

The Rich Young Ruler

Let's read Psalm 49:6-11 NKJV to start us off -

Those who trust in their wealth And boast in the multitude of their riches, None of them can by any means redeem his brother, Nor give to God a ransom for him— For the redemption of their souls is costly, And it shall cease forever— That he should continue to live eternally, And not see the Pit. For he sees wise men die; Likewise the fool and the senseless person perish, And leave their wealth to others. Their inner thought is that their houses will last forever, Their dwelling places to all generations; They call their lands after their own names.

Matthew 19:16-24 NKJV

Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to Him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” The young man said to Him, “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, 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.”

You know something, I read this passage and I really, really feel for this guy. I'm thinking he is an incredibly nice bloke. So I want to do a quick journalistic character assessment of him along the same lines that an aspiring celebrity reporter does when he can't get an interview with the celeb, so he does a few Google searches for the basics, makes some sweeping assumptions and writes it as fact using phrases like, 'quoting sources close to - n'. Well my sources are three close friends of the main character in this story, Jesus. One's called Matthew, there's another that's called Mark and the other's name is Luke. All three are happy to go on the record so there's no need to hide behind phrases like 'unnamed sources' or 'friends that have let it be known ', so that gives added credence to my article.

So what actual facts are there out there that we can base our assessment on? What clues are there?

Sadly, we don't know his name but we can add intrigue to our article by claiming that anonymity has been requested by all concerned. What we do know is that this guy's minted. Luke quotes him as 'very rich', not just comfortable, but very rich. OK, he's living in Israel, an occupied country that's ruled by a very authoritarian Rome, so it's not an easy environment to make money in, but this guy, he has. More likely, he's inherited some, all or most of his wealth. How can we say that? Well Matthew describes him as a young man. Most of the disciples were relatively young themselves, Jesus was in His early thirties, so if I assume Matthew was of a similar age, for him to describe this guy as a young man, puts him in his early/ mid twenties.

Now bearing in mind that this was before stock exchanges, social media influencers, dot com and modern get rich quick schemes. Back in the day, you made your money buying or manufacturing and then selling, so you needed to source or build your product, open a shop and build up a customer base, all of which takes years, even generations. The other means to making a fortune was agriculture, you build up herds of cattle or sheep but that takes land and lots of it and again, and

many years of breeding. So for me it's pretty likely that this guy had been the beneficiary of his parents' untimely death and their legacy to him.

Next thing we know about him: he enjoys a comfortable lifestyle. Bear in mind that in this period there were huge social inequalities with a privileged few enjoying servants that'll do jobs that'd make your stomach heave or you simply can't be bothered doing, really comfortable furniture including a huge comfortable bed, horses and carriages and stables, gardens, a gorgeous pretty wife and beautiful friends, jewellery, designer furnishings, travel and on and on... But at the other end of the ladder were an unfortunate underclass, disabled, poorly educated and not educated at all, others who've suffered misfortune - debt ridden, widows with children but no breadwinner and many others besides. Makes you think, oh how things have so improved over the last 2,000 years - or maybe not. This man was towards the top half of the social ladder and he appreciated and valued what he had.

Better than that, even though he's still pretty young and wet behind the ears, yet Luke describes his main occupation as 'a ruler'. Maybe this guy's a Bible times younger Donald Trump? He's got charisma, influence, power, friends in high places and he's minted and he does like the finer things in life. Jewish rulers in New Testament times were usually closely associated with the Temple or a synagogue.

Something else that we can glean from the three accounts in these Gospels is that he was pretty clever, and he was very forward thinking. He regularly examined his life, his whole strategy, looking for gaps and weaknesses. An astute businessman will always be looking for aspects and areas of his or her organisation that are weak and need improvement. These need to be fixed or someone else will come along and exploit them for you. The high street is full of closed down chains whose owners didn't see the changes happening because of the Internet, changing shopping habits and tastes.

This guy thought carefully about his life. Yes he was happy and contented with what he'd got, life's good, really good. But there was still this nagging worm in his head, troubling him. When this life comes to an end, what's the next one going to be like? That was his weakness or as some would put it, his nemesis and it troubled him. That was something he had to deal with, he had to prepare for what happens to his soul after he dies. That's why I believe he was pretty bright, forward thinking, not something you always come across when talking to twenty year-olds these days. I'm sorry if I've upset any forward thinking twenty year-olds that object to this sweeping stereotype by a fuddy-duddy old git, but please stay with me on this one so I can make this point. You see I was once in my twenties, and I'm still just young enough to remember back that far. I remember working in an office in Manchester and I remember the guy on the desk next to me taking a phone call. I could overhear one side of a two sided phone call. It soon became clear to me that my colleague was engaged in a sales call, somebody was trying to sell him life insurance, a product that was of zero interest to him. I remember he asked the telesales rep this question. 'So you're saying that if I pay you lots of money whilst I'm alive, you'll pay it me back when I'm dead. So how's that work for me?' It could be said that my colleague was not what you'd call forward thinking.

Anyway, now back to our man. He was forward thinking and really worried about what will happen to him after he dies, this was a question he was genuinely concerned about. Like all good Jewish children he'd been to the equivalent of Sunday school and there he'd learnt the ten commandments. He was one of the bright kids sat at the front, not one of the troublemakers who are always sat at the back - some things never change do they? He could still remember the ten commandments even ten or fifteen years on, better than that, right through his life, he'd tried his darndest to follow them. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if he weren't a Rotarian, raising lots of money for lots of wonderful charities doing lots of wonderful work. And yet still this maggot was chewing inside his head,

'What's going to happen to me when?' He'd have close friends that were Pharisees, you needed to be in with the Pharisees if you were socially ambitious and if you're rich, the Pharisees were very welcoming. Doubtless he'd have asked the same question to them that he was going to ask Jesus. I wonder what they'd have told him. Maybe they'd have assured him that he nothing to worry about because he's Jewish. Rightly, he'd have been unconvinced (Matthew 3:9). Maybe they gave him similar advice to Jesus, follow the commandments and laws with additional emphasis on Sabbath day and tithing, and you'll breeze into Heaven. Still he's unconvinced.

Then he hears from someone, maybe it was at a dinner party, was it Rupert or Miranda? - oops more stereotypes, but no, he'd heard that Jesus, the son of God, the Messiah was in town, so who better to ask? And so he does.

The conversation with Jesus doesn't exactly get off to a flying start. Rather patronisingly, he addresses Jesus, 'Good teacher', rather like the next door neighbour who completely blanks you all year round and then comes up to you all gushing, chatting like you both went to school together: 'Aww mate, how are you doing? Oh, you couldn't lend me your lawnmower could you, mine's broke down?' But actually Jesus knows this guy inside out, He knows how he thinks, He knows what he's like - actually He knows him better than the guy knows himself. He's fully aware that this young man is only here to talk about what he wants. He's not there to listen, neither is he there to worship and adore the King of Kings, no, he gets straight down to business, straight to the point ... 'Good master ' Jesus jumps in - 'Don't call me that!' To him it's a bit like a politician in the House of Commons addressing an opposition MP who everyone knows he disagrees with and loathes:

'With all due respect to the Right Honourable....' No, Jesus is not interested in etiquette, He wants total love, respect and adoration but that's a concept that's quite foreign to this young man, he prefers to receive rather than give. Anyway he jumps in there and he asks his question. Surprisingly there's actually two answers to this question. But first let's remind ourselves, what was the question again? Can you remember?

"What one good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Yes, that was it. Well the first answer is, that you've got to be as absolutely perfect as God from the moment of your conception, right through to the moment of your death and all the bits in between. But Jesus made it a bit easier for him, watered His answer down and just gave him the beginners version - keep six of the ten commandments. Now in actual fact there's another 600 plus commandments that most people have never even read, let alone keep - I mean fully keep from that day one moment, but I suppose Jesus thought, well you've got to start somewhere.

But this guy's not stupid and he isn't going to get fobbed off:

'I've done that. Didn't work!' So Jesus tells him:

'OK, if that didn't work for you, try this one. Go back home, put everything you own in an auction, instruct the auctioneers to give all the proceeds to the poor and then come and follow me: you can be my 13th disciple'.

This was one heck of an ask for this guy. All that his parents had built up and given him and he'd developed since, his house, his land, furniture, jewellery, wine cellars - sold, gone to the poor. All his friends, career, position in the community - everything, gone; they wouldn't want to know him once he's got no money! No sorry, no way, that's just too rich!

This was a new experience for this man, for the first time in his life, something he desperately desperately wanted, he had to walk away from because the price was too high. It wasn't that he

couldn't afford it, he had enough, it's just that his valuation of what Jesus was offering didn't justify the asking price. Ever been shopping in Harvey Nicks and looked at the price tags? Well, that's how he was feeling. Now maybe this dude was not as forward thinking as I've given him credit for. Assuming he didn't reflect later in life and change his mind; where do you think he is right now? Do you think maybe he's regretting his choice, kicking himself? What happens to people who reject Jesus? I'm not going to go into that now, if you want to know, Google what happens to people who reject Jesus? There's plenty of info on the Net that'll point you to the relevant verses and passages in the Bible.

No, I want to talk to anyone who's done a double take on this passage and thought to themselves, when I became a Christian I didn't sell everything I owned or give it to the poor, in fact I've still got most of it. I also want to talk to anyone that's asking themselves the question, was Jesus running something of a weird cult? 'Go and sell everything you own, and then come and follow me'.

Alternative question - what one thing is getting in the way of your journey to Heaven?

Money is a problem, even if you haven't got any. Some people will only buy a lottery ticket if it's a triple or quadruple rollover; like £2m isn't enough.

What lesson can we draw from this story of the Rich Young Ruler? Jesus goes on to make what was then a sweeping statement - 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." Matthew 19:23

Do you have to be poor to get into Heaven? Luke 16:19-23.

Was Jesus just talking about money or maybe other things. What other things in our lives make God a jealous God? Luke 14:23-33

Is God prepared to compromise? What happens when we disobey and we hang onto a sin that's impairing our walk with God? It was this guy that walked. Jesus didn't send him away. What might Jesus have said if the man had replied, 'OK, I'll follow you but I want to keep all my goods.'?

When witnessing, do we use verses like John 3:18 as a hook or a thin end of a wedge and then later slip in the less palatable requirements like submissive wives (Colossians 3:18), sexual purity (1 Thessalonians 4:3), hair length (1 Corinthians 11:14-15). Jesus was able to make a judgement on this guy and tell him exactly where he was lacking. Can and should we apply that to our approach when witnessing?

Lessons we've learnt from the rich young ruler :-

You can't buy or earn a ticket to heaven - sell all that you have, give to the poor AND follow me.

True satisfaction and fulfilment only through Jesus.

Faith can cost and hurt.

Cleanse ourselves of wrong priorities. Matthew 16:24-26, Romans 6:16

God won't compromise just to attract the rich and famous.