

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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IT IS HARD FOR A RICH MAN

Matthew 19:22-24

It does not take long before a Christian realizes that a large portion of the Bible has to do with money. There are more verses devoted to money than to faith and prayer combined. Jesus spoke more about money than both heaven and hell. In fact, fifteen percent of the recorded words of Jesus were spent just on this one subject.

Moreover, there seems to be a direct link in Jesus' teaching between money and salvation itself. Remember the story of Zaccheus. Zaccheus was this rich tax-collector who offered to give half his money to the poor and pay back four times over those he cheated. Jesus commended him highly. After hearing Zaccheus' promise, He said, *Today salvation has come to this house* (Luke 19:9)... There is something amazing about this statement. Jesus judged the reality of this man's salvation based on his decision to part with his money for the glory of God and the good of others.

A broken hearted man

But there is the flip side of Zaccheus. The other side concerns a man described as a 'rich young ruler.' He was the central point of our previous lesson. We saw that this young man came to Jesus asking what he could do to inherit eternal life. The Lord answered him by quoting the Ten Commandments. The man said he had kept them. Then Jesus said this. *If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me* (Matthew 19:21). This story does not end well. The rich man went home broken hearted. Let's see what happened. Matthew 19:22-24.

Matthew 19:22 But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property.

23 And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

24 "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Notice that Jesus did not tell the young ruler, 'Give ten percent to the poor.' Neither did He say, 'Set up a fund, keep the principal intact, and give the interest to the poor.' I think he would have gladly done either of those. Jesus requested that he give up everything that he owned.

As we saw in the last lesson, Jesus does not call all His disciples to get rid of their possessions. He knew that money was a problem for the rich young ruler. That man had an unhealthy attachment to his wealth. And that is why Jesus made the specific demand on him to 'go and sell all.'

The command was too much for the ruler. We are told that it was his wealth that blocked everything. *He went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property* (Matthew 19:22). The owning of many things prevented the man from entering into the kingdom of God. He could not give them up. Compare that situation with the one involving Zaccheus. Just as Jesus gauged Zaccheus' true spiritual condition by his willingness to part with his money, so He gauged the rich young ruler's true spiritual condition by his unwillingness to part with his wealth.

It is extremely hard

This man was very sincere in his desire to have eternal life, so sincere that he was grieved to turn away from Christ. But in the end, the question is, how far was he willing to go to get eternal life? This question is also for us. How far are you willing to go to have eternal life?

You know, salvation is described by some preachers as a present that seems to just fall in your arms as you stretch them out. 'Just believe, that's all,' we are told. 'Ask Jesus into your life; you don't really have to do anything else.' The rich young ruler was very motivated to get eternal life. He was willing to make quite a lot of sacrifices to get it. But he drew a limit.

'I'd like to have eternal life. How do I get it?' the man asked. Jesus said, 'Well, fulfill the commandments for a start.' 'Oh, I've been doing that before.' Jesus did not discuss his answer. He came straight to the point. 'If you really want eternal life, let's talk about your possessions. This is what I'd like you to do. You go, dispose of all your riches and then, you come and follow Me.' At that point, the rich young ruler changed his mind and decided that the price of eternal life was simply too high.

If you are reading or listening to this lesson, you are probably interested in eternal life. How far are you willing to go to have it? Everyone has a sensitive point. For many people, when it starts touching their wallet, that is where it hurts the most and that is also where they draw the line.

After losing this potential follower, Jesus explained to His disciples that *it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*. How hard is it? Verse 24 tells us. It will be impossible to gain entry into the kingdom. The Lord said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich to go into the kingdom. If it is easy for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, then it will be easy for a man with much money to enter the kingdom. The fact is that no camel can get through the eye of any needle. It is the proverbial way of saying that wealth has a way of excluding a person from entering into the kingdom. Wealth can shrink the door of the kingdom down to an impassable peephole.

The analogy is deliberately hyperbolic. I think it is not to be taken as pointing to the literal impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom but as a way of underlying the exceptional difficulty of this occurring. I believe that a relative few are able by the grace of God to live with their riches in a way that does not compromise their commitment to Christ. But we have to understand that to live with wealth in this way is, in practice, equivalent to giving it away.

This being said, we will now examine more closely the Lord's teaching on the character and the danger of riches. I will do this under six points.

Point 1: an antagonistic relationship

The first thing we observe when we read v. 24 is that there is a definite incompatibility between riches and the kingdom, between the possession of riches and the entry into the kingdom. If you are rich, you will find it very hard to enter the kingdom. The owning of many things jams the door of heaven.

We find the same antagonistic relationship between riches and the kingdom when Jesus described the various kinds of people who respond to the gospel in the Parable of the Sower. He explained to His disciples that *the one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful* (Mat 13:22). Wealth choked the growing seed.

This antagonism is similar to the one that exists between the flesh and the Spirit. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:17, *For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.* The desires of the flesh are contrary to those of the Spirit. They draw us to opposite directions. While the Spirit of God would lead us in one way, our flesh would lead us in another, and thus produce this antagonism. Because they are opposite in their nature, they can never be brought into harmony with each other. Now, wealth is the kind of things that greatly attracts the flesh. The attraction can be so strong as to motivate an individual to center his life around the accumulation of material things. This person foolishly believes that it can bring happiness and fulfilment even though the voice of God tells him the contrary.

It is also the opposition that we find in the Scriptures between two kinds of kingdom. In John 18:36, Jesus said to Pilate, *My kingdom is not of this world.* 'You are of this world and so is your kingdom. My kingdom is not of this world.' These two kingdoms cannot be brought together. The person who is of this world looks at life as a brief interval that begins at birth and ends at death. His vision is restricted to the horizons of this world. The person who has a relationship with Christ has a fundamentally different perspective. He sees life through the eyes of eternity, knowing that the door of the heavenly kingdom swings on the hinges of what he does with his life on earth. Two kingdoms; two opposite views of reality.

Point 2: the heart follows the treasure

This leads me to the second point. The antagonism between riches and God's kingdom is seen in the fact that money competes against the kingdom of God for our love, the love our hearts.

A disciple's priorities will be determined by his comparative valuation of earthly and heavenly benefits. If your heart is not in the things of God, it is because you do not value them as much as other things. There are other things that you love more, that occupy more your thoughts and your time. In a way, the rich young ruler was confronted with this question: What do you love more, the things of this world or the kingdom of God? We see from his example how his 'great possessions' competed against God for the love of his heart. The greater is your estate, the more you will be attached to it.

The Lord Jesus made this insightful statement in Matthew 6:21. He said, *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* Your heart will be where you put your money. In other words, Jesus is saying to us, 'Show Me your checkbook, your credit card statement and your receipts for cash expenditures, and I will tell you where your heart is. I will tell you what you truly value. If you value possessions, you will find that your treasure is in this world, and your heart will be in this world too, no matter what you may say about your devotion to God.'

Point 3: choose your master

The third point is that wealth also competes against God for the lordship of our heart. Jesus put it in this way in Matthew 6:24. *No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*

Jesus did not say it is wrong to serve God and money, or it is difficult to serve God and money. He said that it is impossible to serve God and money. Some relationships, by their very nature, are exclusive. Our relationship with God is one of those. There is a throne in each life big enough to sit only one person. God may be on that throne, or mammon may be on that throne. But they cannot be both on that throne at the same time.

Mammon in Aramaic essentially means 'possessions.' Material possessions can themselves call for our allegiance, putting us in direct conflict with our loyalty to God. Jesus warns that a choice has to be made. As far as He is concerned, only a total devotion to Him is acceptable. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength.'

In demanding the liquidation of everything, Jesus was forcing the young man to choose which master he wanted to serve. Unfortunately, he chose mammon.

Point 4: money addiction

The fourth point is that money can breed covetousness. In Luke 12:15, Jesus said to a whole crowd, Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.

Many of you are probably like me. I was brought up with the belief or the philosophy that life does very much consist in the abundance of what I possess. I thought that if I were rich enough, I would be happy. Many times, I felt envious of other people's properties. I wanted to have what other people had. And if I could not have it, I felt annoyed, sometimes bitter. Quite frankly, I coveted other people's nice possessions.

The word 'covetousness' here is translated from the Greek word *pleonexia* which means 'to want more.' Covetousness is the desire to have more and more, to acquire without reference to one's own specific needs or the situation of others. This is precisely the thing about riches that Jesus warns us about.

When you get a taste of riches, you feel good. You feel satisfied, at least temporarily. And you want more of it. And when you get more, you still want some more. You just can't stop desiring money even if you have plenty of it. Have you ever heard anyone complaining that he has too much money? The desire for money becomes a sort of addiction which makes you forget what will happen to you in the end. You have no sense of the eternal. You are not even interested in it. Who worries about the kingdom of God in some future day when money can give you some satisfaction right now?

Point 5: unrighteous mammon

We come now to the 5th point. In Luke 16:9, Jesus uses an interesting expression to speak of money. He calls it 'the mammon of unrighteousness.' Let's read that verse.

*Luke 16:9. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of **the mammon of unrighteousness**; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*

We are puzzled by the word 'unrighteousness.' Why is money called 'the mammon of unrighteousness'? Can money be unrighteous? Here we need to understand the nature of money. Money is essentially a tool that people agree to use to simplify trade. It is the transferable object in an economic system that makes possible the exchange of any kind of goods or services. Money is neither moral or immoral, i.e., there is no inherent good or evil about it. Therefore money itself cannot be unrighteousness. People can be righteous or unrighteous, but not money.

Now, money may appear to be good when it is used to do good. For example, it can be used to feed, clothe and provide shelter for the homeless. But in reality, the good is in the person doing these actions. On the other hand, money can be used to do evil. It can purchase sexual favors, bribe a politician, buy cocaine. Note also that evil resides in man, not in money itself.

So money has great potential for good when used rightly, and great potential for evil when used wrongly. As I mentioned, money is amoral. It is neither good nor bad. If it becomes a problem, it is because of the depravity of man. We live in a sinful world. And in the hands of sinful people, money inevitably becomes a tool of evil. If money can be used for either good or evil, and the one using it is more evil than good, then it is fair to conclude that money is most often used for evil.

This is the reason why money is called 'the mammon of unrighteousness' in Luke 16:9. In Greek, 'mammon of unrighteousness' actually means 'mammon which leads to unrighteousness.' Jesus was saying, 'Look at this worn currency. It has often been used for evil purposes. It may have once been stolen, perhaps even killed for. Now that it is in your hands, use it wisely. Use it for good. Use it for eternal purposes.'

Do you see the delicate balance of this whole passage? We are told in the same breath, 'Money, this mammon of unrighteousness, tends to be tainted by sin and lends itself to abuse. But you can use it for eternal good. When you do so, God will reward you.'

Point 6: God is watching

My final point is this: God watches our stewardship. God watches with great interest what we do with the money He has entrusted to us.

In the account of the poor widow, Mark tells us that Jesus *sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury* (Mark 12:41). Notice the context. Jesus did not happen to see the money that fell into the offering box. He deliberately watched what people were giving. Try to imagine how close Jesus was to the box. He was close enough to see that some people put in large amounts. He was close enough even to see two small coins being dropped by a woman and to identify them as copper. Being that close shows that He was interested in who was giving what. Do not suppose that the use of your money is only your business. God makes it His business.

This particular woman gave the only money she had. Jesus regarded her as wise and set her up as a model for His disciples to follow. He said, *Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on* (Mark 12:43-44).

May we commit ourselves to develop the heart of this poor widow, learning to put boldly all our resources at God's disposal, as He has put all His resources at ours.