

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever left home and had a funny feeling you have forgotten something? You don't know what it was, but you just had this nagging feeling. A man said every time his family drove off for a vacation, his mom would say, "Honey, we've got to go back home, I think I left the iron turned on. I don't want the house to burn down." His dad would turn around and they would go back and check and the iron would be turned off. This continued for several trips. Finally on one trip, when she told her husband to turn around and go check, he didn't say a word. He pulled the car over to the shoulder, got out and opened the trunk and handed her the iron.

Our passage today introduces us to a young man searching for something. He's often called the Rich Young Ruler. Matthew tells us he was a young man; Luke describes him as a ruler, or what we would call an aristocrat. And Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us he was rich. He was a man who had two things, everything and nothing. He was wealthy and successful, but he turned away from Jesus with nothing. He was searching for something more in life.

Millions of people are searching for something they really can't even put their finger on what it is they're searching for. In 1987 Bono and the Irish rock group U2 recorded a song about this universal search. He sang: "I have run; I have crawled; I have scaled these city walls; Only to be with you. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for." He even ends the song referring to Jesus. "You broke the bonds; And you loosed the chains; Carried the cross of my shame; Oh my shame, you know I believe it. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

Bono is now 55, and over the last few years he has become much more vocal about his faith. He granted an interview to Focus on the Family a couple of years ago in which he made it clear he has found what he was looking for—a relationship with Jesus. By the way Bono's real name is Paul David Hewson and he wears sunglasses indoors because he suffers from glaucoma. He said, "'Who is Christ' is a defining question for a person. You're not let off easily by saying a great thinker or philosopher. He went around saying he was the Messiah. He was crucified because he said he was the son of God. He either was the son of God or nuts. And I find it hard to accept that millions of lives have felt their lives touched and inspired by some nut. I don't believe it."

Two thousand years ago, there was a young, wealthy, successful leader who came to Jesus looking for something.

Mark 10:17-31. As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

We don't know this young man's name, but since we're going to be talking about him, let's give him the name Ben. Ben did so many things right. He came at the right time. As I talked about last week, the best time to come to Jesus is when you are young. He came to the right person, Jesus. He came with the right energy—he was running. He came with the right attitude, he knelt before Jesus. He came with the right question: How can I have eternal life? What a contrast! Ben came running, smiling, full of hope, but he walked away full of sorrow, dragging his feet with only his only hope in his wealth. As we examine this amazing encounter, let's look at five episodes and five life lessons.

1. A STRANGE CONVERSATION: "Keep the commandments!"

So, what's wrong with this picture? Why would Jesus tell someone to keep the commandments to find eternal life? We all know that nobody will ever make it into God's Kingdom by obeying rules and regulations. What was Jesus doing?

Every Jew knew the Ten Commandments by heart. They knew them as well as any of us could count to from one to ten. The Ten Commandments were divided into two sections, or two tables. The first four commandments have to do with a relationship with God. We should have no other Gods, we shouldn't make and worship idols, we should never take God's name in vain, and we should remember the Sabbath Day. The second table contained six commandments about how we relate to one another. This is the table that Jesus quoted. But he intentionally omitted one of the Ten Commandments. You might not have caught it, because you may not have them all memorized. What if I said I am going to count to ten and I say, "One, two, four, five, six...?" You're going to say, "Hey, you skipped the number three."

Jesus left out one; did anyone catch which one He omitted? Let's go through them. He didn't give them in order, but let's check them off. He said, "Do not murder." Check. "Don't commit adultery." Check. "Don't steal." Check. "Don't bear false witness or defraud" Check. "Honor your Father and your Mother." Check. Which one did Jesus leave off intentionally? "Do not covet." That means a desire to have more and more stuff. Jesus knew this was Ben's problem. Ben smiled and said, "I have kept all these since I was a boy!" Jesus said, "There's one thing you lack." You see, the Ben already had a god in his life. His god was gold and his creed was greed. And there is only room for one God on the throne of your life.

LIFE LESSON: Jesus will probe your heart to expose any competing gods

Jesus wanted to point out that Ben had a problem with greed and covetousness, but He didn't just come out and say it. He kept probing until Ben saw the problem himself.

I have a friend who recently went to the doctor not knowing he had appendicitis. He complained of hurting all over his torso. The doctor had him lie down and started probing. When he gently touched the area of the appendix, my friend said he almost flew off the table. That's what Dr. Jesus does for us. He keeps probing to show us where we have other gods in our lives.

The Holy Spirit is working on you right now, gently probing. What is that thing, or that person, or that activity that has become more important to you than the true and living God?

2. SHOCKING ADVICE: "Sell all you have and give it to the poor, and follow me"

Jesus said there was only one thing Ben was lacking. This one verse has caused more confusion and consternation than perhaps any verse in the Bible. Multitudes read it and thought, "I want to obey God. So, should I go and sell everything I have, give it to the poor, and a vow of poverty, and follow Jesus?"

Here's the short answer. You don't need to sell all your riches unless your riches have become the god of your life. Ben is the only person to whom Jesus ever spoke those words. Nicodemus was wealthy. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy, but Jesus never told them to sell all their possessions because Jesus knew their possessions didn't possess them.

LIFE LESSON: Jesus provides a personal solution to remove any competing gods

Jesus looked into Ben's heart and saw that money was his god. And Ben wanted more and more; that's what it means to covet. So, Jesus was simply giving Ben a solution to get rid of that false God. And notice Jesus said, "You aren't losing your treasure, by giving it to the poor, you are laying up treasures in heaven. You're just transferring your wealth."

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned there is only room for one God in our lives. He said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Matthew 6:24)

Jesus designs a different solution for each person. In Luke 10 a lawyer came to Jesus asking the same thing, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus didn't say, "Sell all you have and give to the poor," because He knew this man's problem was pride. Jesus asked him what the greatest commandments were. The lawyer said, "Love the Lord your God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "That's correct." The lawyer was looking for a loophole. He said, "But who is my neighbor?" He wanted Jesus to say, "All your Jewish brothers and sisters." But instead Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, a half-breed. Jesus saw this man's god was pride, so he said, "Love your neighbor, even your Gentile neighbors."

In John 4 Jesus was talking to a Samaritan woman at a well. She asked for some living water. Jesus didn't say, "Go sell all you have and give to the poor." He didn't say, "Love your

neighbor." That was her problem, she was loving too many of her neighbors! He said, "Go call your husband." She said, "Ahem, I don't have a husband." Jesus said, "You said it sister. You've had five husbands and the one you're living with now isn't your husband." Jesus was pointing out that she already had a god in her life, lust, and the unhealthy desire for acceptance by a man. She later became the village evangelist bringing people to meet Jesus.

If you have a competing god ruling your life, Jesus will give you a unique word to replace that god with the true and Living God.

3. THE PERSONAL CHOICE: "He went away sad, because he had great wealth"

Mark is the only one who gives us the tiny detail that Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. We know that God loves the world. We know that Jesus loves everyone. But don't forget that Jesus loves individuals. He looks at you and loves you. He looks at me and loves me. Jesus really did want Ben to make the right choice.

There's a painting by the German artist Heinrich Hoffman. In this frozen scene, Hoffman captured the divine drama of the moment. The Rich Young Ruler is seen wearing his fancy clothes and hat. Jesus is inviting him to give his money to the poor people in the background and then to follow Him. The Rich Young Ruler looks down as he ponders the most important decision he would ever make. Give away all his money and follow Jesus? But he has so much! And in that moment he sadly shakes his head



Christ and the Rich Young Ruler
Heinrich Hofmann
1889

and says, "No. The price is too high." And he walked away. Not all stories end, "and they lived happily ever after." He was a man with only two things: everything & nothing.

LIFE LESSON: Jesus offers eternal life, but He won't force you to follow Him

This was an amazing invitation. Some scholars suggest Jesus was inviting Ben to become the 13th disciple. Why thirteen? Jesus knew He had a bad one in the bunch. Jesus called Him to follow Him, and I believe Jesus really wanted Ben to say, "Yes, Lord!"

Someone wrote, "The saddest words of tongue or pen, are these four words, 'What might have been.'" Just think, if Ben had gladly transferred his wealth to heaven and followed Jesus, we might be reading his Gospel account rather than Mark's. But because he rejected Jesus, his identity is lost to history.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating. God is omnipotent. He is all-powerful. But there is one area of the universe where He has voluntarily restricted His omnipotence; it's in the area of your will. God won't FORCE you to accept his gift of eternal life.

4. THE CAMEL JOKE: "A camel could squeeze through a needle's eye easier than a rich person could get into heaven"

Have you heard the one about the camel? Stop me if you've heard it. Jesus employed hyperbole and humor to teach a powerful point. Jewish humor was based upon impossible, ridiculous images. Jesus used the largest animal in Israel, a camel, and the smallest manmade opening and talked about the impossibility of trying to get a camel through that. Ha, that's a good one!

Jesus was partial to camel jokes. In Matthew 23 He used a pun to describe the Pharisees. He said, "You guys strain out a gnat and swallow a camel." The Aramaic word for gnat is *galma* and the word for camel is *gamla*; they sound alike. Jesus said you strain out the *galmas* but swallow the *gamlas*! Get it? Maybe you don't appreciate Jewish humor.

It's like the cross-eyed schoolteacher who got fired because she couldn't keep her pupils straight. See, you got that.

Some people have tried to explain this joke away by saying, "The eye of a needle was a small door made for people, and a camel COULD squeeze through, but it was really difficult." The only thing wrong with that is that it's wrong. The New Testament scholar Dr. Hugh Nibley writes: "The needle in Matthew and Mark is a *raphis*, while in Luke it is a *belone*. Both refer to needles used for sewing. There is absolutely no evidence that there was a gate called the eye of a needle. The 'gate idea' was probably invented by some unknown nineteenth-century minister for the comfort of his wealthy congregation."

So what was the point of the camel joke? Jesus was pointing out that it is impossible for wealthy people to enter God's kingdom. One of the reasons is because people with wealth tend to trust their own wealth.

Life lesson: It's impossible for a rich person (or a poor one) to enter God's kingdom

The point Jesus is making is that it is impossible for anyone to gain salvation through his or her own merit. Ben trusted his wealth. What are you trusting today? Is there a competing God in your life?

We all must come to Jesus the same way. Bill Gates needs to come to Jesus the same way a dirty homeless man would come to Jesus. He would have to acknowledge his complete and utter need and come as a guilty sinner and receive the gift of life from Jesus. It doesn't matter who you are.

You can be a rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief; doctor, lawyer, Native American tribal leader. There's only one way—and that's Jesus. That leads to our final observation:

5. THE GOOD NEWS: "All things are possible with God"

The disciples were under the impression that rich people were blessed by God, so after they heard the camel joke they turned to Jesus in amazement. They asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answered with a profound truth: With men it is impossible [salvation]; but all things are possible with God."

God specializes in miracles. When Moses had an ocean in front of him and an army chasing him, he faced an impossible situation, but God specializes in the impossible—and He made a twelve-lane expressway in the middle of the ocean. When little David faced a nine-foot monster with only a slingshot, victory was impossible by human standards. But the God of the impossible directed the stone to strike Goliath right between the eyes, then David used Goliath's own sword to decapitate his fallen foe. He showed everyone there he was someone who knew how to get ahead! When Gabriel visited a teenager named Mary he announced she would give birth to a son who would be the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Mary said, "How can this be, since I'm a virgin?" Gabriel said, "Nothing is impossible for God." (Luke 1:37) It's impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but it's a miracle when God takes a person through the door of salvation.

LIFE LESSON: Eternal life can't be earned or bought; it's a gift from God

Ben walked away singing that U2 chorus, "But I still haven't found what I'm looking for." Have you found life? You won't find life in morality or religion, you'll only find it in Jesus. The Bible says in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life IN Christ Jesus our Lord."

CONCLUSION

The first step to coming to Jesus is the admission that you are a sinner in need of forgiveness. What I'm about to talk about isn't political; so don't misunderstand me. Donald Trump is a modern example of a Rich Young Ruler. Except he's a Rich Old Wanna-be-ruler. I thought it was interesting this past week that when Donald Trump was interviewed at a Family Leadership Summit in Iowa, he was asked if he had ever asked God for forgiveness. At first he beat around the bush for a few minutes talking about his religion and how much he loved Norman Vincent Peale. After he finally took a breath the moderator asked again, "Have you ever asked God for forgiveness?" Trump said, "I'm not sure I have. I just go on and try do a better job from here. If I do something wrong, I just try to make it right. I don't bring God into the picture."

It's not about bringing God into the picture; He is the picture. He's the artist of the picture that is life and the universe. And there is only one way you can approach God and that is with humility and the admission that you are lost without His forgiveness.

Theoretically, there are three ways to get to heaven. I said, "Theoretically." Number 1, you can die before you reach the age of accountability. But if you can understand what I'm saying, chances are you've passed that window. Two, you can live a perfect life: Never once commit a sin of thought, attitude, or action. Anybody qualify? Third, you can fall on your knees and ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins and to make you a new person.

Ben had so much, but he ended up with nothing but the god of wealth in his life. There may be someone here today who as a competing god ruling your life. You may think you have everything you want or need. But if you don't have Jesus, you don't have anything. Jesus is looking at you today and He loves you. He looks into your heart and says, "Get rid of all those idols, and follow me. I can give you a life that is really worth living." Will you trust Him?

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
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