

A TRUE DISCIPLE'S GREATEST PROMISE

Luke 18.24-30

We called our last exposition “A Moralistic Materialist’s Greatest Need” (Luke 18.18-23). We saw that the rich young ruler was spiritually impoverished, for he was ignorant of the way to eternal life, he was alienated from God, he was self-righteous before the moral law, and he was a slave to money. These several aspects of spiritual need would have been supplied if only he had received and possessed Jesus, but this the proud, covetous man refused, preferring to boast and hoard, while rejecting the only Savior of sinners. The rich young ruler had famine at a banquet, dryness before the water of life, and poverty in the immediate presence of the most glorious, wealthy, and compassionate King.

With verse 24, Luke turns from Jesus’ dialogue with the rich young ruler to an exchange between Jesus and His disciples. There were lessons to be learned from this disappointing encounter. First, the sinner’s bad choice stood as a sober warning to other sinners. We do not know what ever became of the rich young ruler, whether today he is in heaven or hell, but one thing we do know. Everyone like him is bound to perish except for repentance. The Spirit inspired and preserved this account of spiritual poverty for our good. We learn from it that wealth is a great temptation that hinders multitudes from entering into the kingdom of God.

Second, not all people are like the rich young ruler. By the grace of God, some treasure Jesus above all else and it shows. They need encouragement to persevere in a principled choice which may even leave them poor in this world. So Jesus takes this opportunity to assure His disciples of faith’s ultimate wisdom. In rejecting the pursuit of riches and all other earthly happiness for Jesus, they had chosen the better part, and their reward would not be taken away. Here we see that . . .

A true disciple’s greatest promise is Christ Himself.

The Spirit unfolds this promise by showing us 1) the necessity of God’s almighty power before anyone meets the condition for it, 2) the most important trait of its recipients, and 3) its very desirable prize, especially to confirm and strengthen Christians but also to entice poor sinners.

ITS PRECEDING MIRACLE (18.24-27)

Jesus refers to a bona fide miracle coming before the experience of the blessing He promises. I use the term “miracle” in its highest sense, something “impossible with men” but “possible with God” (18.27), “a manifestation of the power that God will use to restore all of creation to its proper order, to restore the image of God in man to its full expression, and to destroy death” (EDT, “Miracles”). Before you can be assured of receiving what is promised (18.29-30), you must first be miraculously changed by the grace of God.

The Need for This Miracle (18.24-25). The AV is best: “And when Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” (18.24; not *Jesus’* sorrow as in the ESV; some translations fail to mention sorrow at all, e.g., NASB, NIV). Luke repeats the young man’s response of 18.23, “very sorrowful,” as the plain evidence that he rejected the proposal to sell all he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus, with the assurance of treasure in heaven (18.22). Jesus observed and interpreted the young man’s body language—his sad expression, disappointment written all over his face, drooping shoulders, heavy sigh, slow turnaround, and trudging departure. Silently, he rejected Jesus and His offer. This reaction prompted Jesus’ next comment.

The word “hardly” captures well the Greek adverb which means “with difficulty.” Jesus is making an exclamatory declaration we can paraphrase this way: the rich only enter God’s kingdom with difficulty if at all. People commonly think going to heaven is easy, but in one sense, it is impossible. Many evangelicals, knowing eternal life is a gift, assume it is easy to get. Jesus contradicts them. Everything done in this world is easier than this. Athletes break world records, concert pianists attain virtuosity, and now some have even set foot on the moon. These amazing feats are nothing compared to escaping hell. More to the point, the rich young ruler had risen to great moral and financial success, and yet he failed to enter God’s kingdom. The fact is that on his own he could not possibly do it.

At first it seems Jesus refers to the difficulty of men, but things which are difficult are still doable; and yet Jesus implies that this entering the kingdom of God is impossible with men (18.27); i.e., they lack the inherent ability to do it, they are powerless to save themselves. In the light of the whole context, He is surely referring, amazingly and figuratively, to the difficulty of God! Saving a soul is the most stupendous miracle of divine power there is, exceeding the original creation, general providence, healings, exorcisms, or any of Jesus’ miracles in the physical realm (cf. 1 Pet 4.18, “the righteous are scarcely saved”).

To impress His disciples with the difficulty of a rich man’s entering into the kingdom of God, Jesus makes a comparison in terms culturally familiar to them, but which we can still readily understand. “For it is easier for a camel [“largest animal in Palestine,” Bock] to go through a needle’s eye [“one of the smallest items a person might deal with on a daily basis,” *ibid.*], than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (18.25). People too clever by half have often misinterpreted this unforgettable statement as referring to a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem through which a camel could only pass on its knees without its burden. Two problems with

this view are that the Greek word means a literal needle and that “The Needle’s Eye” gate at Jerusalem did not exist in Jesus’ day, but only from the Middle Ages (NET notes, in loc.). Jesus is using a familiar proverb for that which is ordinarily impossible, and the response (18.26) confirms this is what they understood Jesus to mean.

The reason Jesus expressed Himself in such a dramatic fashion was that He wanted the disciples to take notice. He wanted the truth of human total inability to sink in. . . . The Lord means that for a rich man in his own power to try to work or worm his way into the kingdom of God is impossible. So powerful is the hold which wealth has on the heart of the natural man! He is held fast by its bewitching charm, and is thereby prevented from obtaining the attitude of heart and mind necessary for entrance into God’s kingdom (Hendriksen, in loc.).

The Possibility of This Miracle (18.26-27). To speak of “possible miracles” seems like a contradiction, but miracles are not *absolutely* impossible (otherwise they could absolutely never happen; even God could not do them), but only *relatively* impossible—that is, men cannot do genuine miracles in their own strength. There are a few things which *are* absolutely impossible (God cannot lie, Tit 1.2), but miracles are not one of them.

The disciples responded to Jesus’ statements in utter shock (18.26)! If *even rich men* cannot be saved any easier than a camel can pass through the eye of a needle, then the rest of us must be hopelessly lost! To appreciate why they would say such a thing, we must realize that the rich were generally held in high esteem as God’s favorites, since God evidently had blessed them the most. Such a mistaken idea is found today among those who have embraced the “health and wealth gospel,” a heresy to be sure. You cannot tell whom God loves the most by examining somebody’s net worth! Often those with the least earthly riches have the most spiritual riches, while the wealthiest sometimes oppress and persecute poor believers (Jas 2.5-7). Still, some rich people are saved, and many poor people are lost.

Jesus reassures His disciples that even things impossible with men can be accomplished by God (18.27). The Greek word order emphasizes “impossible;” we might paraphrase it, “impossibilities with men are possibilities with God.” God can usher rich men into His kingdom at His mere will and pleasure. In fact, God has the gracious power to show mercy and save whomever He pleases, regardless of their attachment to idols (e.g., covetousness, Col 3.5) and unwillingness to be saved, and this is no small part of His glory (Exod 33.18-19; cf. Rom 9.14-18; John 1.11-13; Jas 1.17-18; 1 Cor 4.7, etc.).

So no one can know that he has eternal life apart from this divinely-wrought miracle in the soul, and no one who hears the gospel should despair of himself being the object of

God’s miraculous grace, because He can and does do such miracles in multitudes, so why not in you?

ITS PARAMOUNT MARK (18.28)

Evidently some of Jesus’ disciples, including Peter, witnessed the whole exchange between Jesus and the rich young ruler. They heard the terms of Jesus’ offer (18.22b), and picking up on those words, specifically the word “all,” Peter responds.

Its Appearance Among Jesus’ Disciples. “Then Peter said, Lo, we have left all and followed thee.” Peter sees these two as linked, not merely as two in a list, but as necessarily belonging together. For the Twelve, literally following Jesus around for three years to watch Him, learn from Him, and work with Him required an abandonment of their mundane callings, whether as fishermen, tax collectors, or anything else, and a practical turning over of all their possessions to others, to give themselves wholly to this all-consuming training and ministry (cf. Luke 5.11, 27-28). But this is not all. “Leaving all” and “following Jesus” are not limited to a strictly literal sense here. “Follow” is a standard and figurative reference to discipleship. Together these two phrases mean giving ultimate loyalty to Jesus while forsaking ultimate loyalty to all competing interests. It is impossible to “follow Jesus” in this sense *without* “leaving all,” that is, making all other considerations secondary, with the will of Jesus taking absolute priority over everything else. One translation renders it, “we have left all we had to follow You.” In this figurative sense, more than the Twelve had become Jesus’ real disciples.

Its Universality Among Jesus’ Disciples. Peter is characteristically acting as the spokesman for others. “We,” not just “I,” he says, “have left all to follow You, Lord.” Peter brings forth a universal trait among all the sincere disciples of Jesus. None of them were thinking, “I will follow Jesus as long as it does not cost me too much.” They were wholly committed to Him, without reservations, unlike the rich man.

Notice Jesus accepts this assessment. He does not correct or qualify it in any way, but rather commends it, which is a tacit admission that it is true. It is as if He had said, “Yes, you have left all and followed Me.” Although these words are not found in the text, doubtless they are true.

This seems a high standard for being a real Christian, but for Jesus it was non-negotiable. He was so very concerned that the multitudes understand the absolute necessity of this great commitment (Luke 9.23-26, 57-62; 14.25-27, 33). “Whoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple” (14.33). This is a sweeping, general axiom, totally unqualified, always true for all people at all times. And to be a disciple of Christ is nothing more or less than to be a Christian (Acts 11.26). Real faith—saving faith—includes a fundamental submission to Christ as one’s Lord and a prizing of Christ as one’s all. Real Christians realize deep down that *nothing* in this world deserves to be worshipped as a god,

and we resolve to give Jesus Christ our ultimate loyalty. All of us who are real Christians have this kind of committed faith! Professing Christians without it need to be miraculously born of the Spirit, just like the rich young ruler.

This theology [which] separates faith from discipleship and grace from obedience, [which] teaches that Jesus can be received as one's Savior without being received as one's Lord, . . . is a common defect in times of prosperity. In days of hardship, particularly persecution, those who are in the process of becoming Christians count the cost of discipleship carefully before taking up the cross of the Nazarene. Preachers do not beguile them with false promises of an easy life or indulgence of sins. But in good times, the cost does not seem so high, and people take the name of Christ without undergoing the radical transformation of life that true conversion implies (James Montgomery Boice, quoted by John MacArthur in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 30).

ITS PERSUASIVE MESSAGE (18.29-30)

Now we come to that promise so very precious to real Christians. This is part of how God motivates us to persevere in a life of faith, self-denial, and following Christ as Lord.

A Broad Scope of Blessing (18.29). "Verily I say unto you" is a frequent preface meant to impress the hearers with the authority, truthfulness, and importance of what the Lord is about to say. Do not let any discouraging circumstances or your feelings or the ridicule of other people take this iron-clad promise away from you.

"There is no man that hath left [all; Jesus elaborates] for the kingdom of God's sake [not asceticism, but true devotion to God and Christ] who shall not receive manifold more." Pause and consider well this phrase: "no man." Jesus is saying that the blessings here will certainly, without any doubt or exceptions, come to every single one of the people whose character is here described. Every single true Christian is guaranteed the blessing, or Christ is a liar. His reputation is on the line in the fulfillment of this promise.

A Temporal Sphere of Blessing (18.30a). Jesus is saying that what a real Christian gives up to be a real Christian is far less than what he gains; he will not be the loser in the end.

Jesus talks about leaving house (metonymy for one's worldly wealth), parents (one's whole upbringing and tradition), brethren (peer pressure), wife (spousal approval), and children (their approval and worldly interests), and as we have shown already, this does not mean literally doing without them, but turning one's back on them as gods. Therefore, we would misinterpret "manifold more" if we thought it meant *literally* more houses, parents, brethren, wives, and children (cf. Mark 10.29-30). Jesus is promising that even in this life, God richly rewards true Christians for their faith.

These blessings *may sometimes* include material things, but not necessarily so. Hendriksen explains well:

Even in the present time, that is, before the great day of judgment, and for each believer before his death, these loyal followers receive the blessings indicated in [many biblical] passages [including physical blessings]. In spite of the persecutions which they will have to endure, they will be able to enjoy even their material possessions far more than the ungodly enjoy theirs. . . . For the sake of the kingdom has it become necessary to forsake close relatives? New "relatives" will now be theirs, . . . relatives that belong to "the household of faith," . . . "the Father's family" (in loc.).

Scoffers have sometimes been known to ridicule a Christian's reward as "pie in the sky bye and bye," but this overlooks the manifold blessings true believers experience even in this life, which, even by themselves, make the choice of following Jesus reasonable and attractive.

An Eternal Superlative of Blessing (18.30b). "This present time" is contrasted with "the world [lit., age] to come," that is, when this present time gives way to the world to come, the grand consummation precipitated by Christ's return. This is the important two-age biblical eschatological outlook. Both now and forever real Christians will be greatly blessed, but especially in eternity.

Jesus promises that believers will then receive "life everlasting." We should not reason from this that eternal life is postponed until then; believers possess it even now. In this context, however, "life everlasting" is loaded with its fullest significance. In eternity, those who forsook all to follow Christ during their earthly lifetimes will inherit all the blessings in their fullest measure that God ever intended to give His elect, viz., heaven, the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. And chief among all the blessings of heaven is Christ Himself. "Life everlasting" is rich, biblical shorthand for loving, covenantal fellowship with Christ (1 John 5.11-12), and that fellowship will be indescribably perfect in heaven.

Just as the greatest need sinners have is Christ, even so the greatest promise believers have, to some degree now, and in perfect measure then, is Christ—being His beloved, reconciled to Him, and conformed to His lovely image. Oh, what a treasure! This promise provides sufficient motivation for us to suffer the loss of all things for Christ's sake now. The missionary martyr Jim Eliot said, "He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

On the other hand, those who die in their sins will lose everything they ever counted valuable—even their souls. Why would anyone prefer worldly wealth to our Savior? Why would any professing believer abandon Christ for anything at all this world offers us? Lord, keep us clinging to You! Cause us to lay hold of eternal life. Amen.