“COME, FOLLOW ME”

Luke 18:18­–30

Key Verse: 18:22

“When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”

Ever since chapter 9 Jesus has been on his final journey to Jerusalem. On his way there he’s mainly been teaching his disciples, so that after he’s gone, they’ll continue his ministry. But much of what he’s been teaching was opposite of their preconceptions. He said a sinful tax collector is justified before God while a strict Pharisee is not. He said simple little children are the ones who really enter God’s kingdom. Now a wealthy ruler comes. Jesus says it’s so hard for the rich to enter God’s kingdom, and it causes his disciples to freak out. In the first half of today’s passage Jesus is trying to help this rich ruler know himself. Honestly, it’s hard for each of us to really know ourselves. The second half of today’s passage is about the personal sacrifice required of all those who would follow Jesus. We’d all like to follow Jesus, and, have all the good things of this life at the same time. But it never works that way. As we think about these verses, let’s find out why. Today let’s ask ourselves two important life questions: Do I really know myself? And what things in my life may be holding me back from really following Jesus? May God help us accept Jesus’ words.

Look at verse 18. At first glance, things seem really good here. Though this man is a ruler of some sort, he comes to Jesus with a sincere question. That’s pretty humble. On top of that, he’s actually interested in something beyond the things of this world—he’s interested in eternal life. Though he seems to have it all, his soul isn’t satisfied; he’s pursuing something of eternal significance. Great!

How does Jesus respond? Read verse 19. We wonder why he’s picking on the man’s use of the word “good.” He may be suggesting something about his own identity, or trying to turn the man’s attention to God. But what he really seems to be doing, starting in verse 19, is helping this man begin to know himself. He senses this rich ruler thinks he’s basically a good person. To him, he’s good…Jesus is a good teacher…hey, it’s all good! And that’s the whole problem. Because he thinks like that, he doesn’t really know himself, and he doesn’t really know God, either. Today it’s popular to say, “I’m good” and “It’s all good.” But is it true? In fact, how *do* we really think about ourselves? Often it’s too painful to face the truth, so we just cover it up and try to avoid it.

Jesus goes on. Read verse 20. He quotes from the Ten Commandments. The unspoken assumption is that if we keep the commandments, we’ll inherit eternal life. But if we look carefully at what Jesus is saying here, we notice that he doesn’t mention all the commandments. In fact, he lists only the ones that have to do with how we treat others. Hmm. He said elsewhere that all these commandments are summed up with the words, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. 10:25­–28). So why does he mention to this ruler only these commandments? Honestly, these are the areas where rich people typically fail. The richer people become, the more prone we are to ignore God’s moral laws. Wealth tends to corrupt us and make us more likely to engage in various kinds of adultery, murder, theft, lies and forms of disrespect. Scary.

How does the rich ruler respond? Read verse 21. He’s self-righteous. All his life he’s been keeping God’s word technically. But there’s no way he’s *always* kept the spirit of these laws *perfectly*! There’s no way he’s *always* loved *all* his fellow man as much as he loves himself! Frankly, because he has such a shallow view of God’s word, he’s never allowed it to expose who he really is.

Jesus is determined to help him go deeper. Read verse 22. Here he finally touches the man’s weak spot—his possessions. He knew this man loved his possessions more than the real human beings around him, including the poor folks outside his mansion. So he challenged him to repent—to sell his possessions and give to the poor. It wasn’t about doing an act of charity for the needy in order to earn God’s favor and inherit eternal life; it was about what was really in his heart—who or what he really *loved*. Who do *you* really “love”?

Jesus said that if the man did this, he would “have treasure in heaven.” It meant that this rich ruler currently had only treasure on earth. Earlier Jesus had taught his famous parable of the rich fool (12:13–21). It summarized how foolish people are to store up treasures on this earth, and in doing so, actually end up spiritually bankrupt. Right after giving that parable, he taught his disciples, who were materially so poor, not to worry about what they would eat or wear, following the ways of people of this world who run after all such things. Instead he said to “seek first [God’s] kingdom,” and promised them that “these things will be given to you as well” (12:31). Finally he told his disciples, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (12:34). It was true for the disciples, true for this rich ruler, and true for us, too. To really have treasure in heaven, to really have the assurance of eternal life, we have to cut from our hearts our earthly treasures—our earthly attachments. It’s not just material things but anything that captures our hearts. Does Jesus really want all his followers to be materially poor? Does being materially poor make us more righteous than the materially rich? No. Jesus’ point here is what we really treasure in our hearts. Be honest.

Perhaps the most important thing he told the rich ruler was his last words in verse 22: “Then come, follow me.” It was the same invitation he gave to all his disciples (5:27; 9:23,59; 14:27). Jesus was challenging even this rich ruler to leave his current life entangled in the things of this world and become one of his disciples. And where was Jesus going? He didn’t have much time left on earth. He was going to Jerusalem, and actually, to a cross. Following him only there wouldn’t have had much of a point. Surely Jesus meant following him is more than going to a geographical place. His words “Come, follow me” challenged that man—and in fact, all of us—to make a radical commitment to make *Jesus the center of our lives*, to make learning of him and participating in his kingdom work *our first priority*. Wow. That’s pretty challenging. It means learning his self-denial and absolute obedience to the Father, suffering and total self-sacrifice on a cross, all to save others, not himself. It’s intense. To live that way consistently, for the long haul, we need to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” And we need to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” The Bible also says we need to “consider him who endured such opposition from sinners,” so that we won’t grow weary and lose heart (Heb12:1–3). Sometimes we start; sometimes we stop.

Jesus is challenging all of us today: “Then come, follow me.” Are we really listening? Are we taking him seriously? Are we just doing some Christian things once in a while, or are we really following him? Let’s read verse 22 again. We should state it plainly once more: having treasure in heaven isn’t about doing or not doing certain things; it’s about really following Jesus, a real person, following his example, and it all starts with imitating those who imitate him (1Co11:1).

How did the rich ruler respond? Look at verse 23. He just couldn’t let go of his wealth; his heart was too engrossed in it (1Co7:31). He was one of a number of people mentioned in the Bible who failed to accept Jesus’ challenge to follow him. Not everybody could accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship. It’s sobering. Whether we realize it or not, we’re all making a choice about it each and every day. Are we making the right choice, or the wrong choice?

Jesus went on to say something really famous. Read verses 24–25. Originally, this was mind-blowing to the disciples. They thought being rich was a sign of God’s blessing. Jesus was saying just the opposite—very few rich people seem to make it into God’s kingdom. Why? Because they’ve got it all in this world, and to them, God and his kingdom seem unnecessary. Those listening to Jesus were so freaked out that they asked, “Who then can be saved?” (26) How did he respond? Read verse 27. It’s impossible with us to let go of our worldly attachments. But it’s possible with God’s help; God can change anybody’s heart. We shouldn’t write off anybody, but pray and have hope in God. Then we see Peter speak up. Read verse 28. Notice that it’s an exclamation. Peter seems pretty upset. He thinks Jesus is saying that maybe not even his twelve disciples could make the cut. Peter compared himself with the rich ruler and felt he was way better. He had given up everything to follow Jesus. It was true. But Peter still had a lot to learn.

How did Jesus respond to him? Read verses 29–30. First off, notice that it says that Jesus said “to them”; he answered not only Peter, not only the Twelve, but all his true disciples there who could hear him. He’s also speaking to all those who’ve made real sacrifices to follow him. We also notice in Jesus’ words here that the sacrifices most of his disciples make are not so much material things, but human relationships. Why does following Jesus demand us to sacrifice our closest human relationships? We could just internalize it and say that he wants us to love him most. And that’s true. But in fact, following Jesus does require us to sacrifice time we could be spending with the people we love. Why is that?

There may be several reasons. First off, that’s the level of investment we need to make if we’re really going to learn from Jesus. If we’re always with those we love, we’ve got no time or energy to really learn of Jesus; we’re only giving him “leftovers.” Secondly, Jesus calls us to share in his ministry, the ministry of spreading the good news of God’s kingdom. For that ministry to really happen, it requires our time, our energy, our priority. If nobody is willing to make personal sacrifices to spread the gospel and raise disciples, then very little ministry will be going on. It’s just a reality, a fact of life.

Jesus’ point in these last two verses is not so much to challenge us to make those sacrifices as it is to comfort those who do. It’s his assurance that when we sacrifice for his sake, for the sake of spreading the kingdom of God, God rewards us. What is God’s reward? Jesus says we’ll receive “many times as much in this present age.” We receive many more homes and beloved life partners and family members even in this life. It’s a reference to the large spiritual family we inherit as we follow Jesus. Earlier Jesus said his true mother and brothers “are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (8:21). It’s an even deeper spiritual bond than human family ties. Jesus also says that God rewards us for all the sacrifices we make for spreading his kingdom by giving us “eternal life.” It’s an eternal reward in heaven, a reward that can never perish, spoil or fade away. It’s the reward of being with Jesus and sharing his glory.

Today Jesus challenges the rich ruler and each of us, “Come, follow me.” May God help us accept his challenge newly.