

Today's bible reading hits us right where it hurts – right in the hip pocket...

Jesus actually had quite a bit to say about money, and what we do with it, and our attitudes towards it, and usually what Jesus had to say about money, was both blunt and confronting... And today's bible reading is just that – it's blunt and it's confronting...

Sadly, most times I've heard this passage preached on, the preachers have done their best to **remove** the offence – they've done their best to cut the guts out of the challenge that it is to us and our culture... - basically what they've done, is they've dumbed-it-down, so we don't find it quite so objectionable...

And I suspect a fair bit of what I teach you today, is going to be undoing the work of bible interpreters who have endeavoured to remove the offence that Jesus purposely put in there.

You see, in our culture today (as it was in Jesus' day), wealth is most definitely seen as a blessing. There's a saying that goes *“Those people who say ‘money can't buy you happiness’, don't know where to shop.”* And there's some truth in that, and I'm not going to get up here and say that if you lose all your money you'll be happier – rubbish... The lot of the poor is a hard life, and money makes life easier...

What I am going to say to you is, “In the eyes of the world, wealth is a blessing”, but Jesus warns us that usually, wealth is a curse... because riches on earth, do not equate to riches in heaven... and earthly riches have a habit of keeping us from storing up heavenly riches...

A man came to Jesus, and asked Him, “**Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?**” Now that might seem like a fair enough question, but it’s not really... You see, this young man, the same as many people today, believed that the power to gain eternal life was in **his** hands. **what good deed must I do to have eternal life?**

He wasn’t asking Jesus “How can I gain eternal life?” Or “How can I be saved to eternal life?” He wanted to know what good deed **he** had to do to get it...

And the very first thing that Jesus said to him, gives us the key to this whole passage. Jesus said, “**Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.**”

OK? This young man, believed that **he** was good – he thought that he could **do** good. He thought if he did a **particular** good deed, or a group of good deeds, he’d be rewarded with eternal life. But Jesus said to him, right at the start, there is only **one** who is good – get any notion that **you** are good, right out of your head. Goodness is God’s domain – not ours. The young man **believed** he was good, and yeah, he might’ve been good-**ish**.. but he could never be good **enough**...

And neither can we. Salvation is a free gift of God. It cannot be gained by **doing** good deeds – salvation is gained through faith in the one who **is** good – Salvation is gained by confessing our badness, and being forgiven of our badness, by our saviour, who takes away our bad and fills us with His good...

But he was pretty self-confident, this young fella – as are many people... So Jesus played him along a little bit: **If you would enter life, keep the commandments."**

Yeah, righto Jesus – which ones?

"You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Now I can just imagine this young fella crackin a bit of a smile at this point "Yep, done that – anything else"....

"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Jesus cut him down to size.... The young man was filled with pride. He was filled with self-righteousness... But it was **very** misplaced. ... and so Jesus cut him down to size...

The young man had said "I have loved my neighbour as myself – I've ticked the box – I've done that".... And yet when Jesus challenged him to sell his possessions and give it to the poor, we can see the lie that that was. How could he truly love his neighbour as himself, if he had everything and they had nothing????

He had a wrong view of himself. He saw himself as good. In his mind, he loved his neighbour just as much as he loved himself – but that was a lie...

And the challenge Jesus threw down to him was three-fold:, but it started with “Go”...

- Go, sell what you possess – he couldn’t follow Jesus until he’d gone and done that
- Give to the poor
- Come, follow me

This man was called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus called Peter to leave his fishing. And at once Peter left his nets – he left his boat there on the shore, and he followed Jesus. When Jesus called Matthew the tax collector – and Matthew left behind his licence to extract money out of people, and he followed Jesus...

Jesus called the rich young man. We could have been reading his name in the bible, as one of the great followers of Jesus Christ.... but instead, we only know him as a sad sap who walked away from Jesus... Why? Because he wasn’t willing to give up what he had to follow Christ... His possessions were more important to him, than Christ...

Disciples of Jesus Christ, daily have the challenge laid before them – to live for the Kingdom of Heaven – not for the Kingdom of this world... when you come to Jesus, there’s going to be stuff you have to leave behind. For Peter, that was his fishing business. For Matthew it was his tax collecting, and for the rich young man, it was his possessions... And he couldn’t.

And I have a sneaking suspicion, it is that which we love most, and **never** want to give up, that Jesus tells us to leave, so that we can follow Him unhindered... Valuing nothing above Him – no wealth – no possessions – no activity – no person – So that we value **nothing**, higher than we do Christ and His calling... We learn this from the Disciples:

²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

That's God's economy: **many who are first will be last, and the last first**

In **this** world, those who are rich, are up on top:
Proverbs 10:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ A rich man's wealth is his strong city;
the poverty of the poor is their ruin.

Proverbs 13:23 (ESV)

²³ The fallow ground of the poor would yield much
food,

but it is swept away through injustice.

Proverbs 14:20 (ESV)

²⁰ The poor is disliked even by his neighbour,
but the rich has many friends.

In this world, the rich come out on top... but.... **many who are first will be last, and the last first** That's good news for the poor...

Do you really want to be on the top in this world, if it means you're going to be down the bottom in the Kingdom of Heaven?

²³ ... Jesus said to his disciples, **"Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.** (now that's shocking enough, but then He said this:) ²⁴ **Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."**

There's the offence. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.

That's the offence, and that is exactly what many preachers try to remove.

One explanation I've heard many times, is that in the wall to the city of Jerusalem, is a small opening (a very small gate), which is just big enough for an unloaded camel to struggle

through on its knees. It's a tight fit, but it's possible... and that this opening is known as the eye of the needle...

Has anyone ever heard that teaching??? It's pretty common... If you have, please unlearn what you've been taught – that's rubbish... FF Bruce, summarises what many good Bible scholars say: *“this charming explanation is of relatively recent date; there is no evidence that such a subsidiary entrance was called the eye of a needle in biblical times.”*ⁱ

The simple fact of the matter is this – Jesus meant what He said. He used their largest beast-of-burden – a camel, and thought of their smallest aperture – the eye of a needle, and he said **it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.**

Now, is that possible? No – it's impossible...

Which is what the disciples realised Jesus was saying.. **“Who then can be saved?”**... It's impossible... A camel cannot go through the eye of a needle...

²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, **“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”**

This shook their religious traditions to the core... You see, in their view, if someone had wealth, well that was a sign that they'd been blessed by God... It was thought that the rich were blessed, therefore they were obviously good, therefore they were the ones most likely to get eternal life...

And Jesus turned that notion completely on its head...

It's impossible for a rich person to gain eternal life... but by the miracle of God, it is possible – not easy, but possible...

So, with that in mind, “Is wealth a blessing? Or is it a curse?”..

And before you consider this, I want you to get past the idea that you are one of the poor and other people are the wealthy...

Somebody once wrote a prayer:

Dear Lord, I have been re-reading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and his obviously wrong choice. But it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not: ride in a car, have any surgery, turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes in hot running water, type a letter, mow a lawn, fly in an airplane, sleep on an innerspring mattress, or talk on the phone. If he was rich, then what am I?ⁱⁱ

You are not the world's poor. You are the world's rich – as am I.

Usually we compare ourselves with those who have more money than us... And we might say “Even though we've got a lot of assets, we really don't have much income to give to the poor...”

Do you realise there was no mention made of the rich young man's disposable income? It was his possessions that were holding him back. Jesus said "Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor" That's how you store up treasure in heaven... You don't store up treasures in heaven by giving away the excess... You gain treasure in heaven, by giving up your treasure on earth...

If we only ever had to give away disposable income, nobody would ever have to be generous with anything, because (let's be honest) we've made it an art-form to get **rid** of our disposable income...

To keep yourself 'out of cash' so you don't have to give anything away, a farmer would just buy more land and more tractors. A wage-earner would just buy more houses or a newer car. A teen-ager would buy more DVD's or a newer playstation.... And you can soon do away with all your disposable income – by turning it into possessions...

Don't fool yourself by saying "I don't have anything – I'm not rich"

I nearly cried one day, when someone who has 3 farms, 6 houses, countless cars and the best of everything, complained that the government wouldn't subsidise their children's education, because they had too many assets... "We don't have any money – our money's all tied up in assets..." we deserve to get the government subsidy....

They had no idea that they were wealthy... thinking that they were needy of government handouts – more so than a single income family, struggling to pay off their first home on a basic \$40000 /year wage... We deserve the government handout, even though they don't, because we don't earn any money..

How selfish we have become, that we can consider ourselves as ‘the poor’ when elsewhere, children go to bed hungry at night????...

So, is wealth a blessing, or is it a curse?.... It’s actually both.

Wealth gives people a self-sufficiency, such that they will not turn to God. And in that sense, it is a curse.

But wealth is also a blessing.

There is a saying which is a great saying, but it’s often misused... *I am blessed to be a blessing*... Have you heard that?

It’s true. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. With wealth comes great responsibility.

Proverbs 14:31 (ESV)

³¹ Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honours him.

Proverbs 19:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will repay him for his deed.

Proverbs 22:9 (ESV)

⁹ Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed,
for he shares his bread with the poor.

We **are** blessed to be a blessing... Unfortunately most people I've heard say this about themselves, don't live it – they give, but they give **relatively** little, and keep a lot... They expand their possessions and their lands greatly, and give relatively little.

God does not bless us with wealth, so we can buy flasher cars, flasher houses, bigger farms, bigger barns, holiday homes or better wine... – God blesses us with wealth, to be a blessing to others.

Proverbs 28:27 (ESV)

²⁷ Whoever gives to the poor will not want,
but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.

Proverbs 21:13 (ESV)

¹³ Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor
will himself call out and not be answered.

With wealth comes great responsibility.

The **snare** of riches – the **snare** of wealth – the **snare** of possessions... , is that we put them before God...

With God, it is possible for the rich to get eternal life – but it's very difficult.

You see, when you have nothing, it's easy to give up nothing to follow Christ. When you have a lot, managing what you have – being a good steward of what you have – protecting what you have.. – can consume you...

Don't give everything away, for the sake of making yourself poor. Instead, grow a generous heart. Give – generously. When you give to the poor, you're storing riches up in heaven – that's a great investment.

Give to the poor. Give to Christian ministries. Give to the needy.

By the way, if you're looking for a Christian ministry to support, Bush Disciples funds are running a bit low. I'll tell you about that a bit later in the announcements...

Store up treasures in heaven. Give to the poor, with a generous and loving heart. Support Christian ministries – there's lots of different ones you can support. Love God and love people, more than possessions...

Questions?

ⁱ FF Bruce – the hard sayings of Jesus

ⁱⁱ www.holwick.com 12249 Fredericksburg Bible Illustrator Supplements