



# Salvation...Money...Attachments

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Matthew 19:16-26

November 1, 2020

The Boston College Center for Wealth and Philanthropy conducted a landmark study ten years ago. They asked people with fortunes of 25 million dollars or more to speak candidly about their lives. They interviewed 160 households with an average net worth of 78 million. Here's what they found. The super-rich are generally rather dissatisfied. Many are downright miserable. They cite a litany of anxieties related to isolation, work, and family. Despite their considerable fortunes, they still do not consider themselves financially secure. They say they need, on average 25% more money to become financially secure.

So much for glorifying wealth. It proves the age-old adage that money does not bring happiness. Zig Ziglar said, "Money won't make you happy but everyone wants to find out for themselves."

The man in our story has it all going on. He is young, rich, and a ruler. He enjoys the optimism of youth, the luxury of wealth, and the privilege of being in charge. Yet, of his own admission he acknowledges something is lacking from his life.

He asks Jesus, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) Circle the word "do." The man assumes there is something he can *do* to inherit eternal life.

Jesus knocks this man off stride with a question of his own, "Why do you ask about what is good? There is only One who is good" (Matthew 19:17). Jesus challenges the man's assumption that anyone can become good by human effort alone. No one can be considered good apart from God. Only God is good.

Then Jesus adds, “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17).

“Which ones?” the rich man asks. There are 613 commands in the Torah alone, so which ones have first priority?

Jesus cites five of the Ten Commandments, the ones dealing with human relations. “Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother” (Matthew 19:18-19). He summarizes the second half of the Decalogue with the words, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“All these I have kept,” the man asserts confidently. *All* is in emphatic position. He claims to have kept all these commandments. Jesus doesn’t challenge his assertion. He doesn’t need to. The man’s next question gives him away, “What do I still lack?” The man knows something is missing from his life. He has everything he wants, yet he still lacks something. Do not miss the import of his “what-do-I-lack” question. It’s central to the meaning of this story.

“If you want to be perfect,” Jesus says, “go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Earlier, the man wanted to *do* something to inherit eternal life but here Jesus wants him to *be* something. “Be perfect” is Jesus’ way of saying if you want to be perfect or complete (super good), sell what you have, give it to the poor and follow me. Our story ends with the man going away, sad, Matthew tells, us because he had great wealth (Matthew 19:22).

Jesus can see into this man's real life. His wealth has become an enormous obstacle to following Jesus. His money attachment has become his idol, a clear violation of the first two commandments. Don't miss the irony. Jesus offers him treasures in heaven yet he prefers treasures on earth. This is the only story of which I am aware in Matthew's gospel that someone refuses Jesus' offer of saving faith.

Jesus later conducts a postmortem with his disciples. "It's hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says. "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:23-24). The hyperbole of the largest animal fitting through the smallest opening is almost comical. Frederick Buechner writes about this verse, "It's as hard for the rich to get to heaven as it is a Cadillac to fit through a revolving door."

"Who then can be saved?" the disciples ask (Matthew 19:25). Wealth and riches is, to their way of thinking, a clear sign of God's approval and blessing. If the rich can't be saved, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Matthew tells us that in this moment Jesus looks at his disciples (Matthew 19:26). Jesus' disciples likely recognize Jesus' look. My mother used to give me "the look." She didn't have to say anything. Her look communicated everything I needed to know. Jesus looks at them and says, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three applications to suggest to you having to do with salvation, money and attachments.

First, salvation: Let's go back to the man's initial question, "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says there is nothing we can do to earn God's grace and mercy. No amount of good deeds on our side can earn favor with God. Jesus has put the kingdom of God out of reach for human attainment. Salvation is entirely God's doing. There is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life. Salvation is God's gift that we receive in faith.

In the verses that precede today's story, Jesus blesses little children. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them" (Matthew 19:14). Children instinctively know how to receive something. They are not shy about receiving gifts.

Last evening, Chris and I set up a card table in our driveway to distribute candy to kids on Halloween. Neighborhood kids weren't shy about receiving candy as a gift. They were all about it.

God's salvation is a sheer, unmitigated gift to us. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross serves as full payment for our sins and draws us into relation with God. We cannot possibly earn, buy, or merit this gift of salvation. We receive God's gift of salvation by professing Jesus as Savior and endeavoring to follow him as Lord of our lives.

Second, money: Let me correct a misimpression some people have of this story. Jesus doesn't call everyone to sell

all of their possessions to become one of his followers. Jesus doesn't tell Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who is one of Jesus' committed disciples, to give up everything (Matthew 27:57). This story is the only place in the gospels where Jesus tells someone to liquidate his assets in order to follow him. Jesus does not call everyone to sell off everything but he does call everyone to follow him. What stands between this particular man and Jesus is his money.

I know a thing or two about money. I was raised with money. I have led 42 fall stewardship drives in this church. This one will be my last. Add to it five capital campaigns and I have lots of experience with raising money. With all this attention given to money, I have three major takeaways. First, we don't own anything. Everything we own is on loan from God. Second, the best way I know to disarm the power of money is to give some of it away. Nothing frees us from the tyranny money has over us more than parting with some of it. Third, the best investment Chris and I have made with our money is investing in God's work, especially God's mission through VPC. The video I shared with you earlier proves the point. Talk about a good return on investment: Caring for the spiritual wellbeing of children; Sharing Christ's love with students; Supporting our mission partners; Feeding the hungry. Apart from providing for our family's needs, the money we give to this church is the best investment we have ever made. That's why I unashamedly ask you each Sunday to give generously to the Lord's work here. It's why I'm urging you to make a pledge to support the Lord's work next year through VPC.

Third, attachments: The rich man's attachment in our story was to his money. Gold had become his idol. What is it for you? What stands between you and following Jesus?

For some, money may be *your* attachment also. We don't call it "the Almighty dollar" for nothing. Maybe your attachment is personal ambition, or a house with Wayfair furniture? Perhaps it's your job, your accomplishments, or raising high-achieving children? What attachment stands between you and following Jesus?

There are healthy attachments and unhealthy ones. Whenever attachments get in the way of following Jesus, they become obstacles. Unhealthy attachments are when we treat any created thing as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. It's when we use created things in excess to meet our real needs. It's when something other than God becomes our primary focus.

In C. S. Lewis' classic tale of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund develops an excessive attachment to Turkish Delight. When Edmund enters Narnia through a mysterious wardrobe, he encounters the White Witch. She is able to extract information to use against him and his siblings by giving him this sweet tasting treat. The more Edmund eats, the more he craves. It doesn't matter how much he eats, the only thing he thinks about is eating more. His unhealthy attachment nearly destroys him.

What stands between you and following Jesus? Let it go. Lay it down. Release it. "Then come, follow me," Jesus says.