

The Rich Ruler

Not very many of Jesus' stories cause as much unease as this one, especially to the more well off. It isn't hard for some of us to put ourselves in this rich ruler's shoes. How would I react if Jesus told me to sell everything I owned and give it to the poor?

Did Jesus really mean this? Yeah...I think he did. The question is, did he mean this for everyone? Maybe not. He encountered other wealthy people but didn't tell all of them they needed to sell everything and give it to the poor. But then they maybe never asked Jesus that question. What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?

A short answer is we don't do anything. An inheritance is just that – an inheritance. Eternal life is a gift from God given to us through Jesus.

However, when we fully grasp that...when we fully receive that gift from God, it changes us completely. It makes us unable to live in the here and now in the same way we did before.

This rich man is what we'd call a good person. He has followed the commandments. He is living his life according to God's will. He has been walking the path God calls him to.

But he seems to sense that something is missing. He seems to feel he hasn't quite gone all in on his relationship with God. He is being pulled toward something deeper...and it seems to be that Jesus is who is pulling him deeper.

What the rich man doesn't recognize is that it's not so much that something is missing. Instead, something is standing in his way to that deeper connection to the wellspring of life that never dries up. His wealth.

He seems to desire the complete freedom and union with God that is eternal life. But not only can he not get that with his wealth, it is only by giving up that wealth that he will be able to have that life in the kingdom of God.

That's a hard pill to swallow.

We put a lot of hope and faith in what we might be able to possess. A nice house. Nice car. A good college selection for our kids. A healthy 401K or stock portfolio so we can retire comfortably. Would we actually be able to give all that up?

One day of course, we will give it all up...riches don't matter to us when we die. Rich people do not fully enter the kingdom because ultimately, death makes it meaningless. We truly can't take it with us.

But this story isn't just about eternal life after we die. This is about tapping in to that eternal life in the here and now. Jesus gives a promise for this age.

"Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ who will not get back very much more in this age and in the age to come eternal life."

There are definitely people in our time and place who have given it all up. And they do attest to the freedom and ability to focus on that eternal power of life and love. My spiritual director is a member of a religious order that takes a vow of poverty.

That doesn't mean they have to beg or live on the streets – their order seems able to support them. But they don't really own much of anything themselves.

So, is Jesus asking us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor so we can be all in as his followers? Maybe. For a lot of us, our possessions really are what stands in the way of us fully living in the kingdom now.

Of course, many will be quick to point out all the practical problems if we really all took this to heart. It would be pretty chaotic. And probably it wouldn't really accomplish in society what we might have been aiming for.

But there isn't much doubt that this story unsettles us...makes us less comfortable with what we possess. The call to take up a cross is the call to give up some of our comfort and ease.

Right or wrong I look at it this way - the challenge is how do we live anything close to this now, even when we can't do it completely? Are we willing to even ask God for the willingness to do it more completely?

Death is what it takes to do this. Ultimately our physical death strips it all away. But in the meantime, can we die to what we're attached to before we physically die? Can we die to those things that stand between us and the kingdom of God – even now?

When the kingdom of God has fully come into being, I think what Jesus is saying that there simply will be no materially rich people there. The eye of the needle will strip all that away. There won't be people so desperately poor they can't live either.

But in this in between time, in the now and not yet, we get through the eye of the needle through a hundred smaller deaths when we take up our cross and sacrifice for the well-being of others.

In this weird time of political turmoil, there are widely divergent views about the economy and the actions of the current administration. Many are convinced that what's happening is exactly what is needed to make life better for the largest number of people.

Others are heartbroken by the impact certain actions have already had on vulnerable groups, and what may yet happen to others. I'm in the latter group.

But it is a difficult time to know exactly what one should do about it. Generally, I suppose that has always been true.

Right now, that is my daily prayer – God show me what is mine to do. Maybe that's the thing – to trust that God will actually show us what is ours to do.

As I pray that, I find myself waiting for God to show me some big action to take...the perfect words or action that will have some huge impact.

Instead, God seems to keep showing me little ways to help – often just one person or donation at a time. It's probably not all of our calls to sell everything and give it all to the poor.

But we can ask God to show us what is ours to do. It might be something like learning of a refugee who needs help with rent and paying it...it might be a call from a relative who needs a loan for a health care need.

It might be learning that an organization whose mission to care for the most vulnerable is threatened by funding cuts.

It might be giving up some of your time to help an elderly neighbor or serve meals at Matt Talbot or the City Mission.

For some of us, it may not be possessions at all that we need to give up. It may be our own ego, or a longstanding resentment. But this story seems to be particularly about wealth.

Who knows – for some of us the answer might be giving up all our possessions. That truly is going all in on this Kingdom of God thing.

In the end, when Christ's redeeming work is done and the Kingdom of God has come fully into being, I think what Jesus says here is that there simply won't be rich people. And there won't be poor people.

I don't really know what that will actually look like. In the meantime, we will continue to struggle with this story every time it comes up.

My prayer is that each time we hear it we can also hear the promise...the promise that life in God's kingdom is worth the cross we take up...and the attachments we lay down.