

Introductory

Matthew (19:16-22) and Luke (18:18-23) also relate the account of this man, and like Mark, they place it right after the blessing of the children, and then they have Jesus' third and last articulation of the events of Holy Week shortly after. Those accounts are very similar to Mark's, but as is usually the case, they add or leave out information found here.

None of those accounts are appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, vv. 23-27, the saying on how hard it is for a rich man to get into heaven (including the "camel through the eye of a needle" saying), as well as vv. 17-22 are appointed for Pentecost 21B, and vv. 28-30, Peter's whine and Jesus' response to it, are (optional).

Neither the Matthew nor the Luke text is appointed by LW or LSB to be read.

Using Matthew and Mark, we identify the man more clearly. Matthew (19:20) tells us he was "a young man", and Luke (8:18) tells us he was a "ruler." The man's wealth is apparent throughout. This is not the only time Jesus has dealings with this sort. Rich men often seem to be in contact with Him, and they seldom come off looking good.

Textual Notes

17. Jesus is still in Judea when this incident occurs, and as He sets out on the road again, making the final push for Jerusalem, a man comes to Him. Mark “ἐκπορευομένου αὐτοῦ εἰς ὁδὸν προσδραμὼν εἰς καὶ γονυπετήσας αὐτὸν ἐπηρώτα αὐτόν – while He was going forth onto the road, one had been running and kneeling, he was asking Him.”

The present participle “ἐκπορευομένου – going forth” has Jesus leaving that place. The aorist participle, “προσδραμὼν - running” has an unidentified man approaching Jesus. The first verb is the common word for coming and going, and the second – the one that has the man running towards Jesus – is a word that only occurs three times in the NT.

That word is a compound of “run” and “toward.” The word communicates a sense of urgency. Even as Jesus is leaving, this unnamed "one" runs up to Him before He can get away. Another aorist participle tells us that the man who had run up to Jesus, had also “γονυπετήσας – knelt down” (literally "knee to fall") to Him before he began to speak.

That word (knee to fall) occurs three other times in the NT, most notably for our purposes in Matthew (27:29), where it is used to describe the soldiers' posture towards Jesus as they mock Him. In the other two places, the word is used to express the action of one who is about to ask for something. It may or may not indicate a posture of worship.

It is not the common word for “worship,” and at this point, we do not know whether or not the man in a Christian. Let's see how this thing plays out. The man addresses Jesus as “Διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ - good teacher,” avoiding the use of the more respectful “rabbi,” but then again, His own followers have lately distained the use of that word.

We would prefer the term of respect over the term of competency, “teacher,” but it's not a bad thing to be called “good teacher.” Barclay thinks that the man is flattering Jesus, and maybe he is. But how much of that comes from the assumption that the man is somehow an unsavory character, which is how he has historically been treated.

The man may actually be less unsavory than he is generally given credit for. He is focused on salvation, and there's nothing unsavory about that, and in that regard, he is focused on self, asking one of the few basic, eternal questions of man; He wants to know “τί ποιήσω ἵνα ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω – what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

When's the last time somebody asked you a question like that? When do you think the people in the pew were last asked by somebody how to get to heaven? It's not the sort of thing people these days talk about, mostly because they don't believe in eternal life, or at least they doubt the existence of it. If you think they ask that of pastors, they don't.

In an age when Atheists were rarely if ever found, eternal life is something that people would have thought about and talked about more than they do now. This man is of the nobility; he had land and other assets, income, political power, education, and he was a religious leader. It seems like a natural thing for him to pick the brain of Jesus like this.

18. The response of Jesus is not straightforward. If this question had been asked of a Lutheran Pastor, he would have responded with a lecture on the topic of Justification by Faith. As it is, the Lutheran Pastor is conflicted; his gut tells him to correct Jesus – he feels like he almost has to – but somehow, on some level, that seems somehow wrong.

Jesus answers, “Τί με λέγεις ἀγαθόν; οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ Θεός – why do you call me good; nobody is good except God.” We have spoken here before about “εἰ μὴ” two words that mark what we call an “exception clause” in the Greek language. When it comes to absolute good, nothing is – well, there is one exception, and that's God.

So, the man calls Jesus “good,” and He wants to talk about what he can “do” to get to heaven, and Jesus knows exactly where the man is going with this. The man who does *not* think highly of himself and his good works is not the man who will bring up the subject of good works and salvation. That man will avoid that subject like the plague.

It is the man who *does* think very highly of himself who wants to talk about his good works and maybe even his salvation. If we peek ahead to v. 20, we see just how highly this man thinks of self. So it is that, in a pre-emptive manner, Jesus points out to this man who thinks very highly of self that The One God and Him only can be called “good.”

There are two reasons why Jesus answers the way He does, and I think we might call

this a double entendre. Firstly, Jesus declares to the man that he is not *absolutely* good, and the man does not dispute the point. Who can? And yet we will find him later (20) declaring unabashedly that he has in fact kept the commandments rattled off by Jesus.

Secondly, and in addition to all of that, when Jesus says to the man that "Nobody is good, except God," it's a little bit subtle, and He may well be proclaiming Himself to be God. It's a claim made by the NT writers, and one made several times by Jesus Himself, and as we have noted before, the perfection of Jesus must have been evident to all.

By saying what He does here, He is saying that He is God. It's a simple syllogism; God is the only one who is good, I am good, therefore I am God. Go ahead and talk about syllogism to your hearer, explaining what it means and how it works. By doing this they will think that you are smart, and it will therefore help to increase your pastoral ethos.

Using and explaining syllogism will also appeal to the brain (logos) and make people think about what you are saying. People think all the time, and when they are in church you want them to be thinking about God. If they aren't thinking about God, they will be thinking about something else because it's what we do; we think.

How often do people think? All the time, and if you speak in language familiar to your hearer, one that employs figures from everyday life, then it's entirely possible that your preaching will cause the hearer to maybe think about God during the week as well as on Sunday morning. It's good if people think about the Sunday sermon during the week.

19. We still don't know if the man is a Christian or not, but he knows the Law. When Jesus says to him that "τὰς ἐντολὰς οἶδας – you know the commandments," he does not disagree with or object to the statement, and in the next verse we find out that he does, indeed, seem to know the Law, but perhaps he is not as familiar with the Gospel.

There are several words for "to know" in the Greek language. This one, Vine says "suggests fulness of knowledge," as opposed to only factual knowledge. The verb "οἶδας – knowing" is in the perfect tense. The man has at some point learned the commandments, he clearly remembers them, and Jesus seems to know that about him.

Jesus then names, in this order: the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Seventh (ἀποστερήσης – to defraud), and Fourth Commandments. Matthew's account adds the summary "love your neighbor." The first and most obvious thing about this listing is that they are taken from the Second Table; commandments speaking to our interactions with other humans.

The second thing we note is that they are in order, except that the Fourth should be first, and yet it is last, for emphasis. Finally, we note that the Seventh Commandment seems to be listed twice, by using two different words. As to that, perhaps the man gained his wealth by fudging on the commandment against thievery or by defrauding people.

In a manner similar to our English words "defraud" and "steal," where "defraud" is one of many specific ways to "steal," the verb "ἀποστερήσης – to defraud," which occurs later in this verse, would be a sin that would have been one of many actions that would have been covered by the more general word "κλέψης – to steal," used earlier.

Some scholars think that the verb "to defraud" belongs with the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, which would make the listing of the Second Table complete. It would also mean that there is no repeat of the Seventh Commandment, and that makes sense. There is no good reason to repeat it, if we are in fact to see it as a repetition.

Perhaps because of that ambiguity, if you look in the apparatus in your Nestle-Aland, you will note that the command to "not defraud" is a variant reading, and since Matthew and Luke leave it out entirely, let's call this inclusion in Mark a later, and completely harmless copyist's addition. Unless it is found in the original text, which is unlikely.

As to the Fourth, if the man is young, then that's an issue. As to Jesus discussion being only about the Second Table and not the First, we have noted in other places how people like this - the Scribe in Luke 10 comes to mind - they seem to think their obedience to the First Table, how we should think about, talk about, and act toward God is a given.

That kind of person is the kind of person who is very spiritual and religious, but who is often not actually very nice to actual people. Jesus often notes that the religious leaders are very religious, but that their problem is that they treat people like ... they shouldn't. In particular – going back to the Fourth – maybe the man is treating his parents improperly.

Barclay thinks so. As noted above, by citing the Fourth Commandment last, not first, Jesus draws that Commandment to the attention of the man. As to the reason for this, Barclay is on to something when he says, in his Matthew commentary;

Why? May it not be that the young man had grown rich and successful in his career, and had then forgotten his parents, who may have been very poor? He may well have risen in the world, and have been half-ashamed of the folks in the old home; and then he may have justified himself perfectly legally by the law of *Karban*, which Jesus so unsparingly condemned. (Matthew 15:1-6, Mark 7:9).

20. And in response to that, “ἔφη αὐτῷ Διδάσκαλε, ταῦτα πάντα ἐφυλαξάμην ἐκ νεότητός μου – he was saying ‘teacher, these all I have kept from my youth.’” The first verb is a form of "to say," in the imperfect tense. It means that we are talking about repeated action in the past, with a focus on the connection between the act and that actor.

The second verb is in the aorist tense, the man himself placing the emphasis on the act, his acts in keeping the Commandments. He thinks he has achieved perfect obedience to the Law. Such is the hubris of youth combined with power combined with wealth. Yet even then, does this make the man unsavory, or just afflicted with the ignorance youth?

21. The Good Lutheran, perceiving that this rich young man thinks so highly of himself - and he does think very highly of himself - might well conclude the man is in need of a heavy dose of the Law, and he is. That can be done by simply telling the man that he is in fact a sinner, and that he has not kept the Law perfectly, but Jesus doesn't take that tack.

Most Lutheran preachers would gleefully pound the man with the Law, and then pound some more, and then wonder what's wrong with these sinners that they keep sinning. Some of the Lutheran preachers I hear – you can tell that they really enjoy preaching the Law, and that they are very passionate about it, it's the best part of their job!

On the other hand, Jesus, rather than just tell the man that he is a sinner, which may well have fallen on deaf ears - you know this man - He does it in a more creative, and more effective manner. Jesus causes the man to think, leading him to draw his own conclusions about his true condition, which the man is able to do, as we shall soon see.

The response of righteous Jesus to the sinful man's annoying claim of his own righteousness is motivated not by scorn, but out of love, “ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ ἠγάπησεν αὐτὸν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ - Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him...” We note here that His "love" is of the "ἀγαπάω" variety, the giving, self – sacrificial love.

The word for “looking at” is an aorist participle, a gazing rather than a glance, and we get the idea that there was something about what Jesus saw with His eyes in the young man that caused some kind of a revelation in the mind of the omniscient Son of God; in the mind of the man Jesus, that made Him think this man may be seminary material.

The verb “ἐμβλέψας” refers to the perception of physically seeing something, the sense of sight. To see the difference between this verb and the verb “ὁράω,” see Mark (8:24), “ἀναβλέψας ἔλεγεν Βλέπω τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ὅτι ὡς δένδρα ὁρῶ περιπατοῦντας – looking up he said, ‘I see the men, like trees I see them walking,’” and then v. 25.

The Reformed commentators have Jesus loving him because he's such a good person, “This young ruler showed great earnestness. He asked what he should do now, that he might be happy for ever...Literally, esteemed him, or was pleased with him, for His Eye penetrated his inmost being, and saw within him an honest striving after better things.”

Now, to the man who has just told Him that I have this covered, He says, “Ἐν σὲ ὑστερεῖ - one thing is lacking,” and we see that the one thing actually involves several things; “ὑπάγε, ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον – go, and as much as you have, sell.” That first verb, "go" is a present imperative, emphasis on the connection of the act to the person.

The second “one thing” is to take that money you got from selling what you have “καὶ δὸς τοῖς πτωχοῖς, - and give to the poor.” The second verb "sell" is an aorist imperative, a one-time simple estate sale, emphasis on the act. How much is he to sell? Everything, that's how much you are supposed to sell. All your assets, down to the last acre.

The word "ὅσα" occurs commonly in the NT, and we call it a "correlative pronoun" because whatever you actually possess correlates precisely with what you are being commanded to sell. If you possess it, whatever you possess, you are to sell it. But not to worry, "καὶ ἔξεις θησαυρὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ - and you will have treasure in heaven."

If you own the clothes on your back and a bag of toiletries, sell it all. If you own a house and some cows, sell them all. If you own a large ranch or a large corporation, sell it all, and give it to the poor, if you want to get to heaven by that route. To personalize this, think of the kinds of assets your hearers possess and talk about those assets.

It's an important point, because most of your hearers – because they've been told this – think Jesus is telling only rich people to sell everything they have, and they will be good with that, because none of them are rich. You go, Jesus! Tell those rich people to sell and to give to the poor, which may include me, and we've made Jesus into a Socialist.

Actually, He isn't telling your hearers to sell everything, unless he wants to be a pastor. It's an important distinction. The command "δεῦρο ἀκολούθει μοι – come, follow me" is the same invitation He extended to The Twelve, and if we think the command to sell everything is a bit outlandish, remember what following Jesus meant for them.

It meant that they were to drop their nets, leave behind their business, leave behind their family, and get behind Him. In fact, Peter will point out next week (28) that he and they have done just that, they have "left everything," and what are we going to get from it anyway? Not all Christians have, or are expected to, do that. Pastors are, and we do.

This is not to say that every time the word "ἀκολουθέω – to follow" occurs in the NT, it is in reference to the pastoral office. It's not. Most of the ninety occurrences of that word do not mean that, but when Jesus speaks those words to an individual, commanding that person to "follow me," like here, that's what the word means.

If people really believe that this applies to all Christians, then they need to go out right now and do what they believe to be the right thing; go and sell it all; your house, your land, empty out all those accounts, sell your Amazon stock...and then what? Go and follow Jesus, that's what. If you really believe this applies to all Christians.

I know what they're thinking. If I sell my house, where will I live? If I sell my land, how will I grow things that I eat? If I sell my business, how will I put food on the table, and my employees? If I empty out all my accounts...I don't want to be a burden on anybody. That's what they're thinking when the preacher applies this to them.

But it doesn't, it only applies to the Apostles and those who aspire to the Apostolic Office. Even these days, when one decides to follow in those same apostolic footsteps and become a pastor, a man often has to and does leave behind pretty much everything to go to seminary. I know that I did, and most of the men there with me did as well.

Correlating to the person, we leave behind family, if you own one, your house, your career, the ability to live where you want to live and to choose your place of

employment, a lot of lost income; some pastors are very intelligent, and could make a lot more money, a lot more easily, doing something else. We all make our choices.

But not to worry, “καὶ ἔξεις θησαυρὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ - and you will have treasure in heaven.” Using a verb in the future tense to talk about the future, He brings the conversation back to the starting point, telling the man about riches in heaven at a later time. You remember heaven, don't you, that place where you said you want to go?

22. Mark tells us of the response of the man to the words of Jesus; "στυγνάσας," an aorist

participle of the verb " στυγνάζω," a word that appears only here and one other time in the NT, in Matthew (16:3), where Jesus talks like a sailor about "gloomy" or even "stormy" weather. The word means that Jesus just sort of ruined the rich man's day.

Mark explains why; " ἔχων κτήματα πολλά – he indeed had many possessions." I gave things up to go to seminary, and it has not been easy, but has been a lot easier for me than it would have been for a person with many assets – others gave up more than me – to leave it all behind. Having said that, I and most pastors will tell you they have no regrets.

But if we are being honest, we will probably tell you that we had no idea what we were getting into when we first journeyed to Ft. Wayne or St. Louis, and that if we had known...I have read (Stephen Ambrose probably) that the troops who went ashore on D-Day had never seen combat, and if they would have, they may not have...

And if you want to, looking ahead to next week, you might want to reference what Jesus said to His disciples immediately after this, about this man and about "those who have riches" in general; how hard it is to enter heaven, distracted as they are by their riches, the distraction of more riches correlating with the greater difficulty of it.

Finishing those thoughts, in the thirty-six years since Ordination, I have been employed by LCMS Inc. for thirty-three of them. I have never been paid an exorbitant amount of money, but my wife worked for the state, so she was. Right now, I make about as much as a public-school teacher who has been at it for a few years. But we have assets.

The main thing is that you start off with nothing, an act of faith that The Church will provide for our needs, like the Bible says they should. Like a lot of things the Bible says The Church should do, she could probably do better than she does, especially when my school closes and I went CRM for three years and I was completely on my own.

Law/Gospel

Riches/Riches - The pursuit of riches, a pursuit that is often found masquerading under

such terms as "security" and "protection," is a result of sin. The one who takes the admonition of Jesus to "seek first His Kingdom ..." seriously is a person who believes.

Law/Gospel - Sometimes we just need to talk to our people about the Law and then talk to them about the Gospel, like I did towards the end of last Sunday's sermon. This man is trying to get to heaven by obeying The Law, and it's not working out for him. The man who receives heaven as a gift freely given does much better.

Sermon Titles

Rich, Young, and Powerful

To Inherit Heaven

Lacking One Thing

Hymns

LSB 850 – God of Grace and God of Glory

LSB 536 – One Thing's Needful

LSB 781 – We Give Thee But Thine Own

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa