



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 18:18-30

To understand more about the rich, young ruler.

Zero Is the Hero

In September of 2020, *Forbes* magazine published an article about the journey of a particular billionaire named Chuck Feeney. Feeney cofounded the airport retailer *Duty Free Shoppers* in 1960 and amassed billions of dollars as a result, though he lived a profoundly frugal life regardless of his fortune. The *Forbes* article was an update of sorts on how Feeney was doing in his life-long quest. The goal? Give away all of his money before he died. The article was titled: “The Billionaire Who Wanted to Die Broke... Is Now Officially Broke.” Feeney has given away an estimated 8 billion dollars over the last four decades, and he did it largely through anonymous means. He gave to charities and foundations, universities, and anything he felt had the potential to make a lasting impact on the world. In fact, because of his “clandestine efforts,” *Forbes* called him “the James Bond of philanthropy.” His efforts also inspired an additional 210 billionaires to give, as well. In a separate article titled “Zero Is the Hero,” Feeney summarized his mission in a few sentences: “I see little reason to delay giving when so much good can be achieved through supporting worthwhile causes. Besides, it’s a lot more fun to give while you live than give while you’re dead.” Now at the conclusion of his “journey to broke,” Feeney tells *Forbes*: “We learned a lot. We would do some things differently, but I am very satisfied. I feel very good about completing this on my watch.”

In Luke chapter 18, Jesus confronts a wealthy, young man who raises the question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” After a little back and forth, Jesus hits him with the news he, unlike Feeney,

did not want to hear: “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; come, follow me” (Lk. 18:22).

The Rich Young Ruler

Verse 18 begins this portion of the narrative by introducing another individual simply called “a ruler.” The Greek term used here, ἄρχων (archōn), means simply “one invested with power and dignity.” It can also denote the idea of a chief, a prince, or a magistrate. In this context, the ruler seems to likely be a ruler of a synagogue or a member of the Sanhedrin, as he is presented as one who at least believes he leads an exemplary moral and religious life. This term, at least in Luke’s Gospel, is also perhaps negative in that this puts him in the same category as Herod, Philip, and Lysanius (Lk. 3:1). This entire section begins with the ruler’s question to Jesus in verse 18: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ response opens a broader conversation with regard to the law of God and idolatry. Below is a breakdown of the key ideas and concepts from this passage.

THE LAW

Jesus’ initial response to the ruler is not one of trickery: “And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother’” (Lk. 18:19-20). At first, it would seem that Jesus is advancing the idea that one could be “saved” simply through works. However, this is not an accurate reading of the text nor is it consistent with the rest of Jesus’ teachings nor the teachings of the rest of the New Testament. There are at least two reasons Jesus answers with the law, first. For one, Jesus is referred to as “Good Teacher,” a term that implies a Rabbinic identity. The ruler, like many others, saw Jesus as a Rabbi. No Rabbi was good, and so Jesus calls the ruler out for this. This is not to suggest that Jesus doesn’t see Himself as equal with God, but to point out the inconsistencies in the ruler’s reasoning in every way. Beyond that, every Rabbi would appeal to the law, and thus Jesus answers this in Rabbinic fashion. Beyond that, this is not necessarily untrue. The whole of the law and the prophets can be summed up by loving God and loving neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40; Gal. 5:14), and loving other is a condition only present in one who has been loved by God first (1 Jn. 4:11). Jesus’ mentioning of these moral laws strikes at the importance of demonstrating genuine obedience as a result of being born again. All of the laws Jesus mentions comes from the Ten Commandments, but they are all notably the “one another” laws. The ordering of them is not the same as found in Exodus 20:1-7, but it is the exact order as found in Romans 13:9 and James 2:11, as well as the ordering of Exodus 20:13-15 in the Septuagint (LXX). Central to the transformed life is evidence of itself through loving others in a Godly manner. The ruler, confident in his religiosity, answers Jesus in verse 21: “And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” One need not assume that this man is horribly misguided for this answer (although he almost certainly is).

SELL, SELL, SELL!

However, Jesus knows all things in the hearts of men (Matt. 9:4; Jn. 2:24), and so He gave him an additional caveat to entering the kingdom: “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Lk. 18:21). What does Jesus intend to communicate here? It isn’t that Jesus is insinuating that if the ruler simply do this “one last thing,” he will be permitted to heaven. Rather, his lack of ability to let go of his worldly possessions that he had turned into idols reveals that he had not really kept the Commandments like he thought he had. This commandment, then, shines light on the lack of obedience on the first commandments that Jesus quotes from the Ten Commandments. The ruler was “very rich” (Lk. 18:23), and very much enjoyed it. The prospect of giving away his belongings was unthinkable. Thus, “when he heard these things, he became very sad” (Lk. 18:23). It isn’t that wealthy people

are bad or evil, but that “the love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). When one acquires worldly resources, it’s easy to make those resources the object of one’s hope and security instead of Christ. In this sense, it will be far more challenging to live a life of sacrifice and selflessness, both of which are a requirement of the Christian faith (Phil. 2:3). However, it’s important to remember that wealth in and of itself is not bad, and Jesus even commanded His disciples to use worldly wealth when available for eternal purposes (Lk. 16:9).

THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

It’s at this point that Jesus makes one of His more well-known statements concerning wealth: “Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk. 18:24-25). Various attempts have been made to qualify this by suggesting that Jesus was referring to a specific city gate called “The Needle’s Eye,” and that the camel could squeeze through if it shed its burdens. This view was first mentioned in a gloss attributed to Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century, and was also repeated in the thirteenth-century work of Thomas Aquinas called *Catena Aurea*. However, no historical or geographical evidence supports such a claim. It is more likely that Jesus is simply using hyperbole to make his point. The “eye of the needle” was the smallest opening in the ancient world and the camel was the largest animal in Palestine. Similar hyperbolic statements were made in the Babylonian Talmud where an elephant was used in place of a camel. This makes sense given that elephants were in Mesopotamia, and were the largest animals there. The point of hyperbole is to make an exaggerated claim. In other words, it’s unimaginably difficult for rich people to enter the kingdom for the aforementioned reasons.

The Aftermath

The crowds respond to Jesus’ hyperbolic answer with an additional question: “Who then can be saved?” The answer is in reality, “No one.” But Jesus responds: “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” In other words, all people (even the rich) can be saved if God so chooses to save. God will, by His grace, grant individuals the desire to follow Jesus and leave everything behind in order to do so, regardless of how much they are leaving behind. This is Jesus’ point in verses 29 and 30; the Gospel costs everything, but gives you everything in return.

What About Now?

The main takeaway of this passage is the requirement to make Jesus and His kingdom a priority over any and everything you have. Wealth in and of itself is not wrong, but if you are unwilling to forsake it in order to follow Jesus, it has become an idol in your life that needs to be destroyed.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 18:18. Who asked Jesus a question? What question did he ask? What did he call Jesus?

2. Read Luke 18:19-20. What question does Jesus ask, and why? How does Jesus answer him, and what does He quote in His response?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 18:21. How did the young ruler respond?

2. Read Luke 18:22-23. What is the additional thing Jesus “required” of him? How did the ruler respond?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 18:24-25. According to the notes, to what does the “eye of the needle” refer? What is the significance of the camel in this answer?

2. Read Luke 18:26. What question did the crowds ask in response to Jesus’ saying?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 18:27-28. How does Jesus answer their question? How does Peter respond?

2. Read Luke 18:29-30. What are the requirements to follow Jesus in this verses?

Week 66 Discussion: Idols

In Luke 18:18-30, Jesus calls a rich, young ruler to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor because those possessions had become idols in his life. His unwillingness to sacrifice those things in order to inherit eternal life revealed that he did not love God above all things. Talk as a group about the potential idols you have in your life that you need to “sell” in order to prioritize Jesus better.

1. Icebreaker: What is the one thing you’d have the most trouble giving up for the sake of Christ?
2. Do you believe wealth is bad? Why or why not?
3. Is it easier to live sacrificially when you have less? Why or why not?
4. Do earthly goods and resources give a sense of false security?
5. What is one way you can make use of your resources for the good of others?
6. If you feel led, talk about something you feel God is calling you to give up. Ask for accountability and act!

Takeaways:

1. Jesus tells the rich, young ruler to sell his possessions and distribute them to the poor.
2. Jesus makes it clear that in order to inherit eternal life, one must be willing to sacrifice everything.