

A MORALISTIC MATERIALIST'S GREATEST NEED

Luke 18.18-23

Our text for this message and the next relates an exchange between Jesus and a rich young ruler (Luke 18.18-23) and then a discussion about it between Jesus and His disciples (18.24-30). Jesus exposes the rich man's need and promises His disciples' blessedness. Today let us consider the first encounter of the two.

This rich man was a "moralistic materialist." That may seem a harsh evaluation at first, but consider this. The dictionary defines a **moralist** as one who teaches or promotes morality, or who behaves in a morally commendable way. That is good as far as it goes, but I intend one who is self-satisfied and proud of his morality. That this man had such an attitude is plain (e.g., 18.21). A **materialist** is defined as one who tends to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual things. This man was not a materialist because he had riches, but rather because they had him. He exposed himself as a materialist by steadfastly refusing Jesus' call to spiritual priorities (18.23; cf. Matt 19.22).

Before coming to Jesus, this man imagined he either already possessed everything or had sufficient resources, in himself and his goods, to acquire whatever he lacked, but Jesus showed him his profound spiritual poverty. It strikes me that there is hardly a more important passage in all the Bible than this one for typical, modern Americans—especially religious ones, and particularly professing Christians—who are wealthy with much more than they need to survive, and fancy themselves good, decent, and moral people. Their stock phrase when asked about spiritual things is, "I'm all set." Surely we are witnessing the tragedy of "lost evangelicals"—lukewarm, self-satisfied hypocrites in the church devoid of true fellowship with Christ! How relevant for such, then, is Christ's counsel to the church at Laodicea (Rev 3.15-20). In our sermon text today, Christ is dealing one on one with a similar "Laodicean Jew," and the lesson for him and for us is this:

A moralistic materialist's greatest need is Christ.

Without Christ as Lord and Savior, your life is worse than meaningless and your eternity is bleak beyond words, no matter how good you think you are and how much money you have. Without Christ, you are not "all set," but spiritually destitute. How few seem to take this to heart and believe it sincerely! May God grant us all faith and repentance, making true Christians from moralistic materialists.

This dialogue's flow highlights the rich man's spiritual needs. Four distinct deficits appear in him, and they would all have been abundantly provided in receiving his greatest need, even Jesus Christ.

TRUE DIRECTIONS TO ETERNAL LIFE (18.18)

First, this man lacked a sure knowledge of how to "inherit eternal life." Equivalent expressions in this passage are "have treasure in heaven" (18.22), "enter the kingdom of God" (18.24, 25), "be saved" (18.26), and "receive . . . in the world to come life everlasting" (18.30). How ironic that the "man who had everything"—youth, wealth, power, morality—was still in the dark about the ABC's of gospel truth!

At least he was asking about it. Multitudes are traveling down the broad way to hell without the slightest care about the state of their soul now and their destiny hereafter. Some of you may be relatively unconcerned because you figure you are doing alright. You are fairly happy with your life as it is, and you suspect you are too good to be condemned on Judgment Day. Think again! If you are apathetic about the way to heaven, surely you cannot reasonably expect you are headed there.

This man was an anxious inquirer. He "came running [to Jesus], and knelt to Him" (Mark 10.17), asking Him this question. Evidently the rich man recognized in Jesus one likely to know the answer. He respected Jesus as a reliable religious teacher, and it was right to do so. He is indeed the one and only "Good Master" (John 13.13; Matt 23.8). Do you want to know for sure the way to be saved for time and eternity? Come to Jesus and listen to Him carefully, prayerfully. Every word that drops from His lips is knowledge and understanding (Prov 2.6), truth and righteousness (Prov 8.7-8), and a well of life (Prov 10.11). Jesus speaks in Scripture and through His earthly ambassadors. We gospel preachers are His spokesman throughout the world to answer this very question, and you should seek us out and ask further about this until you thoroughly understand it.

The appearance of many such anxious inquirers is a sign of revival. Missionary David Brainerd saw this in 1745 among the pagan Indians in New Jersey.

These were almost as soon affected with a sense of their sin and misery, and with an earnest concern for deliverance, as they made their appearance in our assembly. After this work of grace began with power among them, it was common for strangers of the Indians,

before they had been with us one day, to be much awakened, deeply convinced of their sin and misery, and to inquire with great solicitude, “What shall we do to be saved?” (“Brainerd’s Journal” in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*).

My own personal experience is that few such inquirers ever come to me, either in church meetings or throughout the week. How sad! What low times are these when people rarely ask a minister of Jesus Christ the way to inherit eternal life! If only they realized how desperately they need to know it.

REVERENCE FOR GOD ALONE (18.19)

Second, this man needed a change of belief and attitude toward God. Jesus picks up on one word of the rich man’s question—*good*—and asks another question to shock him into careful thought about his evident irreverence. “Why callest thou me good? none is good, save one, that is, God.” The rich man is not only ignorant of the true way to salvation, but also without real reverence for God. The rich man wanted assurance of salvation from self-interest, but he did not really know or care to know God, and this estrangement from God through ignorance and irreverence is the very essence of what it means to be spiritually lost.

Consider four interpretations of Jesus’ response:

1) Jesus *denies* His “Godness” (Deity) and goodness. They read it this way: “Why do you call *Me* good? No one is good but God, [and (implied) I am not Him.]” To take Jesus’ words this way is heresy, flatly denied by His own testimony in other places (e.g., John 5.18; 20.28–29), many other plain Scriptures (e.g., Heb 1.8; cf. Rom 9.5), and a synthetic biblical Christology (e.g., see my masters’ thesis on this topic).

2) Jesus *affirms* His Godness and goodness. This interpretation reads it this way: “Why do you call *Me* good? No one is good but God, [and (implied) by calling *Me* good, you are in effect calling *Me* God, which is proper, but do you realize the implications?]” We may understandably want thus to counter the first misinterpretation. While the deity of Christ is orthodox, it seems beside the point in this context. Jesus is not calling any special attention to His deity.

3) Jesus rebukes an attempt at flattery. Rich men typically know how to speak winsomely, gaining many friends (Prov 14.20). This rich man might have been thinking that he could get a pleasing answer if he showed Jesus much respect. Surely the rich man did not realize Jesus’ deity, and so the title “good master” is not an expression of faith but an inept designation of one the rich man considered a mere man. Jesus probably did intend to rebuke this attempt at flattery, as it was

surely rooted in the man’s own pride. “You are a good religious teacher, and I am a good ruler; now let us good men confer together about spiritual things.” So often when people heap praise on others it is aimed to elevate themselves, an outbreak of their sinful pride.

4) Jesus focuses the man’s attention upon God and His revealed will as the way to salvation. Jesus’ words strongly emphasize God’s absolute uniqueness as intrinsically and definitively good. This was the first thing to be addressed which the rich man had perhaps never really understood or had forgotten, at least attitudinally. We may be tempted to criticize talk like this except when it comes from Jesus. His point is not some fine theological abstraction for an afternoon’s debate. This is a basic truth that must be grasped in coming to saving faith. Truly God alone is eternally, inherently, morally, and spiritually good. Inheriting eternal life is all about coming into fellowship with God, the ultimate good. The way to eternal life can only be known by a divine revelation, by the Word of God through His prophets. That is why, just after this probing question, Jesus cites the revealed will of God in Scripture, the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments. This fourth interpretation is the most satisfying and profound view, and I believe, the correct one.

Jesus’ concern here is not to glorify Himself but God: it is not to give any instruction concerning His own person whatsoever, but to indicate the published will of God as the sole and perfect prescription for the pleasing of God. In proportion as we wander away from this central thought, we wander away from the real meaning of the passage and misunderstand and misinterpret it (Warfield, “Jesus’ Alleged Confession of Sin,” *Works* III.139).

God is good, infinitely good, and only God is good. Let that sink deeply into your mind and heart. The Scriptures make much of this important “first truth.” “Good and upright is the LORD: therefore will He teach sinners in the way” (Psa 25.8). “O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in Him” (Psa 34.8). “For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive: and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee” (Psa 86.5), etc.

The attributes of God are the foundation of all true religion. The pious soul resorts continually to them. All the conversions in the world proceed from the glorious perfections and purposes of God. And the guidance of poor souls converted, yet but partially sanctified,

shows the amazing love and goodness of our adorable Lord (Plumer on Psa 25.8).

How do we apply this? There will be no discovery of the way of salvation for the one 1) who continues to ignore God and His Word, 2) who persists in thinking of God as like us only better to a high degree, 3) who holds a grudge against God as not good because of things suffered, for example, or 4) who thinks that God is not sufficiently good to pardon the worst offender. “I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Psa 27.13).

HUMILITY BEFORE THE MORAL LAW (18.20-21)

Third, this man desperately needed to realize he was a great and guilty sinner, or he would never inherit eternal life. Having pointed out God’s unique and exalted goodness, Jesus now answers the rich man’s question even more shockingly by pointing to the moral law. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” “You know the commandments—do them!” How few Christian evangelists today would answer this way, and if one did, what a howl of criticism would arise from people considering themselves theologically astute! But Jesus’ evangelistic approach judges ours, not vice versa.

Perhaps this rich man imagined that Jesus would have some secret knowledge about gaining eternal life, some inside information only known to a miracle-working prophet like Him, and the rich man hoped to tap into it, but Jesus points to the most elementary moral laws of Scripture. “Obey the commandments,” He said, and proceeded to name some of the most tangible and specific ones from the second table of the law about relating to our fellows: against adultery (7th), against unlawful killing (6th), against stealing (8th), against bearing false witness or lying (9th), and against dishonoring one’s parents (5th). These statutes were not esoteric at all, but deeply ingrained in the psyche of every first-century Jew. Jesus taught the very same thing that Moses had preached long before (Deut 30.11-20, read *very* carefully).

Maybe you are thinking that Moses and Jesus were preaching “salvation by works.” Please hear me carefully so you will not misunderstand. Earning eternal life by one’s own works is theoretically possible [hence this direction to keep the commandments in answer to a query about eternal life], and in fact it has been done [Jesus merited eternal life for all the elect by His own active and passive obedience to the law], but this rich man and you and I could never, ever possibly earn justification by our own good works because God’s law exposes our sinfulness and mocks our moral impotence [“If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Gal 3.21)]. Romans 3.19-20 is the death

knell for any sinner’s hopes to justify himself before God. All who persist in this vain effort are doomed to frustration and failure!

Having a Bible, we suffer not so much from ignorance of God’s will, but from not believing and obeying it. This rich man had enough Scripture to be saved, but he did not have a believing heart to perceive and receive its message—both legal conviction and evangelical grace—and all his “righteousnesses” were as filthy rags before God (Isa 64.6). He was a self-righteous man, not seeing himself in need of God’s grace. The rich man said, “All these things have I kept [guarded] from my youth up.” This rich man was saying, “I am a good person,” but as a matter of fact he wasn’t (Prov 20.6). While there may have been a grain of truth in his self-testimony in that he was observably moral, his boast was tantamount to a blanket denial of sin and guilt, evidence of self-deception, aversion to truth, making God a liar, and rejecting His Word (1 John 1.8, 10). And yet countless religious people, even professing Christians, keep on believing in their own basic goodness before God, and hope to get to heaven by being good people!

How good must you be to be justified by the law? The biblical answer is clear: absolutely perfect (Jas 2.10-11; cf. Deut 27.26; Gal 3.10). God does not grade on a curve. Original sin alone is enough to condemn you from conception; actual sins of heart and speech and conduct throughout your life only pile up God’s wrath against you for Judgment Day (Rom 2.5). We must all come to the point of sincere self-condemnation before we have any warrant for assurance of salvation. Jesus says, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5.32).

Normal evangelical practice is swift to run to the cross of Christ. But the cross means nothing apart from the law. Our Lord’s wretched suffering must be tragic and senseless in the eyes of any who have no reverent esteem for the perfect commandments. On the cross Jesus was suffering the just demands of the law against sinners. If sinners are unaware of the Decalogue’s requirements for themselves, they will see no personal significance in Christ’s broken body and shed blood. Without knowledge of the condemnation of God’s holy law, the cross will draw sympathy but not saving faith from sinners. Christ was set forth to be a propitiation [Rom 3.25]—i.e., the substitutionary object of God’s wrath poured out against a violated law (Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic, Chantry, pp. 37-38).

LIBERATION FROM COVETOUSNESS (18.22-23)

This rich man's fourth great spiritual need was deliverance from greed to love Christ supremely.

Elsewhere we read, "Then Jesus beholding him loved him" (Mark 10.21). Jesus saw his desperate spiritual poverty and felt compassion for him. He lacked a true knowledge of salvation, of God, and of his own sinful heart. This one envied by men was rather to be pitied as one of the most miserable of all, though he knew it not.

Instead of directly contradicting the rich man's self-righteous boast, Jesus was pleased to put it to a practical test, so that the rich man could discover, for the first time in his life, how really sinful and idolatrous he was. Jesus' response here is not to be taken as agreement with what the rich man had already said, but as a transition to this specific moral test. "Yet lackest thou one thing," Jesus said. It was not absolutely the only thing he lacked, but it was the thing upon which Jesus wanted to focus attention.

The only commandment of the second part of the Decalogue Jesus omitted was the Tenth, but now instead of quoting it, He takes a different approach.

When Jesus said, "Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor," He was preaching the Tenth Commandment in an applicatory fashion. Christ was using God's Word, "Thou shalt not covet," as a knife to lance the festering sore of greed in the man's soul. The sin was invisible to the human eye. It did not show its colors on the surface of the ruler's behavior. But in all its filth and ugliness, covetousness ruled his soul. Like a dart, the law of God pierced the conscience of this youth for the first time. Had Jesus merely said, "Do not covet," the polite seeker would have said, "I do not desire anyone's property or wealth. I am satisfied with my station in life." It would not do simply to quote Exodus 20 again. Jesus translated the tenth of God's commands into a practical test by demanding that he abandon his riches. The youth loved his riches more than he loved God and His Son, and he turned away. But when he went away, he had a clear consciousness that he was a covetous sinner. He was deficient in love for God, upon which all of the law was hanging (Chantry, pp. 44-45).

Further, Jesus did not require a merely altruistic donation to the world's suffering poor, but that the rich man exercise a hearty trust in Christ that issued in lifelong learning from Him and loyal service to Him. "Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor,

and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me." This was a divine summons, a gracious invitation, and the greatest opportunity of the rich man's entire life! He should have responded with enthusiastic faith, and by God's grace, such was possible (e.g., cf. Luke 19.1-9, story of rich Zacchaeus).

Luke describes the pathetic response here this way, "And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich." He considered Jesus' proposal a bad bargain, a net loss. The price of eternal life was too steep. What an insult to the Son of God! The rich man valued his earthly assets more than heavenly treasure, his own selfish indulgence more than a disciple's fellowship with Christ. Like Achan (Josh 7) and Judas Iscariot, this rich man lived for money and was on his way to a similar fate (1 Tim 6.9-10).

Christ is the greatest and richest portion anyone can ever have, and He was offering Himself freely to this rich man, but only if he would drop the money bags and receive Him as more precious. Christ is the treasure hidden in a field, the which, when a wise man finds, he hides it, and for the joy of Him goes and sells all that he has, and buys the field. Christ is the one pearl of great price, and when a wise man finds Him, he goes and sells all that he had, and bought Him (Matt 13.44-46). Christ is not selling Himself; no sinner can buy Him with money. But as long as you prefer this world's wealth to Christ, you remain a covetous idolater (Col 3.5) and dead while you live (1 Tim 5.6).

Christ's terms have not changed. You cannot receive Him for salvation and continue as a slave to greed. You cannot be in a state of salvation destined for heaven while you are proud of your morality. Christ always rescues His disciples from this poverty.

So how do you respond to this glorious gospel? Are you willing to lose everything rather than Christ, to worship Him alone instead of money? Would you sell all you have, giving it to the poor, and follow Christ if He were to require it of you? Do you manage what money He entrusts to your care with a scrupulous desire to please Him more than yourself? Are you sensitively generous towards people needier than you, especially fellow believers? These are sobering tests, but you cannot have it both ways. There really is no such thing as a genuine Christian who is essentially covetous or self-righteous.

A moralistic materialist's greatest need is Christ. He needs Christ as his eternal life, Christ as his uniquely good God, Christ as his perfect righteousness, and Christ as his chief treasure. May God give Christ to us all in this way, so that we will be truly rich for all eternity. Amen.