

Luke through Lent
LUKE 18:18-30
Lent 5 – Hard Hearts
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When you are rich, young and powerful the world is your oyster. You can do what you want to do, be what you want to be. Everything is at your fingertips.

In 2006 Warren Buffet was not particularly young, or a ruler, but he was rich and powerful. He was the world's second-richest man. At the age of 76 he announced that he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations.

Our rich young ruler asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Warren Buffet said: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way." He thought his donating to charity is the way he would like to get to heaven.

Was he generous? Yes, 37 billion dollars is quite a significant donation. Having said that some went to his own charity, some to each of his children's charities and some to the only man in the world richer than himself, Bill Gates' charity. So, he was sort of generous. But was he totally confused about God? Yes. I hope he has read a bit more of the Bible since then.

Well, our reading might shed some light on Buffet's plan to get to heaven. This rich, young ruler approached Jesus wanting to inherit eternal life ... He wanted to enter God's kingdom. But his issue is that he wants to enter it on his own merit. He wants to be a self-made man. He believes he has been faultless in keeping the law of God. He says, "I've kept all of the commandments since I was a boy."

Let me tell you about fin management. Often we look at sin like we might look at the fin of a shark. We see the bad behaviour on the surface and we try to manage it. We see how sometimes we are tempted to use bad language and we try to convince ourselves not to do it. Or we see that we're tempted to covet our neighbour's good things. So we try to avoid looking at them, or we might go and buy them ourselves, or some other way of dealing with our dissatisfaction with what we have and our desire to have what others have. Usually we end up dealing with the shark's fin (the sin on the surface) but lurking beneath the surface is the real danger. We sort of coral the fins up on the side, like we have a bunch of friendly dolphins. But if we knew what real danger was there we would get right out of the water, or put the shark to death. The problem is that we see the fin, the superficial sin, and we think we can still swim around with it like it's a dolphin.

This ruler who approached Jesus had been practicing fin management. He had the appearance of obedience. He looked like a righteous person, but beneath the surface he was toying with a deadly shark. Beneath the surface He didn't love God, rather, he was full of pride and self-importance.

The ten commandments, which he claims to have kept, all hinge on the first commandment - to have no 'gods' other than the Lord. If you break any of the other nine commandments, you've already broken the first one. You've put something or someone in first place in your life, you've made something else your 'god'. For example, if you steal, then you're saying that what God provides for you is insufficient, so you have to take matters into your own hands, be your own provider, your own god, and provide for yourself. Can you see, that means you've broken the command not to steal and the first command, to have no other gods. Or, for example, if you don't keep the sabbath, if you don't take a day of rest each week, then you're

saying that God cannot keep everything going without you, so you have to take charge yourself and do the job that God's 'not' doing. When you break the sabbath command, then you also break the first command.

The young ruler had made himself so important that he thought he could achieve his own salvation. He was so confident and secure in his own wealth and success that he thought he could secure his own eternity as well.

Jesus was always beautifully gentle with the broken, and yet firm with the prideful. He challenged the man, right where he needed to be challenged. He said, "You lack one thing. Sell everything you have, give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Come, follow me, Jesus called him deeper in relationship with Him. He wants him to remove the false security of wealth and worldly success. He wants the man to trust God, not his own strength. Because ... wealth and success are fleeting, but God's love is reliable, trustworthy and solid. Give up your attempts at self-salvation, and trust in God your heavenly father, like a child. Then, come, follow Jesus.

So, does this mean that every one of us should sell everything we own, & give the proceeds to the poor? No. He **may** be asking you to sell everything, or he may not, but He is definitely calling you to deeper generosity. Jesus gave his all for us, and our response will be generous.

Jesus' word to this rich man was a particular word for a particular man. The man was self-assured. He knew how to be successful in this life and he was sure he could be successful in the next. But the flaw in his understanding is revealed by his initial question: "What must I **do** to inherit eternal life?" Eternal life is a gift, free for all who accept. We cannot **do** anything to inherit it. The rich man trusted in his own abilities to achieve. Jesus wants us to simply receive. Jesus bought eternal life for the price of his own life to make it free for any one who accepts him.

So the question for you is: What are you trusting in? Are you trusting your own abilities? Do you trust that you've been good enough to make it into God's kingdom yourself? Do you trust your wealth or your ability to succeed? Jesus called the rich man to give up his wealth because he was trusting in it and in his own abilities. But nothing we have and nothing we can do will earn us eternal life. So, receive from Jesus, don't try to achieve your inheritance. It's a free gift to Jesus' followers.

And like the rich man, our obedience to Jesus will be rewarded with treasure in heaven. When we give up trying, when we give up relying on ourselves, then we will be rewarded. But it may be costly.

The rich man went away grieving because he had many possessions that Jesus called him to give up. He had a hard road ahead whether he chose to give them up or not. So, today, hear Jesus' call to receive eternal life from him, no matter what you need to give up. It's worth it! Jesus is worth it. Jesus has walked our path, he knows us, right where we are ... but in his love for us, he won't leave us there. He is challenging you to go deeper with God.

And Jesus acknowledges the difficulty in the next verse.

"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

Humanly speaking, it is impossible for the rich to enter God's kingdom, but with God all things are possible.

When Jesus mentions how hard it is for the rich to enter God's kingdom there was probably a cultural clash in the minds of the disciples. In much of the ancient world, wealth was seen as a blessing from God. So if you were wealthy you obviously had God's favour. The disciples are so shocked that Jesus needs to say it again and illustrate what he means vividly. He talks about a camel going through the eye of a needle. This illustration has produced many hypotheses over the years. Some people say that there was a small gate in Jerusalem that only allowed camels through if they were unladen and bent down low. A suggestion of humility. But there is only very shaky evidence for this. And the reaction of the disciples indicates that

they thought it was far more difficult than even getting a camel to kneel or crawl. I believe Jesus was talking about a literal sewing needle. Many of Jesus' illustrations were things his hearers could see or taste, or experience.

The camel was probably the largest animal around and the eye of a needle was likely the smallest opening they would have commonly encountered. So the idea of getting a camel through the eye of a sewing needle was and is impossible.

And that's Jesus' point, 'for people it is impossible.' but the sure and certain hope is - what is impossible with man, is possible with God. God could even save the wealthy! Sounds unreasonable, unjust, impossible ... but God is in the business of performing miracles!

Does that mean that we can wallow in our riches, we can swim in our wealth and not feel the impact of Jesus' words? No. I could get all the statistics about how if you live on more than \$2 a day you're in the richest half of the world's population. And if you have \$10 or more to spend each day you're one of the richest 20% of world population.

Each of us should examine what it is we need to live and generously give to God's work in the world. Now it's not my job to tell you if you've been generous enough with what God has given you, only you can examine your heart and your situation but what I can say is, If following Jesus doesn't seriously affect your wallet, or your bank balance, then you are not really following him.

I mentioned last week that in the Old Testament there was a clear expectation of a 10% tithe of your income to God's work, and in the New Testament Jesus affirmed it. In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul says, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income" 1 Cor 16:2. Obviously, those who make more money are able give more. And of course, Paul saw that the important part is that we are giving joyfully and cheerfully in response to God. If we value God we will give to His work. Our gratitude to God is, of course, immense, since Jesus, in his grace, has given everything for us.

John Wesley was an Anglican Minister who gave away more of his income as he earned more and kept his standard of living the same. He ended up giving away about 90 percent of his money and living on 10 percent. We can see that John Wesley valued God. Wesley's response to God gives an indication of his heart towards God.

Our hearts can be tricky things. — Last week over morning tea after the service I found myself telling a story I didn't want to tell. It's embarrassing and humbling. Let me tell you now.

Our hearts are tricky things. We are worshipping beings. We are made to worship and even if we don't find Jesus we still find objects and people to worship and adore.

Joh and I had a recent conversation about inheritance. We, at some stage in the future will probably inherit some money from our parents - not that we are hoping for it soon, or anything of the sort. In "normal life" our money comes in every month and we give back to God some of what he gives us. We felt God's challenge a few years ago to not just give a 10% tithe but to give more to God's work than what we spend on our comfort, pleasure, and entertainment. So we currently give somewhere near 14%. So in "normal life" we're in the practice of our regular giving. But when we had this conversation about inheritance we were talking about a chunk of money coming in all at once. And my deceitful heart jumped inside of me and I thought, "Surely we wouldn't tithe that?" You know, if I take that 14% of the small amount each month, that's only an amount in triple figures, it's in the hundreds. You know if we happen to inherit \$10,000 that's \$1,400 and if we happen to inherit \$100,000 then we'd be tithing \$14,000. To give that sort of chunk of money all at once is a much greater challenge to my selfish heart than giving the amount in the hundreds each month.

I share this with you not so that I look bad. But because I feel like I've been trying to train my heart for years to give the first portion of my income back to God. And even though I've been doing that, my love of money and what good I can do with it is not always in the right order. Of course we will tithe what we receive. But, I wonder if your heart is a bit like mine? I wonder if you've ever asked, "Should I tithe before or after tax?" I asked that question a while ago, but I now see that a better question is, "How can I maximise what I give to God's work?"

Jesus' overly enthusiastic disciple Peter jumps right in to point out how following him has deeply affected all the disciples' wallets and every other part of their lives: 'We have left all we had to follow you.'

In response Jesus talks of reward in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life. There are great rewards now and in eternity-to-come for people who give generously for Jesus.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who gave up a lot to help Jews escape the Holocaust during World War II. Although she spent 10 months in prisons and concentration camps filled with death and suffering God was central to her perspective on life. She said, "You can never learn that Christ is all you need, until Christ is all you have." Your faith in Christ becomes incredibly deep if you have nothing else. As we generously give things away for Christ and 'do without' some things, we can get a small taste of life-giving dependence on Christ.

When we treasure Christ above all else, all else fades into insignificance by comparison. Hudson Taylor, a missionary who served for 50 years in China said at the end of it, "I never made a sacrifice." He didn't mean that it wasn't hard, or that he didn't give up relationships with family and friends or mourn the loss of his wife to cholera or the deaths of four of his children. But Taylor treasured Christ above all else.

Jesus told a parable about a man who found a treasure buried in a field. He went and in his joy sold all that he had and bought the field. We need to be prepared to sell everything we have to make Christ our joy, our delight and the thing we value above everything else.

Jesus knows us and loves us right where we are. He calls us deeper with the offer of a greater treasure than we can imagine. He warns us about the difficulties of having wealth. And He holds out the truth that with God all things are possible.

God is calling you deeper. He is urging you to come further in, in fellowship with Him and each other. Embrace his call. Live generously and Treasure Jesus.