“TREASURE IN HEAVEN”

Matthew 19:16–30

Key Verse: 19:21

“Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”

This week we celebrate Valentine’s Day. It’s a day when family and friends and people with a significant other get together and share loving appreciation. Couples with lots of money buy each other expensive jewelry or other luxury gifts and eat at high-end restaurants. Others may have a much humbler celebration. But for many, Valentine’s Day is a test of love. It’s not really about the flowers or the chocolates or what we do, but about what’s in our hearts. Couples may not say it out loud, but quietly they’re wondering, “Does he really love me?” or “Does she really love me?” Today’s passage is another kind of test of love. Jesus encounters a man who earnestly asks him about eternal life, and Jesus tells him to get rid of his earthly treasure. Does everyone really have to get rid of all their possessions to follow Jesus? Again, it’s not really about the outward things, the possessions, but about where our heart is. In a sense Jesus is asking us about who or what we really love. Though it’s hard, he’s asking us to love him most—not emotionally, but in practice. We also want to take a look at the disciples’ response to what happens, and how Jesus helps them. Through this study may God open our hearts and speak to us personally.

Since chapter 18 Jesus has been teaching us about living in Christian community. We’re to be a humble, loving, spiritual, forgiving community. In our community we’re to encourage healthy, faithful marriages and welcome children. Now Jesus addresses how we should be relating to our possessions. Little children had just been brought to Jesus for his blessing. They were so simple and trusting. In contrast to them, a man now comes to Jesus. Look at verse 16. This guy is kind of complicated and has a preconceived idea. He thinks he needs to do something good to get eternal life. But there are some admirable things about him. He’s not asking a tricky question; he really wants to know. When most people around him were probably living for the moment, he was serious about what will happen in eternity. And he comes to Jesus for an answer. The problem is, he thinks he has to do something good to earn eternal life.

Actually, so many people think they have to earn God’s favor. Many religions blatantly teach it. They say keeping certain rituals, doing certain good deeds are required, or else we can’t please God and get what we want. Only the gospel of Jesus is different. It’s not about what we do, but about what God has done for us. Jesus gave his life for us, by his amazing grace, and all we have to do is receive it. Nothing else we do can improve our standing with God. This man who came to Jesus had probably already done so many religious things. But he still felt it wasn’t enough. He was wondering what he was missing. He needed an assurance about his soul that he currently didn’t have.

How did Jesus help him? Read verse 17. At first it’s not easy to grasp what Jesus is telling him here. “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Is Jesus saying he’s not good enough to teach this man? No. “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” Is Jesus saying the man needs to refocus on trying harder to keep God’s commands? No. Jesus is trying to help the man come to know himself. “There is only One who is good.” And sorry, but that’s not you.

Knowing oneself is huge. It’s what the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was always trying to help people become aware of. Sadly, most people go through life without really knowing themselves. Sometimes people close to us try to help us see it, but we become defensive and refuse. In this case, this man thinks he’s basically good and that he can do some good thing to earn eternal life. How can he change? How can he come to know who he really is?

Jesus starts by turning his attention to God. He tells him, “There is only One who is good.” Today young people say: “It’s all good.” Jesus says, “There is only One who is good.” So many people ignore God. But only God is good. Also, so many people don’t understand the fallen nature of human beings. All people are both good and evil—even our loved ones. But it’s really hard to accept. How can we really see it—especially in ourselves? It’s only when we get to know who God is. The more we come into the light of God, the more we can see our own fallen nature. It’s painful, but really necessary. It’s the first step of having treasure in heaen.

And to help the man know himself he tells him, “keep the commandments.” For many people, keeping commandments makes them only more self-righteous. That’s what happened to the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus’ day. They thought they were really good, though God saw them as frauds. How does keeping God’s commandments help us know ourselves? Apostle Paul’s story shows us. He wrote, “Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death…Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful” (Ro7:9–11,13b). The more we struggle to keep God’s commandments, the more we will see how sinful we are.

How did the man respond? Look at verse 18a. Why did he ask, “Which ones?” No doubt he thought he knew and was keeping them all, so he was wondering which ones he might have missed. Jesus helped him further. Read verses 18b,19. Jesus taught him the Ten Commandments. But he skipped the first ones about God and focused on the second half, on five that are about our fellow human beings. Earlier Jesus said that though we may not have literally murdered, we murder when we just hate someone in our hearts; we may not have literally committed adultery, but we commit adultery when we just lust after someone in our hearts. And we notice that Jesus concludes here in verse 19 not with one of the Ten Commandments, but with Leviticus 19:18b that sums them all up: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus was trying to help this man not just live a kinder, more loving life, but to really see what kind of life he’d already been living. This man had been so concerned about himself, but never really concerned about his fellow man.

What did the man say? Look at verse 20. We notice here that the man is now described as “young.” He hadn’t lived long enough to really get to know himself. He still thought he was good. He thought keeping God’s commands was about doing outward things, about technically not breaking any rules. But in his heart he knew something was wrong. So he asks with great sincerity, “What do I still lack?”

How does Jesus help him? Read verse 21. Here, “perfect” can mean “complete” or “whole.” Jesus wanted to help this man become whole. He wanted to get at the root of what was bothering him. So he kind of performed spiritual open-heart surgery on him. He told him to go sell his possessions and give to the poor. Jesus was touching on what this man really loved. What he really loved was not his fellow man, but his possessions. This is one of the traits of fallen human beings. We tend to love material things more than people, and people more than God. This is the opposite of how God made us. God made us to love God most, then love people, then be good stewards of our material things. Jesus wasn’t telling this man that he could earn treasure in heaven by giving to the poor; he was telling him to get rid of the things in his life that were stealing his heart away from God and from people.

Jesus is still challenging us to do the same. He said earlier, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also…No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (6:19–21,24). Jesus is saying it’s foolish to store up treasures on earth, because they all gradually perish, spoil and fade away. On the other hand, it’s wise to store up treasure in heaven, because it lasts for all eternity. When we’re sure about his promise of treasure in heaven, we can let go of earthly treasures. Still Jesus warns us that it’s too easy to give our hearts to earthly treasures. If we do, he says we can’t really give our hearts to God. So he’s asking us, “Where is your heart? Who or what do you really love? Does your life show it?”

The most important part of Jesus’ words to this rich young man are in the last part of verse 21: “Then come, follow me.” Jesus is inviting this man to leave whatever is entangling him and holding him back, and then come and follow him. “Follow me” means not just physically going around with Jesus, but learning from Jesus and imitating him. Jesus is inviting this man to learn everything about him, especially his heart of love for God and for people. Jesus is inviting him to do it not half-heartedly or superficially, but to invest his whole life in this learning. Following Jesus is always a response to his gracious invitation. But for it to be real in our lives, we’ve got to be “all in,” we’ve got to make a decision, take action and make practical changes. Just as we can’t be in a real relationship with someone else if we don’t make it our priority, so we can’t really follow Jesus if he’s not most important to us. If we put our studies or making money or our career first, Jesus can’t be first. If we put enjoying things first, Jesus can’t be first. So Jesus isn’t challenging only this immature, ignorant and greedy rich young man; he’s actually challenging all of us. Read verse 21 again. How did the man respond? Look at verse 22. It was the moment of decision, but he just couldn’t do it. He made the wrong choice.

What happened next? Read verses 23,24. Jesus used this as a teachable moment for his disciples. He’s shattering their view. Everybody thought riches were a sign of blessing from God. But Jesus said just the opposite: it’s so hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, harder than squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle. Why is it so hard? Just like with this rich young man, such people find it too hard to let go of their earthly treasures. People get stuck on their investments and savings and properties and the lifestyle they afford—so much so that they can’t follow truth. So we have the expression, “They’ve sold out.” Sadly, many who are living in affluence have in their deep hearts lost all self-respect. Jesus is inviting us to such a better way, a life of freedom, meaning and love that comes from following him.

How did the disciples respond? Look at verse 25. They were “greatly astonished.” Though they followed Jesus, their worldview and values had not been deeply changed yet. They still were impressed and enamored with and envied the rich. How did Jesus answer their question? Read verse 26. It’s impossible for people to be changed. It’s especially impossible for rich people to be changed. But with God all things are possible. With God, people’s hearts *can* change. With God, anyone can leave a life of worldly pursuits and really begin to follow Jesus. With God, even slow-changing people like Jesus’ disciples can eventually become spiritual.

Look at verse 27. Why is Peter saying this? Probably he thinks he’s much better than the rich young man who couldn’t give up his possessions. And in light of Jesus’ words that it’s so hard to enter the kingdom, he’s worried that even his great sacrifice isn’t enough. Though he’s following Jesus, Peter has an unhealthy sense of entitlement, and some pretty serious self-righteousness.

How does Jesus respond? Read verse 28. This is a very special promise given only to the Twelve. At the end of the Bible, in Revelation, we see that their names are on the twelve foundations of the Holy City. They have a special place in God’s redemptive history because they were the ones who first followed Jesus when no one else ever had.

Jesus goes on. Read verse 29. Jesus gives us the assurance that any and every sacrifice we have made that was truly for his sake will be remembered and rewarded. The hundredfold reward is in this life, in the sense that we come into the larger community of God’s people. They become our spiritual family who comfort us, and they willingly share what they have with us, so that we lack nothing. And our ultimate reward is to inherit eternal life. He doesn’t say we “earn” it, but that we “inherit” it. Even though we may make significant life sacrifices to serve Jesus and his kingdom, he still gives us eternal life only as a gift of his grace. We can be sure of this reward when we’re sure of his grace.

And Jesus gives a final word that seems kind of cryptic. Read verse 30. Jesus is saying that those who think they’re first because of their sacrifices or their blessings, may find out in heaven that they’re last. And those who think they’re last because they didn’t seem to do much or have many blessings may find out that they’re first. It tells us that in his kingdom, grace reigns.

Let’s read verse 21 again. Today Jesus is asking each of us: “Where is your heart? Who or what do you love? Does your life show it?” He’s also graciously inviting each of us, “Then come, follow me.” Are we really going to do it? May God bless us not to make the wrong choice, but choose to follow him truly, believing his promise of treasure in heaven.