

Psalm 137:1-4 (NRSV)

¹By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. ²On the willows there we hung up our harps. ³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ ⁴How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?

Luke 18:18-30 (NRSV)

¹⁸A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²³But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. ²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, 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.”

²⁶Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

²⁸Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” ²⁹And he said to them, “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, ³⁰who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Money or eternal life? Is it a choice? Which choice would we make? What do we really want to find in the briefcase when we open it?

Two weeks ago we met some people who, when faced with disappointment, cut a hole through Jesus’ roof so that their paralyzed friend might be healed. They said, “Deal!” Last week, we met some lepers who found themselves to be doing the right thing even though it was probably not for the most virtuous of motives. It was as if God made the deal for them. But today, we meet a successful and important man who when offered “the deal” found himself saying no. Granted he was sad about it, but still, his answer was “no deal.”

A gospel of wealth?

The gospels are filled with stories and parables about rich people, particularly Luke’s gospel. Luke 16:1-13 is a parable about a rich man who employs a dishonest trustee to manage his business. In 16:14, Luke condemns the Pharisees as “lovers of money” and then Jesus condemns them as being corrupt at heart. This is immediately followed by Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus.

This story is well-known, but it wasn’t new with Jesus. It was an ancient story about the dangers of wealth. The story had circulated in various forms around the near-east for centuries. There are seven versions in the writings of the Jewish rabbis alone.¹ In Jesus’ story, Lazarus, the pauper, dies and is accorded a place of honor in Hades.² In contrast, when the rich man dies he is tormented in Hades.

Because the New Testament says so little about our existence immediately after death, what we sometimes call our afterlife, Christians will often turn to this story to look for guidance about what happens to us after we die. But the story is not about that. It is about the dangers of wealth and the importance of generous compassion to those who have less. It is

¹From Alan Culpepper’s commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreters Bible*. A copy of the entire 12-volume biblical commentary is in the St. Andrew library.

²Hades was the ancient Greek word for the place of the dead where everyone went when they died. It was a gray, shadowy, generally unpleasant place of limited individual consciousness. In Hades, people were no more than shadows. The Jews called this place Sheol. Don’t bring to this idea of Hades/Sheol any of your conceptions of heaven or hell. Hades was simply the place where the dead existed and it was a place from which there could be no return. In the ancient cosmology, God was “up there” and the dead were “down there” in Hades/Sheol.

about doing right, doing good, being a neighbor in all things and toward all people. As Culpepper writes, this parable is about “fundamental neighborliness” being the barometer of the soul. This truth is driven home by where Luke places the story of the rich man and Lazarus in his gospel: right in the midst of several stories and parables about the love of money and the dangers of wealth.

All this helps to prepare us for chapters 18 and 19, which we can think of as Jesus’ gospel to the rich and to the poor. In story after story, episode after episode, Luke contrasts Jesus’ teachings: Good News to the poor and warnings to the rich. Jesus’ encounter with the rich ruler of today’s scripture passage lies in the middle of this long section.

The love of money

We don’t know why this wealthy and important man asks the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”³ Perhaps he is sincere. Perhaps he is simply looking for an endorsement. Regardless, he gets the question wrong. One does not “do” anything to “inherit.” Either the man wasn’t paying attention or had stepped away when Jesus taught that we are to receive the kingdom like children (Luke 18:15-17, the verses immediately preceding this story). Like children? There is no place here for merit or achievement. The inheritance is a gift which cannot be earned.

Nonetheless, Jesus lets the man go ahead with his “doing” reminding the ruler that he knows the Law – no adultery, no murder, no theft, honor your parents, etc. The man believes that he has “done” all this. Surely, the man is feeling pretty good about himself at this point, eternal life is in his grasp! But then Jesus asks him to “do” one more thing: sell

Earning the Inheritance

When the ruler asks how he can earn his inheritance, his question feeds many Christians’ misconception of Judaism in Jesus’ day.

Many of us grew up being taught that the Jews, such as the Pharisees, were trying to do everything right so that they could earn their way into heaven and that Jesus came to tell them that it is all about grace, not merit. Even in the scholarly community, this was the accepted model or paradigm until the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Numerous archaeological finds, new analytic methods, and the explosion in the university departments devoted to the historical study of religions revealed that the longstanding view of the Judaism of Jesus’ day was not correct. It wasn’t a matter of piling up enough points to be made right with God. The people of God were just simply – God’s people. For the Jews, it was a matter of staying in God’s covenant people and doing everything possible to keep the covenant with God so that all the promises of God could be kept. Of course, in fact, it was God, in the person of Jesus, who was the one faithful and representative Jew who kept the covenant.

In today’s story, it isn’t only Jesus who would have seen the problem with the ruler’s question, at least some in the crowd would have seen it do. They, like we, would have known that we are saved by the grace of God.

his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. Luke tells us only that the man “became sad, for he was very rich.” Which will it be, Jesus asks: Deal or No Deal?

What a change Jesus asks of this man. Sell all that he has! Surely Jesus can’t mean what he says. What about the man’s financial independence? His financial security? Jesus promises the man a large bank account in heaven, but what about his T-bills on earth?

Yes, this is a story about our attachment to possessions and our imagined independence. But, it is also a story about trust. The man trusts what he can put his hands on, namely his money and herein lies the danger of wealth. The problem isn’t the money itself, it is the fact that money can blind us to our dependence upon God.

The ruler professes to trust God, but it is a timid trust, a trust that is unable to sustain him when he faces the challenge, the deal, posed to him by Jesus. The change Jesus demands is simply too much for him. Jesus has exposed the man to be a person of little faith – or at least to have little faith in God, for he seems to have plenty of faith in his possessions.

As we grow in our faith, we are offered many deals: to love, to worship, to care, to invite. Every day we have opportunities to step up, or to fall back. But when it comes to our own eternal life, God offers no deal, no bargain. We simply discover within ourselves a faith that transcends understanding, a gift from God.

³The man’s reference to “eternal life” may seem puzzling, especially in light of my footnote on the first page. However, it is important to remember that by Jesus’ day, many (most?) Jews had come to believe in a great and bodily resurrection of the dead on the day when God put all things right.

Down to the Sea of Galilee

As I mentioned in this text box last week, my family and I, as well as a couple of dozen others in the St. Andrew family, recently returned from a trip encompassing most of the biblical lands, from Egypt to Rome. We were blessed by being able to visit Israel, even if only for a day and a half.

Our second day in Israel was spent in Galilee: Nazareth in the morning and then on to the Sea of Galilee at noon. From the coastline, we quickly left the plains and headed into the Galilean hills. Nazareth is situated on the top of one. Calling them “hills” doesn’t really do them justice. They may have the elevation of hills, but they have the sharp contours of the Rockies. The hills are often covered by countless volcanic rocks and boulders. Over the centuries, many of the hillsides were terraced by moving tons of rocks from one place to another.

From the hills, we drove down to the Sea of Galilee. Along the way, we passed a road side marking “Sea Level” and then we continued downward. The sign was the Galilean equivalent of all the “5280 feet” signs in Denver! Once we reached the road that runs along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, we were 600 feet below sea level. I was quite sure that no one in our group had been so far below sea level before.

We arrived at the city of Tiberias (a Roman city in Jesus’ day) on the western shore. From there, you can turn right and go south to where the Sea of Galilee pours into the Jordan River. (From there, the Jordan River flows southward, continuing to fall until it empties into the Dead Sea, which is 1200 feet below sea level.) If you turn left at Tiberias, you go northward along the shoreline to places such as Magdala (Mary Magdalene’s home) and Capernaum. A couple of miles beyond Capernaum is where the Jordan River empties into the Sea of Galilee before flowing out of the sea’s southern end.

The Sea of Galilee is big, but on the day we were there it was easy to see across it in every direction. Dramatic hills surround most of the sea leaving a relatively narrow shore area in most places. It was easy to see why Jesus made Capernaum his headquarters. Walking from place to place along the shore would be pretty straightforward. Walking westward into the “hills” to reach the village of Nazareth would not.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JULY 22 - 28

Sunday, Mark 8:1-26 The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle in all four gospels. Why do you think this is the case? What do you make of the two-stage healing of the blind man at Bethsaida? Couldn’t Jesus have gotten it right the first time? What might be the larger message of this story? How could it be related to the disciples’ own blindness about Jesus’ identity?

Monday, Mark 8:27-9:13 What do Peter’s declaration about Jesus and Jesus’ foretelling of his death and resurrection have to do with Jesus’ transfiguration?

Tuesday, Mark 9:14-50 Here, the disciples argue among themselves about who is greatest. Why do you think it is so hard for the disciples to understand and to live out Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News? Is there a message here for our own discipleship? Jesus warns about not putting temptations in front of other people. What are some ways you tempt others to sin?

Wednesday, Mark 10 Here we find Mark’s story of the rich man who wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. How does this telling compare to Luke’s story in this background study? Is it exactly the same? Are any changes important? How?

Thursday, Mark 11 When Jesus rides into Jerusalem it is as a returning king, the messiah. He then heads right for the temple. Read Jeremiah 7 for background. What does the fig tree have to do with it?

Friday, Mark 12 Imagine you are among those hearing Jesus tell the parable of the wicked tenants. Who would think Jesus is talking about? Why doesn’t Jesus want to directly address the resurrection question asked by the Sadducees? What is Jesus saying to you and me with his comments about the poor widow’s offering?

Saturday, Mark 13 Jesus heads up to the Mount of Olives where he can look on the temple. What do you imagine this chapter is about? Is it only about a “someday” that has not yet arrived? Forty years later the temple would be destroyed by the Roman legions and has never been rebuilt. Could Jesus be talking about that day in 13:2? How about later in the chapter? Remember that the Son of Man reference is grounded in Daniel 7:13-14.

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. "Deal or no deal" is a pretty memorable theme for a sermon series, but in today's Scripture passage, truth be told, it is a bit misleading. Jesus never offers a deal. If anything, it is the rich ruler, not Jesus, who wants to do a deal: "Tell me what I must do so I can get eternal life." But Jesus rebuffs the man. The ruler is all about doing, about earning. In fact, I bet that approach characterized the man's entire important and successful life. After all, where is there room for grace in the hustle and bustle of business and the affairs of state? Do you live a life of grace? What do you think I mean by that?
2. It is easy to see even our salvation, our own eternal life, as a deal. The deal goes like this: God will save me so long as my faith is strong enough. How much have you heard or been taught a theology something like that? How does it shortchange Paul's statement that our salvation is "the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:9)? Why is a deal often more attractive to us than simply throwing ourselves on God's grace? Is it because we have trusting enough, even trusting God?
3. The rich ruler who came to Jesus was unwilling to surrender his possessions. Why do you think this is? Was he attached to his stuff? Was he unwilling to give up the security of a fat bank account? Perhaps he had big responsibilities to care for others in his family. . . . Most people strive to build financial security. Do you think we shouldn't? If we do work toward such security, where can we go wrong? How we go about gaining the wealth? Losing perspective? Many of us have at one time in our lives been pretty poor. I don't mean poverty-stricken, but simply not having much stuff or much money. What do you think your reaction would be if Jesus asked you to voluntarily sell all you have and return to a life of few possessions, small income, and a meager bank account? Could you do it?