

"With God All Things Are Possible"

The peril of riches. Often that is the topic introduced when looking at this well loved passage about the rich young ruler. Commentators sometimes point to the tenth commandment, or even the first, as the specific sin of this man. Others see this passage about two alternative ways to heaven - one hypothetical one through law-keeping, and another superior one by following Jesus. These different interpretations do possess some valid insight. And yet they fall short, if they do not understand the message in this passage in relationship to the kingdom. It is the kingdom which is under discussion in this passage. We must look to see what Jesus is teaching us about the kingdom today, and what he says about our relationship to it.

Remember, Jesus came to announce the coming of the kingdom. Right from the start of his ministry in Mark he made that announcement - "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." We've seen Jesus teaching about the kingdom throughout his ministry. That's what the disciples are learning about as disciples. That's what Jesus has been teaching about as he teaches in parables. He is announcing the kingdom and calling people to respond to its coming. Just last week, for example, we saw Jesus relating the kingdom to children. Jesus told the disciples that the kingdom belonged even to the little children who were coming to him. Jesus' conclusion was that we must all receive the kingdom as a child.

And the kingdom is also in view in this passage with the rich young ruler. Understanding the man's relationship to the kingdom is crucial for understanding this passage. Right from the start, the man asks about he can inherit eternal life. In the gospels, the idea of eternal life is something connected with Jesus' teaching on the kingdom. In last chapter, for example, Jesus described two eternal destinies: entering "life" versus being cast into "hell". In that passage, Jesus equates entering life with entering the kingdom of God, Mark 9:47. And so when the rich young ruler asks about how he can inherit eternal life, he is asking about how he can be a part of this kingdom Jesus has been talking about. If that's not clear, just look at the end of this passage - Jesus warns twice about how hard it is for the rich to enter into the kingdom of God. And so Jesus recognized that the rich young man had been asking about how to enter into the kingdom. And so both Jesus and the rich young man were talking about the kingdom. But the question becomes whether or not this rich man would understand the kingdom *properly*. Would this man understand the kingdom as Jesus has been teaching about it? Specifically in this man's situation, would he understand how everything promised in the Old Testament Scriptures would find their fulfillment in this coming kingdom? Would the rich young man recognize that even the nation of Israel as an earthly kingdom established by God, that all the good things of that kingdom, merely looked forward to the coming kingdom? Would he recognize that Jesus was bringing that final, eternal, heavenly, kingdom? Or would the rich young ruler, stumble? Would he stumble as so many other Jews would - mistaking the types and shadows of the Old Testament as the reality, and missing what they really pointed to? We'll we are not told what ultimately happened to the rich young man. It's my hope that he did come to a saving faith in Jesus. But the questions that are raised with him are questions that we all need to consider about the kingdom. And so let's look at what this passage has to teach us about the kingdom of God and see how it calls us also to respond.

And so let's look at our passage for today. Notice that the rich young man begins by asking Jesus the wrong question. He says, in verse 17, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Now certainly there are worse questions to ask. It's actually not a horrible question in and of itself; but in light of the previous passage in Mark, this question especially stands out. In just the previous passage, Jesus had made the very serious statement, "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." Then immediately afterwards, this man comes up looking not to receive entrance into kingdom, but to earn entrance. And so he was approaching the kingdom from the wrong perspective - from a works-based approach instead of a grace-based approach. The rest of the dialogue with Jesus confirms that. He was trying to earn his way into the kingdom instead of receiving entrance as the free gift of God.

It might appear that Jesus doesn't actually address this issue at first, but I think he actually does. But Jesus addresses it with a sort of leading question. Jesus picks up on his words, "Good Teacher." Jesus asks why the man calls him good, for who is good but God alone. Some have wondered about Jesus statement here. Is this suggesting that Jesus is not "good?" Well Jesus doesn't say this. He asks an open ended question. If the rich man really knew who Jesus was, he could have responded that he rightly called Jesus good because Jesus is God come in the flesh. And so Jesus leaves the question open about his divinity and goodness, and the man lost his opportunity for such a confession. Instead in verse 20 he refers to Jesus only as "teacher," dropping his previous adjective of good. It appears the man concedes the point about goodness, and so stops calling Jesus' good.

But the real driving force behind Jesus' question here is to point out that no mere man is good. No mere man has kept God's righteous laws so as to be called good. Only God alone can bear that title. Not mankind. But the rich young ruler doesn't answer Jesus' question. At least not at first. It seems that his silence might acknowledge Jesus point, that only God is good, not man. However, the man's response to Jesus next question suggests otherwise. It seems that the man does think at least one man is possibly good - himself! This man could have gotten back on track by just thinking through Jesus' initial question. He could have realized that no man can claim sinless perfection. That no man is "good" in the full sense of the word. Because of this we can't earn our way into heaven. The man could have realized that he had asked the wrong question in the first place. And so Jesus addresses this man's real heart issue by confronting him on his use of the language "Good Teacher". What a different outcome it would have been if the man had responded with something like, "Jesus, you're right. No mere man is good, certainly not me. But I did rightly call you good, because you are the Christ. Please, help me, someone who is not good, to enter the kingdom of God." That would have been a beautiful confession of faith for this man to make.

Of course, the man doesn't make that connection. Instead Jesus proceeds to quotes a number of the commandments to him. These commandments all deal with the second part of the law, the part that deals with humans loving their neighbors as themselves. It's at that point the man makes his confession of faith - faith in himself. The man responds with a confession of his own goodness - "All these things I have kept since my youth." In other words, from the time this man was old enough to know and understand the commandments, he claims that he has kept them. The phrase here "from my youth," probably referred to his 13th birthday where according to Jewish oral tradition, boys came of age and were held accountable to the laws of God. That's actually what the term Bar Mitzvah means - literally son of the commandments, meaning that a boy has come of age and now liable to keep God's law. (By the way, this notion of an age of accountability is something from

Jewish tradition, *not* from Scripture.) But if that's the case, that this man is claiming to have kept the commandments ever since he came of age, then this again stands in stark contrast to the last passage. In the last passage in Mark, Jesus said we must receive the kingdom as child; here this man suggests that he has earned the right to the kingdom ever since he was grown up, ever since he stopped being a child! I hope you see how these two approaches to the kingdom are in conflict. The rich young ruler had asked the wrong question in the first place. His question showed that he had the wrong approach to entering into the kingdom. He thought he could earn his way in, when Jesus had already said we needed to receive entrance into the kingdom as a gift from God. When Jesus quoted the commandments, the man could have cried out, "Forgive me Lord, a sinner!" Instead the man claims that he is "good" with respect to God's law.

But I love Christ's response here. In light of this rather audacious claim by the rich young ruler, that he's kept all of God's laws, verse 21 says that Jesus loved him. I can just see Jesus here. He had to have warmly smiled at the man; sure you've kept them all son. But here's one you lack - "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.

Of course though Jesus might have lovingly smiled at the man, it seems that the man instead is instantly downcast and turns away and leaves sad. Why? Because it says that he had great possessions.

This is a very crucial point in this passage, and often a place where the full extent of Jesus request is not appreciated. One thing that is clear is Jesus' call to discipleship. Jesus echoes the previous call he had made earlier in Mark 8:34 for his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. But it doesn't seem that Christ's call to discipleship left the man unsettled. It was the first part, the selling of all his possessions, which bothered him. We can appreciate this call a little more when we consider the specific word that's used here. In verse 21, Jesus told the man to sell everything he had, but in verse 22, the sticking point was a specific thing that the man had - his property. The word in verse 22, that he had great possessions is more specifically translated property, specifically "landed property". The man might have been willing to sell some of his other things, but he was hesitant to sell his real estate.

But I think that his concern was more than just him being enamored with his real estate investments. Remember, this man prided himself in keeping the laws of God. And so think about the significance of Jesus asking him to sell his land in the Promised Land of Israel. This would have been shocking to him from a religious perspective.

You see, in the Old Testament, God brought the nation of Israel into the Promised Land. God gave the land to the Israelites as their special inheritance. The people were then told to keep God's laws in the land, and if they did they would be blessed - just read Deuteronomy 28 to see some of these blessings. And these blessings were particularly tied to the land. They were to receive God's blessings in the Promised Land. If Israel was faithful to God's laws as a nation, they would be richly blessed in a physical way: more children, better agricultural yields, financial prosperity, peace from attacking countries, etc. In Leviticus 20:24 the land is described as one flowing with milk and honey, and it is specifically described as an *inheritance* for Israel. The land was divided by lot for each tribe and then divided among each family as an inheritance (Num 33:54). And so the physical Promised Land, with its physical blessings, was the inheritance for God's people. And they remained in that physical land as result of living faithfully and obediently to God's laws.

This is why the Old Testament contains laws to protect a family's inheritance in the Promised Land. Numbers 36:7-8 explains that someone's inheritance must not be transferred out of their tribe into another tribe. Deuteronomy 19:14 describes the solemn importance of not moving a neighbor's landmark that designated the boundaries of each family's inheritance. Leviticus 25:23 demands that no one's inheritance in the land should be allowed to be sold permanently, and that was provided for in the allowance of the redemption of the land and also by the Year of Jubilee ordinance. These are just a few of the passages that show that God demanded Israel to maintain the inheritance which he provided his people. The significance God placed on this earthly inheritance demanded that Israel have deep gratitude to him for providing the Land. And they needed to have zeal in preserving this inheritance.

But here Jesus told the man to sell everything he had, and the rich man understood that to include his land. How could Jesus call this man to sell his inheritance in the Promised Land? I submit to you, that Jesus could only demand this of the man in light of the coming of the kingdom. You see, the Old Testament Promised Land as an inheritance was only a type and shadow of the true inheritance to come. That was the case with so many things in the Old Testament nation of Israel. Israel was a manifestation of the God's kingdom that was yet to come, but it was a manifestation through types and shadows. It had earthly, physical, things that represented ultimate realities yet to come. For example, the sacrifices looked forward to the one sacrifice yet to come, that is Jesus. The priests looked forward to the ultimate priest to come, Jesus. The physical temple at Jerusalem looked forward to the heavenly reality where God will dwell with his people for all eternity. And the land in the Promised Land in Palestine was described as God's inheritance to represent the true inheritance to come - eternal life and blessing with God forever. Even this rich man was thinking in the right direction. Remember in verse 17. The man asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. He saw eternal life as an inheritance. And that it is. It is the true inheritance. All these things in the Old Testament nation of Israel were types and shadows of the true things to come. And so we can call the nation of Israel the "typological kingdom." The "typological kingdom." The true kingdom was shown in the old kingdom of Israel in types and shadows.

And so for Jesus to call the man to sell everything, was another announcement of the coming of the kingdom. Jesus is declaring that the former types and shadows were no longer of value now that the realities were at hand. The typological inheritance of life in the land was giving way to what it truly signified, the inheritance of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

The problem with this rich man was a problem many Israelites had. They clung to the types and shadows, making them an end in themselves. You can understand how this might be. They lived in a crucial turning point in redemptive history. They had grown up in the typological kingdom. They looked for God's earthly blessings in the Land, and strove to keep the law religiously to the letter. They did that to try to get as much of God's blessings as they could. But they stumbled in that effort, because they missed the point. In trying to keep God's laws in order to earn blessings, they missed the point. They didn't look beyond the types and shadows. They didn't see the inherent messages that were pictured in their earthly blessings. Abraham did. He was given the promise concerning the Promised Land, but Hebrews 11 tells us that he saw beyond the earthly land and looked for a heavenly inheritance. That's what the Israelites should have done. That's what this rich young man should have done. The same is true with the law. They should have recognized that their very place in the Land was a gracious gift of God. They should have seen that they didn't earn that, let alone could they really earn God's

true inheritance of eternal life. They didn't keep God's laws perfectly; Israel's history testifies to that. They should have seen the impossibility for any man to perfectly keep the law, and that should turn them to Christ. That should have caused them to look for the Savior to come. No man is good. But the Christ who comes would be. He would keep all righteousness for God's people. That's what Christ has done for us.

I'd like to give a very simplistic example to help here. Let's say you have a free coupon for a cup of coffee at Starbucks. If you like coffee, that's probably a very valuable coupon. But if you hold on to the coupon and don't use it, you haven't really received the real value. The real value is in redeeming the coupon for the coffee. The coupon is just a placeholder for the reality. That's kind like the situation of the Jews in the Old Testament. They possessed real blessed life in the Old Testament, but in types and shadows. When the real thing came, they should not have clung to the mere type but received the substance.

And so the rich young man stumbled at Jesus' command. He still placed his trust and hope in the old typological kingdom. He was holding onto the wrong inheritance. He held onto the old! He stumbled at rightly valuing the true kingdom inheritance of blessed eternal life. That inheritance far surpasses any earthly or temporal blessing man receives in this age. And so Jesus' call to this man to abandon all is a challenge to see the superior nature of the kingdom of God. The old typological kingdom had finally found its fulfillment with the coming of Christ.

And so looking again at the rich man's final response in verse 22: In one sense it was right. He had finally come to recognize his limitations. Just a moment before he boldly declared his ability to keep all the commandments. Now he leaves downcast, recognizing his inability to keep this command by Jesus. What follows then is Jesus' teaching to the disciples concerning this incident. Jesus basically makes the same warning twice in verses 23-24. He describes the difficulty for those with wealth or who trust in wealth to enter the kingdom. Surely we can understand this in light of the kingdom. Worldly status offers a unique challenge for people in relating to the coming kingdom. People with earthly treasures can often be less concerned with storing up heavenly treasures as Christ calls us to. It can be harder to see the surpassing greatness of Christ's kingdom blessings if our earthly situation seems so wonderful. This is partly what's behind verse 31. The reversal in verse 31, that many who are first will be last and the last will be first, reminds us that earthly position and stature doesn't guarantee someone's heavenly status in God's kingdom.

I think it's wonderful how when Christ repeats his warning in verse 24, he refers to the disciples as "children". Again, think of the previous passage in Mark. Jesus says that the kingdom is to be received as a child. As we see, the disciples are those who have, at least in part, received the kingdom. We see this through their own radical sacrifices in following Jesus. And so Jesus warmly calls them children, hinting at the solution to the rich man's problem. As long as you try to earn your entrance you will fail. When you receive it as a child, then you find life.

You see, that's what Jesus goes on to say. He gives this analogy of a camel going through the eye of a needle in verse 25. And so first he gives two warnings, where he says how *difficult* it would be for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Now he says it's *impossible*. It's impossible for a large camel to go through the tiny eye of a needle. You may have heard a rumor that Jesus was referring to a city gate known as the eye of the needle, that was very difficult for camels to pass through, but not impossible. But if you follow the footnotes on that claim, you'll

find that there is no real evidence that such a gate ever existed. That idea appears to be mere speculation that got undue attention. In reality, Jesus is pointing to an impossible situation. How do we know that to be true? Just look at the disciples' response. They were exceedingly astonished! They ask, "Who then can be saved?" The disciples in light of Christ's teaching wonder if anyone, rich or poor, could ever have any hope of salvation in light of Jesus' very radical teaching here.

But what follows next is good news. In fact, it's GREAT news. This might be the most wonderful verse in the New Testament. Verse 27, "But Jesus looked at them and said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.'" This is the key. The rich young man was not morally good. He was not perfect in his righteousness. He could not earn his way into heaven. As long as he clung inappropriately to the Old Testament types and shadows it shows that he even missed the point of them. He thought he had been earning God's blessings. But he needed God's grace. He needed to realize that every good and perfect gift comes from above, as a gift. God's grace is what he needed. It's what we all need. It is impossible for us to inherit eternal life on our own merit. It is quite possible to inherit eternal life as a free gift of God. And God makes that possible through his only begotten Son. God sent his only begotten Son to earth, to become man. He is the only human who can be called good. For this God-man Jesus Christ lived a life of perfect righteousness. He earned heaven. And he did this, so that whoever turns to him in faith, he gives us his perfect righteousness. God accepts his merit on our behalf. What is impossible for us, God makes possible through his son, Jesus Christ. And so God calls us now to receive this as a gift; receive it like a child, placing our faith in Jesus.

Saints of God, in light of this message, I hope we can apply this text in two ways. I want us to have a renewed perspective of the kingdom and of the king; of the kingdom and the king. First - a renewed perspective on the kingdom. This world is not our final home. If even the Old Testament blessings of the earthly Promised Land are no longer worthy of our attention, then how can any earthly blessing be? And yet in reality, there are so many things that vie for our devotion. There are so many things that would become idols of our heart. There are so many things that Satan would want to hold out to us and tell us that are more valuable than anything God offers us. Stop clinging to the things of the world. Stop clinging to the idols of your heart. Make God your ultimate desire and delight. The other things just disappoint. They will let you down. Why do you take your focus away from God's kingdom by lusting after temporary things? They aren't worth it. It takes you away from God's true blessings. Blessings that Christ says can begin even here in this world; yes with persecutions, but blessings that can start even now. Begin to take hold of these blessings by setting your greatest delight on God and his kingdom.

The second application - have a renewed perspective of the king - that is Jesus. He alone is good. He alone is perfect. We are not. And so we need to look to him for the impossible. We need to look for him to bring us into heaven, and we need to look for him to grow us in obedience and righteousness. You know there are reasons why we sing hymns like "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus". Our only hope in life is Jesus. Stop putting the hope in yourself. Stop putting your eyes on yourself to be spiritually mature. Stop thinking it's about yourself. Look to Christ to change you. Come to a breaking point in your life where you realize, you can't save yourself. It's impossible! Look to Christ for the impossible.

And as you do that, may you be encouraged. May you rejoice. May you find your greatest contentment and peace. When Christ is your Good Teacher, your Lord and Savior, and your King, he grants you the inheritance of eternal life. He grants

you heavenly treasure that is far greater than anything the world has to offer. That's the way he describes his blessings in this passage. As eternal life, as heavenly treasure, as entrance into his kingdom. Live with that hope before you at all times. Amen.

Copyright © 2008 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.