

MATTHEW 19:16 – 20:16

THAT ONE THING

When in Italy earlier this year, some of us went to the remains of the ancient city of Pompeii. It was buried when the volcanic Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. The city was covered in deep layers of volcanic ash, which actually preserved the buildings and even the remains of people. While excavating the ruins, the remains of a woman were found. Her feet were pointing towards the gate of the city as if she had been trying to escape certain, impending doom. But as they uncovered the rest of her body, they noticed that her face was looking backwards towards her outstretched hand. Just out of reach was a pearl necklace. She had been hit with the blast of molten ash, instantly killing her while simultaneously preserving her last act of trying to hold onto something of monetary value, even in the face of death.

And that is how we can be. If we're honest, we all like our things. And when push comes to shove, there is a limit to what and when we are willing to part with things.

While on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus was asked a question, one that has been asked many times since.

16 Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

17 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."

18 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,' 19 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' "

20 The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?"

21 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."

22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Last week we saw that on the trek to Jerusalem there were children who wanted to meet Jesus. That isn't surprising, given Jesus' track record with children. But what was somewhat surprising was the response from the disciples. They

attempted to prohibit the children from reaching Jesus with all the zeal of a bodyguard battling the paparazzi! Jesus wasn't having any of it. He rebuked the disciples and used the children as an object lesson to say children were an excellent picture of what it is like to have obtained the kingdom of Heaven. Children are of the lowest social order in that they are dependent on their parents and are expected to be obedient, not seeking any stature in the kingdom. They are innocent and humble. That is the contrast to what we read about in this section of the text.

Jesus was approached by a young man and asked a very pertinent question: *16 Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"*

- Good teacher, rather than rabbi connotes a possible apprehension as opposed to a more humble submission to a teacher he was willing to follow.
- Great question... But there is something else we need to address first.
- Why wasn't this man forbidden from seeing Jesus as the children were? They're still on the same journey/ the same timetable. Answer: This man is rich, young, self-sufficient, successful, spiritually earnest, significant, (they saw the children as insignificant.)
- In the eyes of the disciples, this man is worthy of approaching Jesus. He has all the qualifications of someone who could be a disciple. He is "suitable."
- But Jesus sees things differently. (Like the churches receiving the letters in Revelation.)
- Why was he seen to be "suitable" and the children weren't?

Dt. 28:1-14

1 "Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. 2 And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God:

3 "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

4 "Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

5 "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

6 "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

7 "The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.

8 "The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set

your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. 9 "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. 10 Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. 11 And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. 12 The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. 13 And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them. 14 So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right or the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

- The problem with personalizing every promise from God, especially when the context is more of a general promise to the nation of Israel – not necessarily one made on a one by one basis. So, prosperity was seen to be a sign of spirituality and obvious blessing from God.
- The man's social behavior is never questioned, just his wealth and his attitude towards it.
- Jesus responds to the man's question.

17 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."

18 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,' 19 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' "

20 The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?"

- Why call me good? A question with an important answer.
- Keep the commandments... which ones? All of the commandments are from the second portion of the Decalogue. All have to do with observable outward habits and behaviors – our relationships with others. (All exterior) Commandments 1-4 and 10 are more inwardly focused. But as we will see, his problem is actually with the first commandment.
- How well we "keep commandments" is rather arbitrary. See once again the letters to the seven churches.
- Jesus has already given some powerful teachings regarding the battle

- between God and “mammon.” (earthly treasures)
- **Mt. 6:19-21**
 - **19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**
 - The issue is with placing material security above reliance and trust in a Heavenly Father. And therein lies the rub.
 - Discipleship here is defined as a prior commitment to the kingship of God, which overrides material concerns. This is very visible in this passage.
 - **How do we see this passage? Most of us will look at these verses and then exhale in relief, feeling that it doesn’t apply to us. After all, none of us are wealthy.**
 - But the truth is that it does apply to us on a material level. Even if you adjust for inflation, we are all much more wealthy than the common person in first-century Palestine.
 - **“That Jesus did not command all His followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of person to whom He WOULD issue that command.” Gundry**
 - Our relief gives us away.
 - So... an ascetic lifestyle? The immediate context is that of a disciple like Peter, James and John, et al. This is the comparison we will see throughout the pericope.

“All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”

- Perfect – Gr. Teleios; meaning not so much moral flawlessness as completeness and spiritual maturity.
- Not necessarily arrogant. Paul said the same of himself in Phil. 3:6.
- He is to be commended in his seeking spiritual completeness and maturity. However, he is about to confront a level of “goodness” too high for him to reach. **Remember, the only one who is “good” is God.** Therefore there must be another way. And he has realized that, which is why he asks Jesus what else he lacks. He knows there is still something missing. And this is what happens when we live a life of works-based salvation. We are forever chasing the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

- Jesus doesn't answer the man's "what else" question with anything esoteric or some sort of pilgrimage. He gives him a very practical answer.
- *21 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."*
- *22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*
- As a pious Jew, this man would have given much of his wealth to charity. That is what "loving your neighbor as your self" meant to them. So we can be confident that he was a giving person.
- But now he is being asked to rid himself of what makes him self-sufficient. He is now being asked to be like the flowers, which God clothes and the birds that God feeds. He is being asked to rid himself of what makes him self-sufficient. And in that we can be tempted to see his disavowal of his wealth as a sacrifice. Peter seems to see it that way. But this isn't the case.
- **Following the words, "sell and give" are the words, "come and follow."**
- Whatever this man's personal issues, Jesus uses his situation as an object lesson for anyone whose self-sufficiency is a stumbling-block to being His disciple.

23 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. 24 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."

25 When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"

26 But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Our self-sufficiency and comfort can and are great stumbling-blocks to how willing we are to follow Jesus in where He wants to send us and how He wants to use us in this life. Remember, when He speaks of the rich, Jesus isn't just referring to Warren Buffet or Steve Gates. He is referring to anyone whose self-sufficiency gives him or her pause in following Him.

- The eye of the needle. The clue is the "impossibility" of it.
- If this man can't be saved, then who can?!!
- If salvation depends on human worthiness then it is impossible. But with God's grace, anything is possible.

- The poor aren't inherently more righteous, but since they have "less to lose" they are usually more readily eager to accept the call of Jesus.

Like the woman in Pompeii, we all have something or even someone we are willing to hold onto which impedes our following Jesus. There is always at least that one thing. What is that thing for you? Is it wealth, self-sufficiency, a relationship, a career?

Like the man in the story, we know that there is something missing it is commendable that we see that. But are we willing to confess this when we are confronted with that reality? What will we do when Jesus drills down to that one thing that is holding us back?

Will we hold onto that pearl necklace to our own detriment like the woman in Pompeii? She, like Lot's wife, was frozen in time looking back at something she saw as more important than life itself. Do we see Jesus, and following Him as more important than this life?

Jesus was confronted with a similar situation. He was confronted with certain death, looked back and saw each of us. But before He died, He took all of us in His hand and brought us out of certain death and judgment.

Will we then give everything else away and follow Him?