

## Poverty and Power

When I call my stockbroker for a report or advice I always routinely ask “How are you doing?” His response is always the same: “Living the dream!”



Now, there’s a concept that has been drilled into our thinking: that life is a quest for wealth, success, achievement – The Dream!

**Michael K. Olmsted** In modern American thinking, the goal is to make something of yourself. Sadly, that thinking has invaded the modern church where success is big, and worship is lights, cameras, multiple satellite locations, and the notion that God will give you what you want if you ask believing.

So, let’s meet the “rich young ruler” (Matthew 18:16; Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18). Understand from the beginning, this seeker after eternal life is not a bad guy. He has spent his life up to that point keeping the key commandments at the core of Judaism. He has it all in the eyes of the world. He would be a great husband for your daughter, a wonderful dad for your grandkids, and a model of respectability.

Yet he was seeking more, something that would bring peace and joy to his heart, something that would replace the relentless search for a hope and peace that seemed unattainable. What is the major formula, the prayer, the steps to inner peace that popular motivators and success books never really deliver?

It is telling that this earnest, even admirable, seeker focuses on the “deed” he must do, but Jesus calls him to the “good” (v. 17). Jesus changes the focus of this earnest conversation from “how can I earn eternal life” to “there is only one who is good” (v. 17). Still not hearing clearly, the young seeker says he has spent his lifetime keeping the main commandments, yet he still feels empty and far from God.

I remember an outstanding young member of one of the churches I served, talented and academically strong, telling me he wanted to serve

God, but his mother viewed that choice as cheating her son out of success. The world’s values never change. The seeker we read about today knew all about success in his community and his faith group, but not in his heart. We are wired for success in our society. In business, politics, athletics, and entertainment our society adores success. Forget morality, honesty, compassion, and generosity – success is the goal as our culture ignores the true meaning of life and longing of the heart.

Jesus starts with the foundational truth that there is “only one who is good,” followed by the idea that “if you wish to be perfect, go, sell all your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (v. 21). Don’t go off in the wrong direction here and label success and wealth as evil because it is not, unless those markers are the real gods in your life.

And let’s be clear about the wording “if you wish to be perfect.” Understand that Jesus means “if you really long to know God’s love and grace in a personal way” you can no longer live to worship the world’s standards of wealth and success. It is a hard barrier to overcome. The question Jesus puts to this young man is: Are you willing to love God more than anything else this world offers and can you give yourself and your possessions to help those around you who are suffering? There is a rather old proverb that may be connected to Jesus’ words: “Put your money where your mouth is!”

Jesus’ disciples were witnessing this conversation. They, like all of us, were learning what it means to change habits and thinking, to follow Jesus and serve God. Jesus used this teachable moment to speak to his followers both then and now: “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” (v. 24). A friend once rephrased that dramatic image for his church: You won’t be driving your Mercedes through the golden gates of glory!

“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?” (v. 25). Jesus answered: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (v. 26). Those disciples had been learning from Jesus for about three years. They had heard his wonderful freeing sermons, witnessed his brilliant debates with renowned Jewish scholars, observed him gather children close, heal blindness and leprosy, raise the dead, and welcome the likes of a tax collector into the family of God. They had left families and careers to follow Jesus. They know the absurdity of a camel passing through the eye of a needle, and they know the wealth of the world cannot buy your way into heaven.

Yet they still struggled. To a world that knows all about earning your way and winning success, it is hard to understand grace. Jesus clearly states the ultimate truth: “but for God all things are possible.”

This is a true story, not a parable. A rich young religious man chooses his wealth and religious rules over the love and grace of God. We have four accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry as well as the writings of the early church to teach us the way of faith and how to live as God’s people.

We, like the “rich young ruler,” must face the same questions and make our choice. How do you see your wealth and possessions? Are they proof of your faithfulness to God or are they resources entrusted to you for serving God and helping others? How do you see others, especially the poor, disadvantaged, sick, outcasts, and foreigners? Is your real treasure in the bank, invested in the stock market, or is your treasure the grace of God made real in your words and treatment of others?

The rich moral young seeker returned home that day with his wealth intact and his heart empty. We are truly poor when our material wealth is more important than our love for God and our willingness to give ourselves to others. Choose not to go away grieving as did the young man in our text.