works to fund or carry out, he may have begun with great enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> But as it is, Jesus asks too much of him because he has so much to give up. Fred Craddock writes,

...he has lain too long in silken ease, fared too well at banquet tables, rested too comfortably on the security of his surplus, moved too far from the cries of the hungry, enjoyed too obviously the envy of those less prosperous, assumed too much that he could buy everything he needed. He depends on his money. In short, he is an idolater.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus turns to his disciples and says this man is not an isolated case, but represents all who are wealthy. It is extremely difficult for those with means to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus’ seals the truth with a proverb:

**For 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.”**

Garland explains that “the widely held belief that there was a gate in Jerusalem named “The Needle’s Eye” and that a camel could go through it if it threw off all its burdens, got on its knees, and sucked in its insides is a myth”<sup>12</sup> originating in the 11th century. The proverb is a hyperbole designed to subvert the widespread belief in Israel (and in the church today) that wealth was a sign of God’s blessing. The eye of a needle is the smallest opening possible, and the camel was the largest animal in Palestine. As Green points out, “those in charge of interpretation of Scripture are typically those of elevated status who rule over the synagogue and/or temple, and who find in this common theology a source of legitimation.”<sup>13</sup> With this humorous proverb Jesus totally undermines that pervasive and demonic theology, which explains the shocking response of those who heard it.

#### B. The miracle of access

**Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” (vv. 26–27)**

Jesus affirms that with men it is impossible; but not with God, God can do all things. Reflecting on the image of the camel and all things possible, C.S. Lewis penned a poem:

All things are possible, it’s true.  
But picture how the camel feels, squeezed out  
In one bloody thread from tail to snout.

Yes, for God all things are possible. God can take a rich, self-sufficient, proud individual and cause him to have the faith of a child. God can take the rich who are obsessed with stock options, going public, venture capitalists, and make them live with abandon because of their love for those who are vulnerable and dependent.

In the next chapter we find such a miracle taking place in the heart of Zacchaeus – a chief tax collector who was also very rich. He told Jesus, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (19:8 TNIV) Jesus’ response affirmed the miracle, God had performed the impossible on this man’s heart: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (19:9).

#### IV. The Low Road to Eternal Riches

And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” 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 more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.” (18:28–30)

Yes, these twelve had left everything to follow Jesus. And Peter is rather enthusiastic about it. That being the case, can they confidently expect to receive their share of eternal life in the age to come? Jesus clarifies their understanding. Jesus points out that they won't have to wait until they die to enjoy their inheritance. The future is invading the 'now'. So whatever they left to follow Jesus, they shall receive back, not when they get to heaven, but in the present age. And not just in equal measure, it is exponentially more, (Mark says, “a hundred times more”). Notice two things. First, to experience eternal life there is a leaving of every blood relationship for the sake of kingdom, with the exception of marriage. This tells us that all our family relationships are temporary places of nurture.

Secondly, eternal life is experienced in a new community bonded in love through hospitality and generosity. The bonds of affection within the community will be intensified and invested with deeper meaning because disciples may become isolated from their family and will be separated from the world. But this new family of believers is a family in which material resources are to be freely shared according to need so that there are no class distinctions. Eternal life comes as an impossible gift from God, but it comes to those who are able to receive it as helpless infants and who commit themselves wholeheartedly to God's reign.

As I get older, I find these last words of Jesus penetrating. I began the Christian life well, forsook possible riches for poverty, faced painful rejection, endured hardship, and lost children. Yet Emily and I found the words of Christ absolutely true and we were showered with eternal life. Everything we lost has been returned a hundred fold. I have found countless homes to be the sweetest places of refuge, foreign cities to be happy homes and fields of corn sanctuaries. I have lost children, but possess a nation of children. Never having brothers, I now possess scores of brothers who are as dear to me as David's one Jonathan.

But now I am comfortable, well established in the same church for 40 years. I have a wonderful family, three daughters who have given me infinite joy, two son-in-laws, five grandchildren, and a home I love. And I wonder, will I finish well? Will we as a church enter into eternal life as Jesus describes? My spiritual father, David Roper, served as such a fine model for me. After serving faithfully as a pastor in two churches, he had the opportunity to retire. Most might choose to homestead their wealth and play golf; or at the minimum seek fame on the conference circuit. Instead he embraced poverty and started over again. He and his wife began a new ministry serving 'no-name' pastors in the back roads and rural places of Idaho. For decades I have watched David and Carolyn orient their entire lives in service of the little people, the unknown, the poor and the broken. And now as I near the finish line, I see a couple swimming in the sea of eternal life and as young in spirit as when I met them. It is my prayer that Emily and I can follow their example.

1. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 650–51.
2. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 300.
3. David E. Garland, *Luke* (ECNT: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 729–30.
4. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes, A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 167.
5. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 162.
6. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 655.
7. Garland, *Luke*, 732.
8. Garland, *Luke*, 736.
9. Gwen Tuinman, “Stories, Words and Whispers,” <http://gwentuinman.com/tag/nicholas-winton>.
10. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 167.
11. Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), 214.
12. Garland, *Luke*, 733.
13. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 657.