

There was a commercial where a man rummaging through garbage finds a lamp and rubs it, and a genie pops up. And the genie says, "*You have three wishes.*" And the man said, "*OK, I want to be the richest man in the world.*" And, BOOM, great piles of money appear. He said, "*You have two more wishes.*" The man said, "*OK, now I want beautiful women to love me.*" And, BOOM, he was surrounded by beautiful women. So he has the money and the women. And, finally, the genie says, "*You have one more wish. What do you want?*" The man said, "*I want to live forever.*" And, BOOM, he turns him into the Energizer bunny!

The rich young nobleman is one of those unique characters from scripture that have come to represent greed. So unwilling was he to part with earthly wealth that he sold his soul in order to keep his money. But I think that conclusion is too simple. The fact is there are a lot of good things that can be said of him. For example, having talked with him only a few minutes, Mark tells us that Jesus looked upon him and loved him. That doesn't sound like a scathing criticism to me. And so for a few moments let's examine this young fellow more closely – his positive qualities and the negative ones. First let's look at the positive. These are things that brought him to the master, qualities that made him interested in Jesus' teachings.

The first positive thing is: **he was courageous**. He belonged to the upper class. It is this group which brought the most criticism against Jesus. Perhaps it was his youth or maybe it was his willingness to learn but he did not let his social position keep him from Jesus. Unlike Nicodemus, he did not come skulking in the night.

He came to Christ in broad noonday. He saw something in Jesus and his teachings that convinced him that Jesus was the real thing. He had the courage to seek him out.

The second positive thing is: **he was humble**. When he came to Jesus he came running. Upper class people did not run. It was considered undignified. But this young man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him, in the middle of the road in broad day light for all to see.

Now notice what he asked: Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life? He did not come to Jesus with verbal puzzles, mental gymnastics, and pious theological jargon like the Pharisees did. The Pharisees would ask him questions simply to trip him up and make him commit that one fatal error that might hang him. They were arrogant but this young man came in genuine sincerity. "Good Master," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He had gotten down to the fundamentals. He was in effect saying: Jesus, you clearly have the secret to authentic living. Tell me the secret so that I too may be fulfilled.

The third positive thing is: **he was religious**. Now I don't mean that in a negative way. He was a spiritual man deeply concerned with religious things. When Jesus instructed him to keep the commandments, he basically answered, "been there, done that, so what's next?" And this is the point at which the negatives start adding up in this young man's life.

The first negative thing is: he was **looking for a rule to keep** in order to please God. Listen to what he says, "What must I DO to receive eternal life?" What must I DO? It is a pretty telling word, this DO.

What rule must I keep in order for God to be pleased with me? I keep the commandments but it doesn't seem like enough. Nothing he does ever seems like enough – and in that he was so close to the kingdom, so close. He suffers from what psychologists sometimes call “Destination sickness” -- the malady of having everything that you want, but not wanting anything you have, and being empty and lonely and miserable. But was he ready for the cure?

The second negative thing is: **he did love his money**. It is interesting that Jesus, after being pressed by this young man, actually does give him something to do. Jesus say, “You want something to do? All right. Since you have great wealth, sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.” So are we to conclude that doing that will be enough? Not really. In all the gospels Jesus never asked anyone else to give away all their resources. That's a pretty good clue that wealth itself isn't really the big issue for Jesus.

In the Jewish world wealth was equated with being blessed by God. And clearly if God was blessing you, then you could be sure that things were going your way and all was secure because you had God on your side. But if you gave away all your wealth how would people know that you were special? How would you know you had everything under control? And needing to be in control, having God under control, was a big issue for Jesus.

The third negative thing is: **he walked away**. He could not reshape his priorities. He couldn't trust his security to God; he couldn't trust God but only his own efforts. He wasn't ready to let go of the things on which he

had built his security to embrace a life that trusts everything to God and then reaches out courageously to be God presence in the lives of others.

If Jesus were talking about rich people in this gospel it would be easy to think "*I'm certainly not rich so this gospel doesn't apply to me.*" But he is really talking about what makes you feel secure, what you see as essential – and that isn't about money. Think of the people who lost everything in the flooding on the east coast this week. Most of them would say that as long as their families are safe that's what really matters. But what if the unthinkable were to happen? What if we were to lose a loved one? This has certainly happened for many of us here. Parents have passed away, or your spouse, a close friend, and the worst of all tragedies, perhaps a child has died, If any of this were to happen to us, would we be utterly destroyed? I have observed so many of you dealing with the worst. You go through deep grief, but you refuse to be destroyed. That is because you have what you really need. You have faith. We have faith. We have God. We entrust our loved ones to Him. He will care for them, and for us. We may mourn and weep, but we know that our pain here is temporary when it is united to our faith in God.

When we lose the things that matter to us, we can find our way to God. But God isn't supposed to be a last resort. God needs to be a priority on every normal average day, not just in a crisis. Let me phrase it another way, what is it that motivates you, guides you on a daily basis? Is it your job? Is it your family? Is it time playing computer games, or watching sports on TV, conversing with your friends on Facebook, or some hobby?

Could I look at your Visa statement or your computer log, or your Day planner and discover what really matters to you? Where do you devote your time, your money, your dreams, your energy? Jesus said, "Where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also."

Jesus knew where this young man's heart was. He was a nice guy, he kept all the commandments. That may be more than you or I do. Jesus looked at him and loved him, but Jesus knew that God did not come first in this young man's life. If we are brave today we can reflect on what really comes first in our own lives.

We would all like to be successful and fulfilled as persons; it is one of the dreams our culture instills in us. But when we listen to Jesus, we realize that success and fulfillment don't really come the way we often expect them to. They aren't the direct result of anything we can do to attain them. Imagine Jesus saying this to the young man: "What you want costs far more than what you can pay. You don't need a system, you need a Savior. You don't need a resume, you need a Redeemer . . . God does not save us because of what we've done. Only a puny god could be bought with tithes. Only an egotistical god would be impressed with our pain. Only a temperamental god could be satisfied by sacrifices. Only a heartless god would sell salvation to the highest bidders.

And only a great God does for his children what they can't do for themselves." This man's wealth could not buy him a place at the table of God. But the banquet was already spread. All he had to do was let go of all those bulky, transitory things that kept him from entering the door. All he had to do was take and eat.