

Critical Questions for American Christians
“Can the Rich Be Saved?”
Mark 10:17-27

August 1, 2004
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It's been said of Jesus that whenever he met a person, it was as if that person were an island around which Jesus sailed until he found where the real problem was, and there he landed.

He did that with the woman at the well and landed on the questions of marriage. He said to her, “*Go call your husband.*” In a luncheon conversation He landed on the question of integrity with Zaccheus and before lunch was over Zaccheus said, “*If I have stolen anything from anybody, I will repay it four-fold.*” Here in the gospel lesson for today, Jesus sails around the life of the rich young ruler until he comes to the issue of money and there is where we want to land today.

In Verse 17 we read, *As Jesus started on his way, a man came running, falling on his knees, asking a critical question. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Life is full of critical questions. If you are hungry, the critical question is—Where can I find something to eat? If you are homeless, the critical question is—Where can I sleep tonight? If you are being abused, the critical question is—Where can I go to be safe?

If we are fortunate enough to have our basic needs met, the questions change. The questions turn from safety and security to love and meaning. We begin to ask:

1. How can I love and be loved?
2. How can I find meaning and purpose in life?
3. How can I be happy?

So the young man in this story is looking for life. He wants to live, not merely survive. He is hungry for meaning, longing for purpose, determined to make the most of what he's got. He already has it made; now he wants to matter, so he comes to Jesus asking “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” The critical questions are:

1. Where is the life you have lost in living?
2. Are you drowning in things but thirsty for meaning?
3. Are you making a life or making a living?

These are critical questions, crucial questions, the kind of things we need to ask.

In the midst of that honest quest for understanding and meaning and purpose in life, Jesus turns to the young man and makes this response. Verse 21 says, *Jesus*

looked at him and loved him and said, "One thing you lack." Of course, Jesus didn't really need to say that. That was why He came in the first place. He knew there was a missing link, but nevertheless, Jesus calls it to his attention so that they can have a conversation about it. Somebody said that there is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us that it hardly behooves the rest of us to pass much judgment on any of us. This is a rich young ruler who is respectable and religious.

He is rich! My favorite TV show is Who Wants to be a Millionaire. Thank God for the Game Show Network; I can still find it on TV. Do you know what I like about 'Millionaire'? I know a lot of those answers. Never mind they are the 100, 200, 300 dollar questions. I know the answers to them and I know that if somehow I could just get on that show I could succeed and I could be a millionaire, also. Who doesn't want to be a millionaire?

Not only is he rich, but he is young. Oh, to be young again. We were keeping our grandson a couple of weeks ago when out of the blue Caleb said, "Poppy, you are getting really, really, really, really old." He could have left out one or two of the 'reallys.'

He was rich and he was young and he was a ruler; he had power and position. Whether we admit it or not, we all love power. Tony Campolo says, "I was traveling on a main thoroughfare in Philadelphia when I had a flat tire. I was stuck on the highway, not even a place to pull off. So I proceeded to get out and fix my tire. A few minutes later I heard the traffic reporter on the radio say there is a major backup on my boulevard because a man in a brown car is trying to fix a flat tire." Tony said, "Suddenly I felt in control. A good part of Philadelphia was waiting on me." All of us would like a little power now and again if we could get it.

He was young and he was rich and he was powerful; he was righteous. Morals aren't everything, but they are way ahead of whatever is in second place.

Jesus says, *You know the top ten* —He replied, "*All these I have kept since I was a boy.*" He would be an asset to any community, a welcomed member of any church. He is the kind of guy you would like to have.

Jesus said to him this day, "*One thing you lack. Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.*" Ouch! Wow! Woe! Wait a minute! Hold on! Let's talk! The extravagance of it is radical. No wonder this young man is sad. I don't know what I would have done in that situation, but I think had I been Jesus I would have changed the story a little bit. I would have said something like, "Do you think it might be possible for you to increase your pledge next year? Try tithing; make God your Senior Partner." I would have said something different than what Jesus had to say. It is so radical. When people come to me trying to take this literally, my palms get sweaty. They tell me that they have heard God calling. They wonder if they

should leave their job, pack up their family, go off to seminary, strike out for Costa Rica as friends of mine did. I find myself saying something different to them. “Maybe you could volunteer to teach junior high Sunday school or do some mission work at 61st Avenue?” Radical religion leaves me reeling.

“Sell all that you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me.” What is this **all**? Life is not a game of horse shoes. When it comes to life, ALMOST won’t work. Sometimes it just needs to be **ALL**.

Those people waiting on you to finish surgery and come out and tell the family sitting there how that particular brain surgery went. They only have one thing on their mind. Did you get it **all**?

Suppose the leaders of Sonshine Choir came home last week and reported that they returned with 105 of the 106 students on the trip. They said to parents standing in the corner, we couldn’t find your daughter but 99% is pretty good, isn’t that enough? Of course, it is not enough. *“Go sell **all** that you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me”*. It’s radical; it’s profound; it’s earthshaking and it is scary.

And so Jesus uses the occasion to teach a lesson to his disciples. Look at what He says in Verse 23: *“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* The affects of ‘affluenza’ are almost paralyzing. When you consider that no matter how much wealth this young man had, he could not ride in a car, have any surgery, turn on a light, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, surf the Internet. He couldn’t talk on the telephone. If he was rich, then what are we?

If you shrink the world’s population to a village of 100 people then here is what you have: Fifty-seven would be Asians, twenty-one Europeans, fourteen Westerners, eight Africans, fifty-one female, forty-nine male, seventy nonwhite, thirty white, seventy non-Christian and thirty would be Christian but 50% of the entire world’s wealth would be in the hands of six people, all six would be citizens of the U.S.

- Eighty would be living in substandard housing
- Seventy would be unable to read
- Fifty would be suffering from malnutrition
- One would have a college education.

Who is rich?

Back in the year 2000 the New York Times ran an article describing the disease of ‘affluenza’. They made it up, but I think it is a great word. Affluenza—the sudden wealth syndrome, the disease everyone would like to have. Affluenza is a dysfunctional or unhealthy relationship with money or wealth or the pursuit of it.

Eric Fromm said in The Search for Meaning fifty years ago, “Greed is a bottomless pit that exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need

without ever reaching satisfaction.”

Money has a way of controlling us. The super wealthy seldom think they have enough and the middle class, who are really quite cared for, continue to buy bigger houses than we need, acquire more cars than we can drive and have more clothes than we can ever wear. Too many of us spend money we don't have to buy things we don't need to impress people we don't like. We are forever and endlessly drowning in debt.

Lest we think the Bible is silent on the subject of money, I remind you that the Bible says more about economics than any other social issue.

1. Proverbs 11:28 says, *“He who trusts in his riches shall wither.”*
2. Matthew 6:9 says, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.”*
3. Luke 16:3 says, *“You cannot serve God and mammon.”*
4. I Timothy 3:3 says, *“A bishop should not be a lover of money.”*

Then Jesus says it here, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!”* I didn't say that, Jesus said it. However we try to shrink our camels or enlarge our needles we are left with the question of the disciples. In Verse 26 we read, *“Who then can be saved?”* Do you get it? It is here that Jesus offers a word of hope. The very last verse of the story, *“With God nothing is impossible. With God all things are possible.”*

God can bring us out of denial. That is the best thing that He can do for us is to get us out of lying about what we have. Stop pretending you are poor. Quit denying your wealth. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, the sun, the moon, the stars are His. Whatever portion of creation He has entrusted to you, get down on your knees and thank God for it and ask Him to help you be a faithful steward of it.

It's not money, but the misuse of money that is the root of all evil. Abraham, Job, David, and Solomon were very rich men. They managed large holdings for the glory of God and the greater public good. Lydia and Deborah were very wealthy women and God used them to build His church and govern His kingdom. The parable of the talents suggests that God will hold us accountable for all that He has entrusted to us. So don't dig a hole and bury your assets in the ground. God is going to hold you accountable for them. Use them for the glory of God and the good of the world. Someday God is going to ask you, *“What have you done with what you have?”*

God can help us hear the cry of the needy. We are not Christian until our hearts are broken by the things that break the heart of God. 1 John 3:17–18 *“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him. Dear children let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.”*

What can God do for us? He can get us out of denial. He can keep us sensitive to

the hurts and pain of humanity. One of the problems we have is isolation. We get so far removed from the hurt of the world; we pretend that it is not there.

What can God do for us? He can save us by His grace. Did you hear about the good guy who died and went to heaven? Upon meeting Saint Peter at the gate he was told he needed one hundred points to get in. "Fine," replied the man, "I've been active in the church all my life." "Good," said Saint Peter, "That's one point." The man said, "I've tithed my income and given to the poor all my life. I have expressed myself in every way that I could to help other people." "Great," said Saint Peter, "That's wonderful. I will give you two points for that." Becoming concerned the man exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy, who can enter here?" "That's ninety-seven points," replied Saint Peter, "Come right on in." Do you get it? By grace are we saved through faith and that is not of ourselves. It is a gift of God.

It was the great Charles Spurgeon who said, "I have now concentrated all my prayers into one and that one prayer is this: That I may die to self and live wholly for God." Therein is the prayer that will save us.

Amen.

