

A Quest About Money

Jesus and the Rich Ruler; Luke 18:18-30. Luke Bushman, April 6th. Based on Mary Schertz's Commentary: *Luke* (pages 305-309).

Good morning, this morning I am sharing about a bit of a more difficult passage that has always made me a bit uncomfortable. Every once in a while (not super often), I like to pick passages that I have no idea what to say about, because you learn a lot when you study for a sermon, and try and talk about it in a digestible way. Thankfully, I can rely on the works of other, smarter people to give me ideas about how to understand difficult things. My train of thought this morning comes from Mary H Schertz's commentary on Luke. She uses a framework of "Quest Stories" to understand the book of Luke. I was surprised to see that she identified the story of the Rich Ruler as a quest story. It seems complex to me, and quest stories are often fairly straightforward. When I was in the 3rd Grade I wanted to be an author, all my stories were quest stories. My character would have to get from point A to point B, while encountering obstacles along the way. J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* often follows this simple guideline throughout the story. The conversation between Jesus and this ruler is not as simple as it has many complex nuances and interpretations to consider.

I have always struggled with this passage, and its many different interpretations. I find it leaves me with more questions than answers. Jesus commands the man to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. I still have possessions as do many followers of Jesus. Jesus says it is nearly impossible for a rich person to inherit the Kingdom of God. While I would not consider myself rich based on the world around me, statistically speaking, I am in the top 10% of earners in the world. That means I have more money than 90% of the world. I know lots of people who have wealth who are lovely and follow God with all of their hearts- are they not going to heaven because of this? I also struggle with the common message that Jesus has nothing to say about wealth as long as it does not come before God. Because it seems like Jesus has lots to say about finances and taking care of the poor. I am not sure we can just spiritualize verses like this away. These are all things that I really struggle with when I encounter the story of

the rich young ruler. As a disclaimer, I have no judgement to give about how people interact with wealth and money. I could be more generous, and I certainly have not sold my possessions to give to the poor. So if you feel guilt or shame creeping in during this sermon that touches on wealth and finances, that isn't the intention, and you can disregard that feeling. We are simply going on a quest into this story together.

This is the 5th of seven "Quest Narratives" in the Gospel of Luke. Interestingly, Jesus is the one placing obstacles on this quest, and this quest is never completed (Schertz, 305). This interaction between Jesus and the ruler is very similar to Jesus' interaction with the lawyer in chapter 10, which leads to Jesus telling the famous story of the Good Samaritan. They both come to Jesus with the same question- what do we have to do to inherit eternal life?

In both of these instances the starting position is the Law. Here, Jesus quotes five of the ten commandments, and while the text does not say the ruler hopes to justify himself, that seems to be his intention. He immediately feels relief as he is able to declare that he has kept these commands since he was a young boy. I can definitely relate to this feeling of wanting assurance about where I stand with Jesus. It can be hard to hear the more challenging things that Jesus has to say and not think about how we fall short. When we view ourselves as evil, we are often looking for someone to say otherwise. I think it is important to remember that Jesus speaks into the present and the future. We often focus on who is and out of heaven, but Jesus is also speaking about our existence now. These laws aren't just meant to book a ticket to heaven. The laws are about enhancing our lives, not just for ourselves but also for those around us. The guilt of coming up short fades when we realise Jesus isn't saying these things to condemn us, but to help us.

The term Kingdom of God, refers not just to a future thing, but also something in the present. We often jump to thinking Jesus has condemned this man to hell, and that is a scary thought. Jesus is also speaking in the here and now. Some of the ideals that Jesus mentions regarding the Kingdom of God, include justice, equality of people, non-violence, and love for one another. It is hard to imagine that an extreme difference in wealth would fit well in a Kingdom like this. Jesus is not threatening the man,

saying “Give up everything or be apart from me”, but saying “How can you be part of this good thing if you are hoarding wealth?”.

Mary Schertz would say that these discussions of wealth have a similar point to the laws quoted from the Old Testament. The goal is freedom, joy, and justice not just for some people but for all people. When we discuss wealth it is not about condemning certain people, but about ensuring the freedom of all people. I have the luxury of being relatively wealthy, and the luxury of not encountering Jesus face to face, telling me exactly how to enact economic justice in my own life. Unlike the rich man, I can discern and debate how this is supposed to look. Perhaps I have abused this luxury, and used it as a tool of complacency in my own life.

For this morning, I don't want to focus on what exactly we are supposed to do. I am not Jesus, I can not inform others exactly what it means to care for the poor in their context. For me to tell everyone to sell everything they have would be hypocritical. For me to give a quantifiable answer would be legalistic and probably uneducated. I would rather us continue with Mary Schertz's theme of going on a quest. We are all on a quest as people, trying to figure out meaning and purpose in this life. The Rich Ruler was on a similar quest. He wanted to find meaning and purpose, or perhaps, he wanted affirmation that his current life direction was purposeful. Jesus recommends surrendering his wealth in order that he may find meaning and purpose. To complete his quest for purpose, he has to start putting others first.

I think if we can forget trying to find a simple answer, and focus on embarking on a quest together, we will have more freedom to talk honestly about this passage. When we need a hard and true answer, these topics can be scary, and make us feel like failures. When we decided to go on a quest together, there is room for nuance, struggles and doubts. Here is a paragraph from Mary Schertz's commentary that outlines how we can go on a quest instead of looking for a perfect answer.

“Whatever the range of wealth and possessions in a congregation, this message of release, freedom, joy, and holiness is one we need to hear. Hearing Jesus on wealth and possessions does not excuse us from the difficult work of discernment. What are basic human needs? What falls outside this category of need? What defines acquisition

beyond need? What does release entail? How do business opportunities, business people, investment, and investors fit into the picture? How do we care for institutions in light of need, release, freedom, and joy? What happens when our responsibilities involve the basic human needs of other people--sometimes many other people? The teachings of Jesus are meant to speak into these discussions, not circumvent them. Yet the goal of these discussions in the light of Christ is not perfect answers, perfect Christians, or perfect congregations, or a perfect world. The goal is light, free, joyous Christians and light, free, joyous communities of faith. The goal is Christians and communities of Christians who can tackle hard questions and come to hard conclusions with an uplifted heart, a lightness of being" (Schertz, 309)

I am unsure how exactly we are supposed to address money in light of this story. I do not know how much, when, and where exactly we are supposed to give. I think this story does invite us on a quest. To look inward at our relationship with money. To look at the world around us and see how wealth might be creating barriers. Economic equality is an important part of the Kingdom of God, and Jesus lived out principles of simplicity and generosity. With these things as a guide, I hope as a global group of followers we can go on a quest with one another, to explore how to live out the Kingdom of God that Jesus talks about. Jesus is forgiving and loving and wants what is best for us, so we can trust that his words can provide meaningful context for these discussions.

Works Cited

Shertz, Mary H. *Luke: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. 2023, Herald Press.