

THE PROBLEM WITH RICHES

Mark 10:17-31

Introduction:

There is a well-known quote which has been attributed to many sources. I was not able to find who said it first, but it says, "I've been rich and I've been poor, and believe me, rich is definitely better."

In our text today, we read of a rich man who was so right, yet so wrong... He came to the right person, looking for answers – v. 17. Jesus was the only person who could tell Him the way to eternal life. He asked what seemed to be the right question.

Mark, Luke - *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

Matthew - *"Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"*

Jesus begins his response by challenging the man's view of who He is – *"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."* He is not denying His Deity, but rather affirming it. He is, in effect, asking the man, do you believe that I am truly God? If not then it is wrong to call me good.

But then he addresses the question with an answer that is actually quite appropriate for someone living under the OT covenant of Law – he refers him back to the commandments. Matthew says, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." And Jesus names several of them. The implication is that if you are wanting to achieve eternal life by doing something, then this is it – keep the commandments.

It seems that Jesus' goal here was to show this man that he was not as good as he thought he was. He needed to recognize his own inability to keep the Law perfectly. His response indicates that he thought he was doing very well - "I have kept all these from my youth." All my life I have been obedient to the Law. Matthew adds another question, "What do I still lack?"

There is one more thing Jesus asks of him. You are lacking one thing, if you would be perfect (Matt.) this is what you need to do.

"...go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Now Jesus is cutting to the core of this man's heart. When confronted with this challenge, he chose to walk away. In fact – see. V.22. He had great possessions – he was a wealthy man, and he was unwilling to give that up in his quest for life.

He had the right questions, he came to the right person, he got the right answers that penetrated to the centre of his spiritual need, but at the end of it all he made the wrong decision.

As he walked away, Jesus turned to his disciples and used this incident as a teaching moment. He began to talk to them about the difficulty of riches – *read vv. 23-25 – discuss briefly.*

What is it about being rich that makes salvation so difficult...? Are we aware of the dangers of riches? Do we have the proper attitudes toward wealth, whether rich or poor? I think we would do well to consider these questions for a few moments this morning. (*These thoughts are not all original with me.*)

The Problem with Riches

The Danger of becoming preoccupied with riches...

Riches do not satisfy, but there is the tendency to believe that more riches will bring satisfaction –

Eccl. 5:10 – "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity."

With riches comes the preoccupation with them: how to use, maintain, store, etc. Like a black hole, the accumulation of riches can absorb what time and energy we have so that we have little for anything else.

The Deceitful Promise of Riches

Jesus warned about the deceitfulness of riches - Mark 4:19. Riches promise much, but really offer little in return.

- They can easily disappear, rust, or be stolen – Matt. 6:19 – *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,"*

- They cannot buy one's salvation – Psalm 49:16-20 - *“Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him. For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed, and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light. Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.”*
- They cannot protect one from God's wrath – Zeph. 1:18 – *“Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.”*

Riches can deceive one into thinking they are in need of nothing; the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) illustrates the folly of such thinking.

The Foolish Pride of Riches

Wealth tends to promote a sense of pride and self-sufficiency, even arrogance. In Deut. 8 God warned his people of the danger of this kind of attitude – *read Deut. 8:11-17.*

It was this self-sufficient attitude, and pride in riches that was Israel's downfall. *Hosea 13:4-6 – “But I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior. It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought; but when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me.”*

Clearly, not all who are rich are guilty of such things. Some of the most godly people in the Bible were rich (Job, Abraham, Joseph, David, Solomon, Barnabas, Philemon, Lydia). But these are reasons why it is so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus warns us of the danger of letting money become our god – Matt. 6:24 – *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*

Lessons from the Problem of Riches

The Folly of Covetousness ... The Duty of Contentment

Why is it that we are so anxious to be rich when riches might very well prove to be a curse to us? God never says that being rich is a sin, but He makes it clear that desiring riches and making wealth our goal is wrong – *read 1 Timothy 6:6-10 – discuss the contrast – seeking wealth with its temptation to sin vs. contentment and godliness.*

Socrates said, “He is richest who is content with the least.” The Apostle Paul reminds us that contentment is a virtue that must be learned and cultivated – Philippians 4:11-12 – *“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”*

The writer to the Hebrews warns us, “Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have...” (Heb. 13:5).

The importance of Faith in God's Power

Back to Mark 10 – even though it is difficult for the rich person to be saved, it is not impossible – *read vv. 23-27.* You see, whether we are rich or poor, it is impossible for any of us to save ourselves. It is only God who can save us, by His power, through the gospel of His saving grace.

In the NT there were many people of great means who became disciples of Jesus, and supported Him in His ministry. They used their wealth in service to God and others.

We need to reach out to the wealthy with the gospel, and pray for them. And we need to rejoice that there are wealthy men and women in the kingdom of God.

The Reward of Sacrifice

One more part to our text this morning – note Peter's question in v. 28 – compare Luke – *“...left our homes...”*; Matthew – adds the question, “What then will we have?” At first glance his question seems self-serving and boastful – Look at what we have done... But I don't think

that is what Peter meant by this. I believe it was a simple, honest question – “Lord, what about us? We have made our commitment to you.” Remember when Jesus first called Peter and Andrew, James and John – they left everything and followed Him. Now, with all this talk about the rich, and about the difficulty of being saved, Peter may be wondering, was it worth it?

Listen to Jesus’ response – *read vv. 29-31*. Surrender of everything for the sake of the kingdom has its reward, both in this life and in the life to come. That does not mean having nothing, but surrendering our claim to the wealth of this world.

Conclusion

The issue of wealth is often one of contention... The poor are often envious of the rich... The rich often look down on, or despise the poor. We have a great tendency to separate people into classes based on economic standards.

But the truth is that riches and poverty both have their difficulties... Wealth can make one arrogant, self-sufficient and less receptive to the gospel and the need for a Saviour. Poverty can fill people with envy of those who have more, and bitter toward God, feeling that He has somehow cheated them.

So, whether rich or poor, we all should be aware of our need for salvation that comes only by the grace of God. And we need to recognize that the riches of salvation, the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8) are available to all, regardless of wealth or economic standing.