

Luke through Lent
LUKE 18:18-30
Lent 5 – Hard Hearts
Rev'd Chris Johnson

When couples come for marriage Lynda and I use a marriage preparation programme called PREPARE. It deals with many different aspects of the marriage relationship including finances. In the Couple Workbook there is an exercise where they answer 16 questions, which helps each partner discern the meaning of money for them.

There are 4 categories for understanding the meaning of money.

- Money as status
- Money as enjoyment
- Money as security
- Money as power

The survey treats all of these categories as neutral. The aim of the exercise is simply to help the couple understand where they have similar or different attitudes to money.

So what does money mean to you?

Money can mean **Status**. Why is it that billionaires keep working? They obviously have enough money to meet all their basic needs for housing and food and clothing. They have enough money for security and enjoyment, so why keep working? I'm sure there are many reasons, however for some it is probably status. When the richest 200 list in Australia comes out each year is it only the masses who read it or do the billionaires read it as well. Money can mean prestige, it gives you a certain place in society, money is about status.

But money can also be for **enjoyment**. Why do some people make their millions of dollars by the time they're 35 and retire. They make their money in the first half of their life with the aim I've enjoying it in the second half. For these people the status of having a lot of it is not the most important thing, enjoying it is.

But then there is also money as **security**. People in this category are savers not spenders. Here the goal is to be a self funded retiree and not have to depend on the government pension. The goal is about moderating all the risks associated with living. People in this category probably spend a lot more than the average on insurance premiums with minimum or no excesses, they put money aside for a rainy day, they look for conservative investments, the meaning of money for them is security.

Money as **power**. Power is not necessarily a negative motivation. Power can be simply influence and influence for good as well as bad. So people who find the meaning of money in this category love giving their money to causes to make a difference. It may be various charities, to members of one's family or political parties or movements. I think of someone like Clive Palmer who is putting millions and millions of dollars into advertising for the coming election. I bet the primary meaning of money for him is power and influence; you can decide for yourself whether you think that is for good or ill.

So you might like to think for a minute, what is the primary meaning of money for you?

Is it status?

Is it enjoyment?

Is it security?

Is it power?

So this morning we come to the story of the rich ruler. What did money mean to him?

I think **status** would have been important not so much for him as an individual but for his family. In his cultural context the family would be all important and being a part of a wealthy family would have given him status in his community.

Possibly also the **security** of owning your own home and having property. Land is very important in Jewish culture and a sign of God's blessing. In fact having land that you could trace back through your family line would give you both status and security.

Jesus demand to sell everything and follow him is an enormous ask given the nature of his culture. The demand is shocking for any culture. The presuppositions of every culture about the meaning of money are being severely challenged by Jesus at this point.

The rich ruler is shocked by Jesus' demand. It would appear he goes into a deep depression. The text says he became very sad. In Mark's version it says his face fell. And it says the reason was he was very wealthy.

He thought eternal life was simply a matter of keeping the ten commandments in a good respectable way. All these he kept since he was a boy. But now Jesus is saying that eternal life is not about the goodness that comes from keeping the law but the goodness that comes from a changed heart. And questioning his wealth went right to his heart. We can only begin to imagine how deeply this cut into this fellow's life and challenged him to the core of his being.

Jesus goes on to give the metaphor of the camel and the eye of the needle. He says, *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God."*

Not only is the rich ruler shocked by Jesus teaching but those who were listening in are also shocked. V26 *"Those who heard this asked who then can be saved?"*

It may be these people are thinking that if a respectable wealthy Jewish leader can't get into the Kingdom of God then what chance have we got.

Or it may be they're thinking we are wealthy to; it looks like Jesus is excluding us from the Kingdom as well.

Jesus is using an image which shows an impossibility. Whatever size needle you are talking about it is impossible for a camel to fit through it. Jesus is deliberately presenting a concrete picture of something absolutely impossible.

He wants us to realise that membership of the Kingdom is given purely by the grace of God. It is only those who realise how powerless they are who turn to God and trust in his mercy.

Jesus response to the question, 'Who then can be saved?' is in verse 27, *"What is impossible with man is possible with God."*

The rich ruler had thought there was something he could do to inherit eternal life. Jesus initially tells him what he wants to hear. He quotes him Commandments 5 through to 9. These are all commandments about loving your neighbour. The ruler thought he was doing OK in this department. Jesus response will actually point him to the first commandment - love God supremely above everything else. Selling up everything and following Jesus is about loving God supremely above anything else. This is the one thing, the most important thing that this ruler still lacks.

So both the rich ruler, and those standing by are shocked by the absoluteness of Jesus command and teaching.

The story ends with **the disciples** also shocked by what they've just heard. Peter expresses this with the words, *"We have left all we had to follow you!"* Peter is wondering if he's done enough to receive eternal life. Jesus assures them that God has worked in them what is humanly impossible. He has turned their hearts to leave everything and follow him.

The rich ruler was wedded to his wealth and the family ties that came with it.

The disciples were prepared to relinquish those family ties to follow Jesus.

It is encouraging here that the disciples are held up as a good example when so often in other places in the Gospel accounts they are seen to fail. Here they are actually on the right track. Yes all things are possible with God.

So how might we **apply this passage**?

The first thing is, we have to feel the power of the absolute call of Christ.

"Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

We need to be shocked by that command

-just as much as the ruler was,

-just as much as the others who were there were when they heard it,

-just as much as the disciples.

The command was shocking back in 1st century Palestine; the command is shocking in 21st century Australian society as well.

What does it mean to sell everything? It may mean taking it literally and leaving behind all your worldly possessions and joining a monastic community or some other type of Christian community living. These types of communities are still alive and well and maybe that's your calling.

What 'sell everything' means in practical terms will be different for every disciple.

I don't think Jesus wants us to sell up our homes and go and live on the streets, depending on the generosity of others. That doesn't help anyone.

But he may want you to sell up your home, become a missionary and go and live with the poor in another part of the world - maybe those both physically poor and gospel poor.

In a few weeks time Nathan and Diane Lovell with Shirri and Isaac will be visiting us for a week. They've left Australia to go and live in South Africa and work at the George Whitfield College training gospel workers who in many cases leave family and home to go all over Africa taking the good news. Here are examples of this radical call being obeyed today.

Or maybe your calling is to go to another part of Australia where there are physically poor or gospel poor people. Maybe it's about moving to a poorer under-resourced suburb. Maybe hearing God's Word this morning, that's what He's putting on your heart, that's what it will mean for you to love Jesus supremely. None of us should be too quick to walk away from a literal reading of this text as a test of our own heart's true allegiance.

All of us need to examine our hearts about what money and our possessions mean to us.

- Is it about status?
- Is it about enjoyment?
- Is it about security?
- Is it about power?

Now as I said at the beginning these questions are quite neutral. But once you have identified what is the chief meaning of money for you then the most important question is, is that submitted to the Lordship of Christ? Are you looking for ultimate meaning and significance in the status, enjoyment, security, and power that money can give you or have you submitted these things to Christ?

Is it not Christ who provides all these things for you?

1. Is it not Christ who gives you the **status** of being a child of God?

Addressing God as your loving heavenly Father.

He provides all your needs, not all your 'wants' but yes, all your needs.

Don't you have a wonderful new status before God in the Gospel.

2. Is it not Christ who gives you joy?

Not the joy of a good night out at an entertainment; but the deep seated joy that allows you to rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice whatever the circumstances might be.

3. Is it not Christ who gives you security? Our society desperately tries to hide death and flee away from death. But our eternal security is hidden with Christ in God. Jesus is the solid rock on which we can stand when everything else is sinking ground. He is our security.

4. And finally is it not Christ who is our power? Christ is the one who gives us significance to make our way in the world and bring a Godly influence. This is the work of the Holy Spirit empowering us to be about Christ's mission in the world.

Lynda last week emphasised the importance of context in grasping the meaning of scripture.

Look at the context here.

The story before the rich ruler is Jesus blessing the little children and saying let them come, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Children have a simple dependence on and trust in the love and care of their parents. Contrast that with the rich ruler who was trusting his great wealth.

The passage which follows is Jesus taking the twelve aside to explain for a third time that he must go to the cross, because this was his mission. The cross would have to be the absolute opposite of amassing huge wealth.

So brothers and sisters in Christ sit lightly with your money. Let it take its proper place with your first allegiance to Christ. Jesus Christ is where we find our status, our joy, our security and our power; not money.

Growing as a disciple means becoming more and more generous as you discover your true self in Christ. And if you do especially identify with the rich ruler, give it away in bucketloads to the poor and for the sake of the Kingdom. Afterall, it's only money!

Let us pray

Lord please come and do the impossible, do what only you can do, change our stony hearts.

Give us a clear vision of Jesus and the Kingdom, and a new life in him.

Thank you for the status, joy, security and power we have in Christ. Help us to sit lightly with our money and follow you with freedom, generosity and love.
