

HEAVEN FOR YOUR HAVENS!

Today's Text: Matt. 19: 16-30

Extracts:

The young man said to [Jesus], "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" *Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come and follow Me."* But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter *the kingdom of heaven*. And again, I say to you, 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*" [Matt. 19: 20-24]

In mid-July 2009, President Obama signed into law a programme called the "Car Allowance Rebate System" (CARS), popularly known as Cash for Clunkers.¹ It is part of the American government's economic stimulus plan. The programme helps you to buy a new and more fuel-efficient car by trading in an old car. Those who qualify can get up to \$US\$4,500 as government subsidy towards a new car. One week into the programme, thousands of people have taken advantage to trade in their old cars and over 100,000 new cars have been sold.

Why have those that have clung to their old vehicles all these years suddenly chosen to buy new ones? In part, it was because of the irresistibly superior offer that they have received. Second, the opportunity may last for long but certainly not forever. If you missed it now, you might not get the chance ever again.

In this week's study, Jesus offered a rich young man the chance to go to heaven. All that he was required to do was to give up his reliance on earthly treasures and follow Christ. That would mean giving up material wealth, his haven on earth, for eternity in heaven above. The young man is not alone in this dilemma. Every new day, God calls us to choose between earthly comfort and salvation. What is your response to Him? Is wealth holding you back? Under what conditions can rich people go to heaven? Those and more are the issues that we shall address in this week's study.

¹ Cash for Clunkers Bill, <http://www.cashforclunkers09.com/>

1. Background: Good means perfect!

According to an African proverb, trouble was fast asleep when pride woke him up! Today's episode was provoked by a rich young man who came to Jesus and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what *good thing* shall I do that I may have eternal life?" [Matt. 19: 16]. That was a loaded question. How did the young man come to the conclusion that Jesus was a good teacher? Was it that He taught them well or that what He taught them was good? Where did the young man get the "teaching" that doing the "good thing" would earn him eternal life? It is no wonder that Jesus addressed both aspects of the young man's question.

Jesus said him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God" [v. 17a]. As the Second Person of the triune God [1 Jn 5: 7], Jesus knows that He is good but did the young man (like most Jews of his time) accept Jesus as God? Was He not crucified for blasphemy, for calling Himself the Christ, the Son of God [Matt. 26: 62-66]? Therefore, Jesus did not want to complicate matters. So, He drew everyone's attention to the one true God that the Jews already accepted [Deut. 6: 4]. Before God, no human being is good because all have sinned and fall short of God's glory [Ps. 14: 3; Rom. 3: 23]. God's goodness refers to His perfection as Jesus taught during the Sermon on the Mount, when He said, "You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" [Matt. 5: 48].

In answer to the young man's question concerning what good thing he should do to gain eternal life, Jesus replied him, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." As if to justify himself, he fired back at Jesus, "Which ones?" The Lord went ahead to list for him sections of the Ten Commandments that specifically address love for our neighbours [Matt. 19: 17b- 19]. The young man was in a combative mood! With a sense of triumph, he said to Jesus, "All these things I have kept from my youth. *What do I still lack?*" [v. 20]. This man was so sure that he had already "earned" eternal life! He was like saying to Jesus, "You have nothing to add to the Law of Moses!"

It was at that stage that Jesus removed the carpet of self-righteousness from under the man's feet to expose his spiritual nakedness. Jesus challenged him, "If you want to be *perfect*, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me." That broke the young man's defences! After he had heard that, "he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" [vv. 21 -22]. If you examine Christ's statement, there is no where that He said, "sell *all* what you have" and "give *all* to the poor," but that was what the man seemed to have heard. *Wealth had become his object of worship*, which is idolatry. That is the heart of the matter.

2. Where to bank your wealth

As soon as the young man had sorrowfully walked away, Jesus told His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of*

heaven. And again, I say to you, 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*” [vv. 23-24]. Is there any difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God?

The Lord said to the prophet Isaiah, “Heaven is My throne and earth is My footstool” [Is. 66: 1]. Therefore, even though God sits on His throne in heaven, His kingdom extends all over His creations, including the earth. We are also told that the kingdom of God “is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” [Rom. 14: 17], and that the kingdom of God is within (among) us [Lk 17: 20]. So, *the kingdom of heaven is where God lives with His angels and saints who have slept in the Lord.* However, since God is omnipresent, *the kingdom of God extends to the earth and dwells in the hearts of living saints.* Therefore, what Jesus is saying is that *those who rely on their material wealth cannot make heaven nor can they be spiritually minded while on earth.*

Let us consider a few examples of such rich people:

a) *Those who trust in their material wealth*

The young man in today’s story walked away from following Jesus because he possessed so much and he did not want to give part of it to the poor. For such persons, it is in material wealth that they trust. That is idolatry. “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [Matt. 6: 21].

The parable of the rich fool teaches us the need to “take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” [Lk 12: 16-21]. The rich man’s estate produced in abundance to such an extent that he had no where to store it. So, he chose to pull down his barns and to build a bigger one to store his crops and his goods. Thereafter, he said self-indulgently, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.” That same day, God said to the rich fool, “This night, your soul will be required of you.” That man’s judgment would be quite short. He could not enter the kingdom of heaven because he laid up his treasures for himself and was not rich towards God [v. 21].

Many of us will do anything to get material wealth. Some people will work around the clock. Therefore, they have no time to pray to or worship God. In the end, they pay with their health, if not their lives. Some people will steal, kill or cheat. Some will sell their bodies and conscience for temporary gains. Some may join cults where they make covenants with Satan for wealth and power. Sooner than later, they die and leave their wealth to others or the state. The word of God says, “God gives wisdom and knowledge, and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but *to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting that he may give to*

him who is good before God” [Eccl. 2: 26]..How can such people have the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit, not to talk of making heaven when they die?

b) *Those who give but not for God’s sake*

In Paul’s famous chapter on love, he writes, “Though I bestow *all my goods* to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing” [1 Cor. 13: 3]. That suggests that not all charitable deeds are for heaven’s or God’s sake. Many rich people give to charity or pay their tithes largely for tax purposes. In other words, the more they give to charities, the more tax deductions they can take and hence the smaller taxes they pay.

Some people give away what they no longer need. That is a kind of trashing. What is the value, for example, of the left-over food that you throw into your trash can? Would you call that charity? When you give away to others what you do not need for yourself, it has no value before God. That was why, for example, when somebody offered king David his threshing farm and oxen for burnt offerings free of charge, he refused, saying, “I will surely buy it from you for a price, nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing” [2 Sam. 24: 22-24].

Some people use their wealth to trap others to do their bidding, usually for bad. For example, political leaders in some developing countries use their ill-gotten wealth to bribe electoral officials and law-enforcement agents, and to hire thugs to rig elections or to suppress dissent. Even in advanced countries, some rich people build media houses or fund lobby or pressure groups to propagate lies against their opponents or to defend their undue advantages over minorities and the poor.

Some people give half-heartedly or deceitfully. For example, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a possession and kept back part of the proceeds while telling Peter that that was the full amount. Peter said to Ananias, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” The man dropped dead right away [Acts 5: 1-5], and I have no doubt that he went to hell!

When you openly donate or make pledges in your church that you hardly honour, or pay tithes and offerings on stolen wealth, or give away all or part of your material wealth for an unholy cause, you are not investing in heaven but on earth “where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves

break in and steal” [Matt. 6: 19]..How can rich people who do such things have the Spirit of God while still alive or enter heaven when they die?

God is not against wealth. After all, He is the one who gives us power to get wealth. *His only requirement is that we use it for His purposes* [Deut. 8: 18]. For example, “Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold” [Gen. 13: 2]; yet, it did not prevent him from following God’s word. Job was the greatest man in the then Eastern world and very rich in livestock with “a very large household” and yet he was “blameless,” and “one who feared God and shunned evil” [Job 1: 1-3]. Barnabas was a rich man, a Levite of the country of Cyprus. He sold his land “and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” [Acts 4: 36-37]. He introduced Paul to the apostles [Acts 9: 27] and became his travelling companion. Therefore, *God does not hate wealth or rich people, but only the rich people who worship their wealth* or use it for their self-aggrandizement. That is the import of Christ’s message to the rich young man, to His disciples and to us.

3. The rich can be saved!

When the disciples heard the Lord’s response to the rich young man, they were astonished and asked Him, “Who then can be saved?” He replied, “With men, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” [Matt. 19: 25-26]. Peter was certainly speaking for us too when he asked Jesus what there was for His disciples who had given up their families and earthly possessions to follow Him [v. 27]. What is in there also for us? We cannot pursue material wealth like unbelievers. We are commanded to do everything right- not to steal or cheat. We are to give more than receive because God blesses the cheerful giver. We are to walk by faith and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7], and to take the narrow road of righteousness that leads to salvation, to heaven, instead of the broad way that leads to destruction, to hell [Matt. 7: 13].

The Lord’s answer addressed both the earthly and hereafter concerns in Peter’s question, as follows [Matt. 19: 28-29]:

- Concerning the kingdom

Those of them that had followed Him would “in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory ... also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The gospel of Luke makes it clearer. There Jesus said, “You are those who have *continued with Me in My trials*, and I bestow upon you a *kingdom*, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” [Lk 22: 28-30].. It is instructive that when the New Jerusalem shall be descended from heaven at the end of the age, the names of the twelve tribes of Israel will be on the twelve gates and the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb shall be on

the twelve foundations of the wall of the city [**Rev. 21: 12-14**]. Certainly, that is an honour worth working or waiting for.

- Concerning our earthly needs

Jesus also made it quite clear, “*Everyone* who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother, or wife or children, or *lands, for My sake*, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” [**Matt. 19: 20**]. For example, Job lost 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels and 500 oxen when Satan struck [**Job 1: 2-3**] but respectively gained 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels and 1,000 oxen after God had restored him [**Job 42: 12-13**]. That was a hundredfold increase in deed!

4. Conclusion: Trade in your haven for heaven!

In our Lord’s words, there is nothing impossible before God. It may be hard to combine wealth with true worship because of the temptation to backslide into idolatry. Ask Solomon, the richest man that ever lived! Nevertheless, there are many rich people in heaven. All that God requires is that you prioritize by putting the kingdom of God first and it is God Himself who adds appropriate doses of your earthly needs to keep you on course to eternal life [**Matt. 6: 13**].

There is a mansion waiting for you in heaven. Why should you bother about that haven on earth which deteriorates each day? Americans are rushing to trade in their clunkers for new cars, and the programme will end when the government runs out of funds. The good news for you is that God’s subsidy will *never* expire. But remember that your time on earth is limited and unpredictable. Therefore, rush for your mansion in heaven- *right now!*