

“Who then can be saved?”

Reflection 6 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

In our series on “Salvation: The Quest,” we come to one of the classic Jesus stories – Jesus and the Rich Young Man – in Matthew 19:16-30. Many of you will remember this story. It begins with a man coming to Jesus and asking, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get this eternal life?” Then it works its way through what goodness means to Jesus finally saying, “Oh, if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor.” Because that’s the man’s issue. It’s his attachments that are strangling him, keeping him from God’s eternal life. “Then,” Jesus says, “come, follow me.” “When the young man heard this,” we are told, “he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

In many tellings of this story, the story ends here. But in fact it goes on. Jesus observes to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell 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.” Is this humor? Irony? Maybe he’s talking about the small night-door in a city gate, the security gate that a camel could only shuffle through on his knees. Maybe he’s talking about the eye of a sewing needle. In any case, it’s very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Why? Why is it so hard? Maybe it’s because many who are rich are so sure that what they have they owe to their own skill and character, and they forget to factor in their own good fortune, their “lucky breaks,” the people who helped them on their way, the kindness of strangers, their great good fortune in where they were born and to whom. And they don’t factor God in. Anyway the disciples are greatly astonished and ask, “Who then can be saved?” Now that is the question toward which this whole story has really been driving.

Who then can be saved? This is another of the common salvation questions. Who then can be saved? Who is saved, and who’s not? And this question in its several variations haunts us – haunts us with all sorts of real-life and historical consequences. Some learn from this question to comply with the intention, the will and the ways of God on some particular aspect of life. They publicly confess their faith. They repent. They’re baptized. Maybe they sell their possessions and give to the poor. But what also happens is a whole lot of heat and controversy and confusion, a whole lot of “What about” questions – “What about Aunt Martha, and Uncle Bob? What about Grandma? She never did this one thing we did.”

These questions to debate and division. Churches get obsessed with notions of predestination and once-saved-always-saved or “faith only.” Sometimes the question leads to smugness and complacency and self-righteousness, so that even if a person is racist, sexist, angry, lustful and violent they’re O.K. as long as maybe they were baptized. And the absurdity of all this leads to real loss of credibility on the part of those who witness it. And everywhere this question increases fear and anxiety. Always there’s this lurking fear that maybe we missed something, or maybe we misunderstood something.

And so a question that's meant to create spiritual assurance doesn't. Instead, it leaves in its trail doubt and uncertainty.

Now if a question has these kinds of consequences, what might that tell us? That just maybe we're asking the wrong question? And that's what we find when we go back to the text. The disciples have asked, "Who then can be saved?" "Jesus looked at them," the text says. Jesus was always looking at 'em. "Jesus looked at them, and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'" And this, in fact, is the main point of this story – not selling everything you've got, but this.

With man being saved is impossible, not unlikely, not difficult, but impossible. But with God all things are possible. This is the truth Jesus has been driving toward in this whole encounter with this rich young man. It's a truth that the rich in particular have trouble understanding. Goodness is a human impossibility. We're too fragile, too brittle, too needy, too inconsistent. All of us. We're always falling behind. Cause-and-effect keeps catching up to us. The bone-headed things we do have consequences.

Goodness comes, salvation comes, from admitting that this life of the age to come – this eternal life that the young man asks about first – is impossible if it were just up to us, but with God all things are possible. Salvation is not one more accomplishment. It's not one more acquisition. It comes from God. And true goodness begins the day you cast yourself entirely upon the mercy of God for the rest of your life. And of course God can save rich people as he did with Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus. And for that matter, is it only the rich who have a problem? No, it's also the educated, the athletic, the beautiful, the popular, and the religious, all who think this life of the age to come comes down to something they do.

The whole story then ends with what caution? Again, it ends with a theme that Jesus stressed over and over – that one day there will be a great reversal, now in verse 30, "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." It's the beggar outside the door eating scraps who's saved, not the rich man. It's the tax collector, not the Pharisee. It's the penitent thief, not the high priest. It's the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek. The saved are those who cast themselves entirely on the mercy of God.

True goodness begins the day you cast yourself entirely on the mercy of God for the rest of your life, and now no more smugness, no more self-righteousness, no more religious arrogance, no more goodness that intimidates and alienates others, just a heart wide open to God. We give up all notions of status, and we get on with the task of proclaiming God's salvation day after day. We get on with the task of bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. And here's the great, glorious secret. As we proclaim the salvation of our God, as we bring the salvation, as our lives are more and more filled with this God, we come to know his salvation deep in our souls. It can be no other way. Of course this God saves. Of course this God saves me. But it's in the telling, it's in the doing, that the assurance comes.

– Dale Pauls