

BaptistWay Bible Series for July

29: Choosing stuff over Jesus

July 18, 2012

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The lure of materialism stands as a great barrier for many to a relationship with God. This appears to have been the issue with a rich, young ruler who came to visit Jesus one day. Materialism focuses on the pursuit of the material provisions God willingly provides. The result is dependence on accumulated material items instead of on God. A further issue is the perception that material wealth reflects God's blessing and a right standing before God. This second issue also plays a strong part in this week's story and sets up Jesus' stunning final word in the matter.

The story opens with a man falling on his knees before Jesus. This man often is called a rich, young ruler, based upon a composite description taken from Matthew, Mark and Luke. This man's approach to Jesus was both an act of worship and an expression of urgency.

The man addressed Jesus as "good teacher" and requested spiritual assistance. In verse 18, Jesus immediately challenged his referring to him as good, replying only God is good. Jesus already was preparing the young man for the answer he sought. Had he thought through the connection of the title "good teacher" to Jesus' "good teaching" in this opening response, he should have discovered Jesus was God. Such a realization would have altered greatly his response to Jesus' "good teaching" later in the encounter.

The young man's request in verse 17 was how to inherit eternal life. Since the man was young, possibly he had inherited his wealth. Therefore, perhaps he thought spiritual rewards worked similarly. This is perceptively

close to the truth of salvation by grace through faith. The man, however, thought something must be done to inherit eternal life. Such activity replaces grace with religious works.

Jesus therefore gave the standard “religious works” answer. In verse 19, Jesus recited the second table of the Ten Commandments, in the order of commandments 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 5. The word “defraud” seems to represent the action that derives from covetousness, the topic of the 10th commandment.

While the young man's life evidenced an adherence to the law, that is not the foundation of the urgency seen here. In verse 20, he states how he had kept the commandments all his life. Such practice had not prevented the present spiritual crisis. So the young man's answer is something of a protest. He felt a deeper need and wanted immediate assistance. Curiously, verse 21 states Jesus loved the young man, perhaps for his observance of the law or more so because of his urgent interest in eternity with God.

In verse 21, Jesus delivered the remaining spiritual requirement God had for this man's life. Jesus ordered the man to sell his possessions, distribute the proceeds to the poor and follow him.

Jesus' seemingly harsh instruction delivers an important lesson. Countless people across the centuries have been horrified by the thought that material poverty was prerequisite to eternal life. The key, however, is that Jesus gave the young man a direct command.

The lesson is that one in a right relationship with God will obey his direct command. The point is not that God instructs all to give away their wealth before they can have a right relationship with him, but that believers must be committed to follow God's direct command.

The response of Peter in verse 28 that the disciples had left everything underscores God is looking for obedience and personal sacrifice out of love

and devotion for God. Jesus further states in verses 29-30 that all sacrifices by God's people will be rewarded with abundance and eternal life.

The saddened young man departed in verse 22. His great wealth stood in the way of obeying the God he thought he loved. Had he truly been a follower of God, he would have obeyed Jesus, the "good teacher," and trusted God to provide for him. His trust was in his vast wealth and his own power to preserve it.

Jesus' response to this lack of faith was to exclaim the difficulty of the rich to enter God's kingdom. Jesus pressed his point and restated the difficulty of entering God's kingdom. Verse 25 delivers his famous statement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter God's kingdom. Jesus compares a very large animal going through an impossibly small opening to the impossibility of the rich to enter the kingdom of God. In essence, the rich have to switch from reliance upon their wealth to reliance upon the Lord, the source of all wealth. This is a hard maneuver to make, even for one so seemingly motivated as the young man who dove to his knees before Jesus.

The disciples, astonished the wealthy are not by definition participants in God's kingdom, ask who can be saved. In other words, if the rich, who appear to be blessed by God, are not saved, who can be? It was a horrifying specter to the disciples, but Jesus responded with his famous line, "All things are possible with God."

Salvation and eternity are in God's hands. God powerfully provides for his people. One's material status is irrelevant to establishing a meaningful relationship with God, and it could be detrimental. One's faith, however, is completely relevant and is proved by one's obedience to God's commands.