

The Rich Young Ruler, A Story About Character

Lk. 18:18-30

Introduction:

1. Luke tells this story in a context addressing the magnificence of the graciousness of God.
2. First he records a parable about God's great desire to bring deliverance for those oppressed (18:1-8). Second, he records a parable about the prayers of the Pharisee and the publican that ends with the statement "He who humbles himself will be exalted" (18:14).
3. These two parables are then followed by a statement about entering the kingdom as a little child. The one with no status (15ff), no justification (13ff) and no protection (3ff) is protected, justified and valued by the Lord.
4. The story of the rich young ruler teaches us of the challenges facing those with status, who would justify themselves valuing other things more than the kingdom of God.

Discussion:

I. The rich young ruler approached this life as preparing for "eternal life" (18). Eternal life is equivalent to "heaven" (22), "the kingdom of God" (24), and "salvation" (27).

- A. This is an approach based on the revelation of Scripture.
 1. The Pharisees particularly believed in a resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:8) and I take that to mean they believed in a life hereafter.
 2. Jesus obviously accepted this perspective.
 - a. He taught it in the parable of the unrighteous steward (Lk 16:9).
 - b. And in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19ff).
- B. This young ruler recognized that what he did in this life was critical to the next. He saw life in terms of the future, a fact to which we all need to give attention.
- C. When he identifies Jesus as "good teacher" some have seen in this recognition of social status. Cf. "rabbi," or "Dr." But Jesus sets the stage that this interaction will not be set by the standard values to which the ruler pays homage. Only one is to be revered and that is God.
- D. This man is keenly aware of the commandments. Perhaps for him keeping them reflects some status. It is not unusual for us good people to think we are better than because we keep the commandments (cf. Lk. 18:11-12).

II. Character goes deeper than the commandments and taps into our core values.

- A. Recently in our study of the parables Jesus' attention has been focused on the value of the word, the value of the kingdom and the value of kingdom citizens.
 1. The kingdom is so valuable that we should give up all for it. It requires everything (Lk. 15:3-10).
 2. It is more valuable than anything else.
 3. This kind of valuation is a reflection of our character.
- B. N. T. Wright defined character well when he told a story about a conversation he had with a banker after the financial crash of 2008. The banker said, "They can

introduce as many new regulations as they like. We do need some guidelines put back in place; we went too far, giving people freedom to gamble with huge sums of money and do crazy deals. But any banker or mortgage broker can easily hire a smart accountant and lawyer to help them tick all the boxes the government tells them to, and then go around the back of the system and do what they want. What's the point of that?" What's the answer? "Character," he said. "Keeping rules is all right as far as it goes, but the real problem in the last generation is that we've lost the sense that character matters; that integrity matters. The system is only healthy when the people who are running it are people you can trust to do the right thing, not because there are rules but because that's the sort of people they are" (After You Believe, p. 10).

- C. Having commandments is one thing, but checking off all the boxes is insufficient. And that's exactly what Pharisees did (note Lk. 18:9ff). They had magnificent ways of "checking off the boxes."
 - 1. Adultery—give a certificate and divorce her (Matt. 5:27; 19:9ff).
 - 2. Murder—homicide only (Matt. 5:20ff).
 - 3. False witness—swear by gold, etc. (Matt. 23:16ff).
 - 4. Honor father and mother—it has been given to God (Matt. 15:4ff).
- D. True character gives in to the intent. In submission it follows the Lord. It gives up selfish interests.
- E. It is difficult (Lk. 18:24-27). But acceptance of the grace of God is radically transforming. But we must accept ourselves as sinners (Lk. 18:9-14).

III. Peter said, "We have left everything and followed You" (Lk. 18:28-30).

- A. The kingdom of God is more valuable than house, wife, brothers, parents or children. The rich young ruler could not leave his wealth, but the kingdom is of so much more value than even our dearest relationships.
- B. Note Jesus' affirmation of "this time" and the "age to come." In both times recognition of the value of the kingdom produces magnificent results.

Conclusion:

- 1. Are you withholding yourself from the Lord? The kingdom of God is more valuable than that!
- 2. Leave everything.
- 3. Like the publican recognize who you are. Come saying, "God be merciful to me, the sinner!"
- 4. He who humbles himself will be exalted! (Lk. 18:14).