

Luke 18:18–30 (NIV2011)

¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”

²¹ “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. ²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!

²⁵ Indeed, 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.”

²⁶ Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁷ Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

²⁸ Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!”

²⁹ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

We have received so much from God. The least we can do is give much away.

There are certain Scripture passages that many preachers would just as soon avoid. Today’s is one of them. It’s yet another of the gospel stories about rich people.

The truth is that 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 ignoring the needs of the poor. 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

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. In the parable. The rich man seems to be in a special corner of Hades where he is enduring torment.

have less. It is about doing right, doing good, being a neighbor in all things and toward all people. It is about Jesus, yet again, speaking to the Great Reversal that is the coming of God's kingdom. 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.

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.

The love of money

And so we come to today's story. We don't know why this wealthy and important man asks Jesus 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 (Mark 10:13-16, 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 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."

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?

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.

Fred Craddock helps us to see the heart of this story in his commentary on Luke:

Jesus knows the condition of the man and writes the prescription for life, a prescription we have met frequently in Luke, perhaps most forcefully at 12:33. The ruler is invited to trust God completely, but he cannot or, rather, will not. He is no longer in the position of being bedazzled and enticed by the prospect of wealth; he has lain too long in silken ease, fared too well at banquet tables, rested too comfortably on the security of his surplus, moved too far from the cries of the hungry, enjoyed too obviously the envy of those less prosperous, assumed too much that he could buy everything he needed. He depends on his money. In short, he is an idolater. His encounter with Jesus ends sadly, because, upon the realization that he cannot serve God and mammon, he has chosen mammon. It is most likely not the case that there was ever a time or place when he said to himself, “I choose mammon over God”; experience and observation teach us that his condition is one to which people awaken after years of the creeping spread of materialism. Earlier he might have extricated himself, but now he is “very rich.”

Luke does not say the man went away (Mark 10:22) but only that Jesus enlarged upon the sad case before him and said, not solely to him but to those nearby who could overhear, “How hard it is for the rich.” The statement sounds more like an observation than a regulation. A camel going through the eye of a needle (v. 25) is a proverb about the humanly impossible and not a description of a camel, stripped of his burden, crawling through a small gate. The question from bystanders is a proper one: How can anyone be saved, since all of us participate to a lesser or a greater extent in the love of money which afflicts this ruler? The answer is the same one given to Abraham and Sarah when they were told that they would have a child, the same one given to the Virgin Mary as she stood in awe and bewilderment: nothing is impossible with God. Only God can save, whatever one’s condition.⁴

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. He professes to trust God, but it is a timid trust, a trust that is unable to sustain him when he faces the challenge 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 little faith in God, for he seems to have much faith in his possessions. In essence, the man is an idolater. He has chosen to trust in his wealth rather than in God.

It is our faith in, our trust of, the LORD God that sustains us through the fears and anxieties of our lives. It is our trust in God that encourages us to be ever more generous, not filling up barns and bank accounts, but giving with wild abandon so that others may be fed and clothed and hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

John Wesley understood this. When he was a young man he made 30 pounds a year. He figured out that he needed 28 pounds a year to live on and gave two pounds to the church. When his income increased to 50 pounds, he kept 28 and gave 22. When he made 100 pounds a year, he kept 28 and gave 72. Let those who have ears, hear!

*To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.
O my God, in you I trust.*

(from Psalm 25)

⁴ Craddock, F. B. (1990). *Luke*. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (213–214). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Trustees and Tithing

Often, when we speak of our responsibilities in God's house, we speak of our "stewardship." In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*. This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer in the NRSV.

When writing to a congregation he founded in Corinth, Greece, Paul referred to himself as "a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God," and as a steward, was required to be "trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1-2). Peter reminds us that we, the people of God, are to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Clearly, Paul and Peter knew that their responsibilities to God extended far beyond their possessions.

Leonard Sweet suggests that "steward" is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship. Instead, Sweet suggests that "trustee" is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God's trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God's creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God's wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God's creation is not ours, we don't own it; rather, we hold it in trust. We hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Timothy 6:20). We, God's people, the body of Christ, the church, have received a treasure, a trust, given by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14). This treasure is the truth about God and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord!

Understanding our responsibilities as being those of a trustee turns fall stewardship campaigns on their heads. I've been in many Sunday school classes and when stewardship time rolls around, we always end up talking about tithing. Pretty soon, somebody would ask the inevitable question – do we tithe on pre-tax or after-tax income! But this is all backwards. It assumes that all the stuff and money we have is ours and the challenge is to figure out how much we want or need to give to God. Do I give 1%, 2%, 5%, or even 10%? Tithing is a long tradition in the Christian church, but it has always been more talk than tithe. Even tithing is not the approach of the trustee. Trustees of God's house recognize that everything we have – all the money, cars, houses, stuff – is a gift from God. We use what we need and then grow the rest for God. Do we need to keep for own use 80% of what God entrusts to us? 85%? 90%? 95%? John Wesley understood this. Will we?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The first eight questions are taken from the booklet 40 Day Spiritual Journey to a More Generous Life that our church is using during this series. I hope you'll pick up a copy and read the devotions daily.

1. Are you a systematic giver, a spontaneous giver or a little of both?
2. If you have children, what have you done to help them become faithful and generous givers?
3. How have you determined how much you will give to St. Andrew? How do you give (cash, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, yearly, sporadically, loose cash you have on you, etc.)?
4. What other types of ministries or needs do you like to give to?
5. Do you take into consideration the tax implications of your giving? Why or why not?
6. How do you make sure you are faithful in your giving to the Lord (i.e. write the check/s monthly, keep track in a bookkeeping program, put the Lord's money in a special place, electronic giving, etc.)?
7. If married, do you agree together on whatever giving you are going to do OR does each person have freedom to give OR is there one of you that is the main decider of where and how much you'll give?
8. If you have children, do your children know how much you give, where you give and why you give? Why or why not?

One last question:

Do you tithe? If so, why? If not, why not? If you aren't tithing, are you working toward tithing in the future? If so, how long do you think it will take you to get there?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 2 Kings 12 Josiah rebuilds God's temple.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Job 20:17-24 Wealth gained by immoral means is not wealth that can be truly enjoyed.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Acts 4:32-5:11 The new believers share what they have but one couple decides to lie about their generosity.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Corinthians 9:12-13 Paul commends the Corinthians for their generosity.</p>
<p>Friday, 3 John 1:5-8 Working together, in generosity, for the truth.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Connecting the Dots: Genesis to Revelation **An Introduction to the Bible**

Through Monday, November 12, Scott Engle is teaching a four-week-long church-wide Bible study on Monday evenings. We are meeting in Wesley Hall from 7:00 to 8:30.

This is an introduction to the Bible and the over-arching biblical story. Each week's presentation will stand on its own, so please come even if you've missed some weeks.

Everyone who attends receives a free copy of the 62-page *Connecting the Dots* book.

The series will be suitable for youth and adults.

Childcare available – make reservations at www.standrewumc.org

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in **Piro Hall** on Tuesdays (a new room).

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The class is often led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org.

Sermon Notes
