

I'm thinking about taking the wine box back to complain. It said once opened, it would last 6 weeks; it only lasted 3 hours.

In the 1980s, A & W tried to compete with McDonald's by selling a 1/3 lb. burger at a lower cost. The product failed – because most customers thought the ¼ lb-er was bigger. This is why it's not wise to argue online –or to trust much that's out there.

Have you ever noticed that all instruments searching for intelligent life – are pointed AWAY from earth?

OK, down to some background on the gospel text. The man calls Jesus "Good" teacher. Praising or even flattering teachers was common at the time. And the question about *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* was frequently asked of Jewish teachers. Eternal life meant the life of the coming age. Jewish people envisioned this life in various ways, often as a restoration of paradise, as well as living together in peace, joy and justice. At funerals I've heard eulogies where we were assured that heaven was a golf course, one gigantic shopping mall where everything is always on sale, and an endless game of BUNKO. I feel rather certain that heaven is NONE of those things. The man responds to Jesus that he has kept all the commandments since his youth. According to later Jewish tradition, a boy became fully responsible for the commandments at his coming-of-age to become a young man, around age 13, now marked by the bar mitzvah.

Although very few teachers made demands like the one Jesus makes here, on occasion some radical teachers weeded out uncommitted disciples with such demands. The text says the man's "face fell" and he went away sad over Jesus' words. The Greek word used in this passage was also used metaphorically in Jesus' day to refer to the gloominess of the clouds covering the sun. This young man's life was pretty much sunshine and good times. He was wealthy. He was powerful. He was morally upright. If he were single, we'd fix him up with our daughter – no question about it! And then Jesus had to come along and steal his fun. What was this rich young ruler missing? And what did he give up when he walked away from Jesus? That's the truly scary question that we need to consider today. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Sept- Dec 2021, p. 24, and CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, footnotes, p. 1725)

Second, let's get something out of the way. It's too easy for us to sit here and say this text does not apply to us because we are not rich. Not so fast. Compared to most of the world's people – we ARE rich. We may dream of being really rich someday. Erma Bombeck's young son once asked her the question, "Are we rich?" And she stopped to consider what her definition of rich is. See if you agree with her. She wrote:

"You're rich when you can have 8 people to dinner and don't have to wash forks between the main course and dessert. You're rich when your television set has all the knobs on it. (We'd have to update that and say you're rich if your TV screen is as big as your SUV.) You're rich when you can throw away a shirt has a large hole in it – even if it's in the tucked in part. You're rich when you've never been hungry in your life. You're rich when you're never worried about paying the mortgage or rent." (I adapted a number of these) Some of us can relate to these. And we recognize that we are, in fact, rich. But we are forever thinking of Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Mark Zuckerberg rich.

I know that some are having a tough time financially. Still, we need to confront the fact that Jesus did warn time and time again against the danger of riches. He says in this passage that a rich man will have a hard

time getting into heaven. On another occasion Jesus talked about a rich man who built barns to hold his surplus crops and then died in the night. Jesus called him a fool who had not prepared for the world to come. If we took Jesus' words seriously in these passages, we might get a cloudy, gloomy perspective on our lives too.

Now I think that I have money and possessions in their proper place -- and then I read this story about the rich young ruler. And then I wonder if Jesus were to make the same demand of me at this very moment....."sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me.".....would I make excuses? Would I walk away from Jesus and from abundant and eternal life? I think there is something we are supposed to learn from this young man's loss.....

The reality is that we all are forced to make choices about what's important to us. Wealth is dangerous when we begin overvaluing money and undervaluing people. Wealth is also dangerous when we see our possessions as an end rather than as a means. When the accumulation of wealth is our primary reason for living then we are in trouble. Wealth is simply a means to improve the world, to improve our community, to improve our lives, but when it becomes an end then it is dangerous. If our will states that all of our money is left to our already very comfortable kids and grandkids, we have lost what that money is supposed to be for. And if we are giving nothing to the church but have no problem spending a fortune on Christmas or travel or redecorating our house, then we are already spiritually in trouble with money. If we are giving the same amount now as we gave 3 years ago, and we've had raises since then, then we are in spiritual trouble. Money is quite seductive.

Third, wealth can be dangerous if we print on our money "In God we trust" but in our hearts we trust in money and material things.

In his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, author David Foster Wallace said something really thought-provoking: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

The only choice we get is what to worship. He went on to say that whatever we worship will eventually consume us. If we worship appearances or money or status, or the perfect body we will spend our energy on these things. Whatever we worship eventually comes to control our lives. And most of us aren't even conscious of what we really worship. Until, like the rich young man, we are asked to give it up.

Foster ends his meditation by saying, "They're the kind of worship we just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what we see and how we measure value without ever being fully aware that's what we're doing."

There are many of us, if we were asked, who would say, 'Oh, yes, I trust God,' but in our heart of hearts we know that we are much more concerned with the value of our IRAs, our pension, our Social Security, our property, and our investments. We have slipped into worshipping wealth, security, certainty, control. What does our anxiety about these things teach us about our relationship with God? Jesus told us not to be anxious about life, that God would provide.

That does not mean that we are not to prepare for our old age. It does mean that wealth is not our ultimate security. Our ultimate security is God. I'm aware of how glibly we often say, "Trust the Lord" when we really mean we're going to trust in our own devices. Yet there needs to come that time when we settle the issue once and for all. What is the source of our ultimate security? Is it our bank account, our investments, our property, our status, or do we trust in the love and providence of God?

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Jesus says “It is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” Now it was fashionable for a while to say this actually meant a gate in the walls of Jerusalem – a rather small gate – but one that with a lot of pushing and shoving and shouting, one could force a camel through. Scholars have debunked that wiggle out of this rather hard text. The fact is that camels were the largest animals in the Holy Land; the eye of a needle was then, as now, a tiny hole. A camel getting through the eye of a needle was apparently a figure of speech for accomplishing what was impossible – like the analogous Babylonian Jewish figure of speech about an elephant getting through a needle’s eye. It’s classic Jewish hyperbole.

It reminds us of the dangers of wealth. It can keep us out of the Kingdom of God if we overvalue money and undervalue people, if we see money as an end and not as a means, if we write upon our money, “In God we Trust” but donate nothing to the church.

At some point in our lives, we all have to choose who or what we will place our trust in. We all have to choose what we will value, what will take first place in our lives. Jesus didn’t try to make this choice any easier. In every generation, following Jesus means giving up the things that our culture values. It means giving up our own security and comfort and control. But Jesus also ends this passage with the promise that whatever we give up for Him will be returned to us a hundredfold, through the riches of knowing Him and sharing eternal life. We are invited to learn from the loss of the rich young man. Decide now that following Jesus is worth more than anything else in life and discover the rich blessings He has for all who put their trust in Him. Amen. (largely adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Sept-Dec 2021, p. 23-26)