

## Getting Our Priorities Straight

Matthew 19:16-30

July 31, 2011

We continue our break from our journey through Romans this morning with the second of the four sermons the Deacons have asked me to preach on stewardship this year. As always, I want to thank this congregation for your generosity and the ways in which you support First Baptist Church and her ministries. Giving has been down over the last couple of months, as it generally is in the summer, but we could be, and have been, in a worse financial situation. This having been said, Jesus had a lot to say about money, and the Deacons and I believe we need to keep the financial need, and the biblical teaching, in view, hence this series of four sermons on stewardship.

This morning's text includes the idea of stewardship in the context of a man's question of Jesus regarding salvation. Matthew introduces Jesus' teaching by telling us, "*Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'*" (v.16) This is a straightforward question and was asked of Jesus on several occasions. Each time the way the question was put forward changed a little. Also, Jesus always knew the heart of the asker, and so His answer differed each time.

This time the man asked what good thing he must do. This shows two false assumptions that still plague the world today. The first assumption is that getting eternal life has to do with being **good**. The second assumption is that it depends on what we **do**. Jesus immediately jumped on the first assumption. "*'Why do you ask me about what is good?' Jesus replied. 'There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.'*" (v.17) Jesus reminded the man that there is only one Who is good. Only God can rightly be called good. His creation was made good, but that has been ruined by our sin, and it is a ruin to which we

contribute every day. It is certainly not the case, from a right theological perspective, that anybody that has walked the earth can be called good, except Jesus Himself. Of course we compare ourselves to each other and some of us come away looking good by comparison, but the truth remains, none of us are good. Jesus began to answer the question by reminding its asker of this important point.

Jesus then moved on to the second assumption. This one Jesus let stand for a little because He knew it was the sticking point for the man. The man could acknowledge that we cannot be good. He didn't argue that point. He was to have a much harder time accepting that eternal life was not dependant on what he did. We have already seen Jesus' initial answer, "Obey the commandments." This led to a second question by the man, "Which ones?" The man wanted to know how much was to be required of him.

Jesus again answered directly. "*'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (v.18, 19) In saying these Jesus brought to the man's mind the law given through Moses. Jesus did not mean this as an exhaustive list, but as an illustrative one. He gave five of the ten commandments, and another example of the summation of the law given to Moses.

Interestingly, Jesus focused on the laws that dealt with our relationships with each other, and not our relationship with God. He did not say, "Worship only God," or "Do not make any graven images," or even "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." This does not mean that Jesus thought these things were less important. It probably means that Jesus knew the commands toward God are easier to keep. It's easier to not make an image of God then it is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Matthews account goes on. “*All these I have kept,*’ the young man said. *‘What do I still lack?’*” (v.20) Two things jump out of this sentence. The first, and less important, is that Matthew now adds the detail that the man was young. This was not an older teacher of the law with whom Jesus was dealing. This was a young man trying to make sure he got onto the right path early. For this he is to be commended. Too many people early in life are too focused on what they want to do, what feels good, trying to find themselves, and all sorts of other nonsense. This young man wanted to set his feet on the right course. He had a mission and he was going to do the best he could in life.

The other thing that stands out is the young man’s question. “What do I still lack?” He knew that keeping the **law** wasn’t enough. Somewhere, deep inside him, was the understanding that the law couldn’t save him and he was looking for what could. Of course, he also knew that he hadn’t kept the law perfectly. Like us, when he said he did well, he meant that he had done pretty good, or at least better than most. How quick we are to overlook our faults and failures, emphasize the things we like about ourselves, and then wonder why God doesn’t act like He owes us something. The young man would not admit to any failing before the law, and he probably was very good compared to those around him and zealous for the law. After all, he did come to Jesus and ask about gaining eternal life.

This drive of the man to talk with Jesus, and the understanding he had that the law is not enough is the Holy Spirit pointing out his failure and the distance that remained between him and God. The man thought he was good. The Holy Spirit was working in him to demonstrate otherwise in order that the young man might throw himself on God’s mercy, give himself to Jesus and be saved.

To move the young man in that direction Jesus told him what he lacked. “*Jesus answered, ‘If you want*

*to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’*” (v.21) This is a harsh demand. Jesus was good for those. He wants us to be dependant on Him, not on ourselves or our possessions. If this man wanted to be perfect, he needed to follow Jesus. If he was to follow Jesus, then he needed to sell all he had and give the proceeds away.

Matthew tells us, “*When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.*” (v.22) Now the final piece drops into place. Not only was the man young, he was also rich. He had spent his short life collecting things and laying up riches so that he could enjoy life now and have plenty for the future. He knew he was missing eternal life, but his possessions meant even more to him. Instead of following Jesus, he went away sad because the **demand** was more than he could bear. He had come to Jesus looking for a principle he could add to the things he was doing, not for a master he had to obey, and he was certainly not looking for a master for whom he had to give up everything to follow. His wealth was too important to him. It meant too much. He relied too much on it.

Jesus took the opportunity to teach his disciples. After the rich young man left, Jesus turned to them. “*I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell 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.*” (vv.23,24) Whether Jesus meant an actual gate in the Jerusalem wall which a camel could just crawl through or was using an actual needle as a metaphor does not really matter. Either way it is impossible for a person to enter God’s kingdom while depending on his or her riches. This is because God’s kingdom isn’t a place, it is being dependant on God alone for direction and strength. The amount of money isn’t the issue. The understanding that one doesn’t need anything, including God’s help to be saved

is the issue. People with great wealth can enter God's kingdom the moment they realize they are very poor compared to God and they **rely** on Him instead of anything in this world. Everyone needs to come to that same realization.

The disciples didn't understand this. They were still stuck, as we often are, in thinking the way the world thought. They turned to Jesus, and He answered their question with the only possible answer. *"When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"* (vv.25,26) It does seem odd, after living with Jesus' teaching here for almost two-thousand years, that the disciples assumed if the rich cannot be saved nobody can. It may come from a belief that those who are in God's kingdom will be blessed with riches. If riches are the only sign of God's blessing, then it would suggest that the rich people are in and the poor people are out. As we follow Jesus, however, and we look at the history of the church, we see that riches may be a blessing from God, but the real blessings are His presence and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God may bless some people with money. He gives His grace and Himself to all who are in His kingdom. The latter is much to be preferred.

Actually, it is impossible that anybody can be saved, least of all those who have a lot of the things on which this world depends. It is only by the **grace** of God that anybody enters the kingdom of heaven, and so it is only by God's grace that the rich can enter as well. The disciples' question was spot on. "Who can be saved?" Jesus' answer was spot on as well. God can do, and has done, the impossible. He can create the universe out of nothing. He can control the storms and the raging sea. He can bring life out of death. He can bring a rich man or woman into His kingdom.

God bless Peter, we can always count on him to speak up. *"Peter answered him, 'We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?'"* (v.27) The disciples were a mixed bag. While they were not extremely rich, they were part of the merchant middle class. They had substantial property and the means of generating income. Remember, Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John from their fishing boats. They came from families that owned boats and nets and sold their catch in the local villages and cities. Peter pointed out that at least some of the apostles had left all of that behind when they followed Jesus. They might not have had all the rich young man had, but they had begun to do what Jesus to the rich young man to do. Would they, too, get eternal life? "Yes," Jesus said, and much, much, more.

*"Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.'"* (vv.26-30) Jesus' promise here waits for its fulfillment at the final judgement. The twelve apostles, the first to follow Jesus' call and to give up everything for Him, will be given thrones in His kingdom and will rule with Him in judgement over Israel. Even more, everyone who has given up the things of this world to follow Jesus will receive a hundred times what they lost, and will gain eternal life as an inheritance. We gain the family of God, the first glimpses of it now, but fully knowing and seeing all our brothers and sisters in the life to come. The riches of heaven are ours as well. Life here will be difficult and full of loss and sorrow, but it is only a vapor, a passing

of the night, and then day comes and we will receive life as God meant it to be.

Jesus ended with the statement that many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. This is a reminder that the world's priorities are reversed. The things the world thinks are important like money, power, and influence, carry no weight in God's kingdom. In God's kingdom those who have given everything up for Him and are poor in the world's eyes have more influence than those with lots of money. Those who recognize their weakness and rely on the Holy Spirit have power. Those who are poor in spirit and seek out God are rich in the things that matter.

The world encourages us to get our priorities **backwards**. We are told to seek money and happiness. God tells us to set aside money and happiness and seek our fulfillment in Him. If we stop trying to be happy and start trying to be holy we end up being both. We both get eternal life and find that we are content and happier than we have ever been.

What we must not do is follow the example of the rich young man. He kept the world's priorities. He held on to what he had and so he missed the vast treasure that is the kingdom of God. The rich young man would not **give** all that he had to God, and so he could not receive any of what God had for him.

God does not need us to give, but we need to give for the same reason the young man did. Giving to God frees us from dependency on our possessions. It reminds us that God has promised to provide for our needs, and that everything belongs to Him anyway. If we have been bought with the blood of Jesus, then we belong to God and everything we have is His to command. If we give ourselves completely to God and to His will, then, and only then, we will see what He can do with us.

When it comes to giving to the church, like the rich young man we often want to know how much is required of us. Does God mean for all of us to give up

everything as Jesus told the rich young man to do and as the apostles did? No. Our desire for **God** should be stronger than our desire for anything else, however.

Also, God does want us all to give generously and sacrificially to the work of the church. We are to support our common ministry in the community with our prayers, our time, and our money. There are opportunities to serve, and there is a need for financial support. Paul instructed Timothy with the following words. *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”* (1 Timothy 6:17-19) We, too, need to give what we can so the work of this congregation may continue as we point people toward God and serve them in His name. We need to do good, be rich in good deeds, and be as generous and willing to share as we can, even as God has been generous to us and shared eternal life with us. This is setting our priorities straight.