

THE RICH YOUNG RULER

Mother Teresa, the saint of the gutters in Calcutta said, since in dying on the cross, God had “made Himself the hungry one—the naked one—the homeless one,” Jesus’ hunger is what “you and I must find” and alleviate.

Yet less than three months earlier, in a letter to a spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet, that is only now being made public, she wrote with weary familiarity of a different Christ, an absent one. “Jesus has a very special love for you,” she assured Van der Peet. “But as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see,—listen and do not hear.”

The letters, many of them preserved against her wishes (she had requested that they be destroyed but was overruled by her church), reveal that for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever—or, as the book’s compiler and editor, the Rev. Brian Kolodiejchuk, writes, “neither in her heart or in the eucharist.”

That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta, and never abated. Although perpetually cheery in public, the Teresa of the letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In more than forty communications, many of which have never before been published, she bemoans the “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness” and “torture” she is undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God.

It becomes apparent then that works of charity do not save a soul from sin. They cannot give a good conscience before God. One may renounce all that they have and give it to the poor, but if they have not Christ in the soul it amounts to nothing.

One day during the Lord’s ministry an earnest enquirer threw himself at the feet of Jesus. “And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” Mark 10:17.

Just who was this person? We learn that he was a “young man (*veaviakos*).” (Matt. 19:20). He had not yet reached twenty-eight years of age. Young men are usually macho and vain; full of

themselves; and concerned only about where the next immediate gratification will come from; and certainly not interested in the future life.

He was “a rich man” (*plousios*) for “he had great possessions” (Matt. 19:22). Many rich people have a wide field of pleasure open to them. They have a full agenda to keep them busy. They have no time to waste on questions of religion. That is for the poor who have not and must resort to God to make up for their deficiency.

He was “a ruler” (Luke 18:18)—possibly one of the chief Pharisees, or a magistrate of his town, or head and chief of his family. He was certainly not a vulgar and obscure plebeian, but a man of eminence and authority, a nobleman.

He had observed Jesus’ treatment of the parents with little children. The comments of Jesus about little children as subjects of the kingdom of heaven resonated with him in that he sincerely longed for the future life. He took note of Jesus’ compassion and love for these families in the face of His brusque disciples who tried to hurry them along so as not to bother the Master. This was certainly unusual behavior on the part of a professor of religion from what he had observed of the rabbis.

His need was so urgent that he didn’t wait for a clandestine rendezvous as did Nicodemus. He ran and unashamedly prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus in full view of everyone including the religious leaders present. He wasn’t a secret spy or plant with ulterior motives of entrapment. His purpose arose from a sincere desire to have his question answered by one in whom he had full confidence. “Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”

Jesus did not at once answer the young man’s question, but asked him one on another subject. “And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God.” Mark 10:18.

Our Saviour did not mean to intimate by this that He was not good. He himself said that it was His meat to do the will of the Father (John 4:34); and again He said to His disciples, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in His love.” John 15:10. To the Jews He said, “Which of you convinceth me of sin?” (John 8:46), thus demanding the closest scrutiny of His life. Paul says that He “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21); Peter says of Him that He “did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22); and even the devils acknowledged Him to be “the Holy One of God.” Mark 1:24. His

character on earth was the same that it is now as our High Priest, "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." Heb. 7:26. He was absolutely good; the perfection and embodiment of goodness.

Jesus words, "there is none good but one, that is God," were meant as a statement of fact, that He Himself was entitled to be called God. If there is but one that is good, viz., God, and Christ is good, then Christ must be God. Since He is the Son of God, He partakes of the divine attributes. The Father and the Son are one. John 10:30. Both are worthy of worship. God alone may be worshiped (Rev. 22:8, 9), but Christ did not refuse the adoration of His disciples. Luke 24:52.

When Christ addressed to the young man the words found in Matt. 19:17, it was because He saw that this ruler, like Nicodemus, did not appreciate the divine character of Jesus, but thought Him to be a mere man. Christ penetrated the young man's thoughts, and by this question and reply revealed to him his own true nature.

Having incidentally settled this point, our Lord immediately answers his question, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" The young man's question indicates much as to his understanding of his own moral condition and the conditions for eternal life. Like most of the Pharisees of his day he had a robust conscience. Like Saul become Paul, he might well have said, "he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, . . . an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee." Philippians 3:4, 5. And so, the rich young ruler's question indicates his understanding of the covenant as one of works. His question is old covenant.

If the question had been only, By what means must I be saved? or, What is the way to heaven? Christ would have answered him, as the apostles did in a like case. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." Acts 16:31. If the question had been put to Him in a broken-hearted manner, and by one that was sensible of his misery and inability, and had come to Christ and said, "What shall I do?" He would have taught him. Now the Pharisee's error was double: he thought that men might be saved by their own works, and that those works were in his own power. He thought of nothing else but of being saved by the merit of his own works.

Jesus did not say, "You must not do anything," but said plainly, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."

The young man, greatly surprised, asked, "Which?" Being a ruler of the Jews, he had, of course, kept the law, and prided himself on the

strictness with which he had heeded all its requirements. The strictness of the Pharisees, extending even to the minutest forms and ceremonies, is proverbial. The young man, doubtless, like Paul, lived under the “straitest sect” of the Jew’s religion. We can therefore imagine the astonishment and assurance with which he uttered the word, “Which?” As much as to say, “Why, are there any other commandments? Have you some new ones that are not written in the law? If so, tell me what they are.”

Jesus calmly quotes a portion of the ten commandments, showing the law to which He has reference. “Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honor thy father and mother.” Mark 10:19. Interestingly enough Jesus left out the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet.”

The fact that He did not quote all of them is no proof that He did not design that all should be kept. He did not quote the first nor the third, yet no one would argue from this that Christ meant to indicate to the young man that he could worship idols or indulge in profanity and still be saved. He simply quoted enough to show that He referred to that which was regarded by all as the law, and that He had no new commandment to offer. These are the commandments, the keeping of which is the condition of eternal life.

Then why did Paul say, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” Rom. 3:20. Why can no flesh be justified in the sight of God by the deeds of the law? The answer is: “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” Well, why does the fact that the law gives the knowledge of sin make it impossible for any one to be justified by it? Verse 9 will tell us: “We have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin.” “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” Romans 3:10-12. After particularizing somewhat on this point, the apostle says: “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” Romans 3:19. Then follows the conclusion, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight.”

Now we can see the force of Paul's conclusion. Since the law gives us the knowledge of sin, by pointing it out, it condemns the whole world, for there is no man that has not sinned; all the world are guilty before God. And this is a sufficient reason why no one can be justified by the law.

But the young man had not this self-revelation. He responded, "Master, all these have I observed from my youth." Mark 10:20. From the dawn of my reason, as soon as I began to distinguish between good and evil, straight and crooked, I have kept the commandments.

But was it true? In a sense it was true, in regard of outward conformity, but not true in regard of that perfect obedience which was required. Externally he had kept them all, though not in the just extent of the law, yet he was as to men unreprouable, being no adulterer, no murderer, no extortioner, no thief; he did not lie. Certainly in this profession of obedience he made, he spoke as he thought, and out of simplicity, even though in error rather, than deceit; the man lived blamelessly, and did nobody harm. Here is a young man drunk with a foolish confidence, and therefore boasts that he had ever performed his duty. So Rev. 3:17, "Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and stand in need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Oh! how apt are many to be conceited of themselves beyond what they ought!

What is the cause that people are so apt to overrate their own righteousness and goodness before God?

Ignorance of the law and its spiritual meaning. They think they are well enough if they refrain from outward gross sins: profanity, drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, wickedness. They live in error thinking they are civil and harmless. Comparing themselves with the heathen around they are not so bad. They are well-spoken of by their neighbors. They have been born and bred in the church, been baptized, professed Christ, what do they need to be converted from?

They are blind and partial to their own cause because of self-love. They favor themselves. A man will not see his own sin. He that thinks better of himself than there is ground and reason for, the only way to bring him to himself is to put him upon fiery trial. When God ransacks the conscience by His word, they are not pleased with this, but seek diversions. Their consciences have slept many years securely in their sins, but God casts them down, and revives their thoughts. How light every one of us shall be found wanting when we are put in the balance of the sanctuary. What is weighed? Our work, with the

motives, the principles, that state of your hearts; and it is weighed and put into the balance and God knows all things. “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men, but God knows the heart; for that which is highly esteemed amongst men is abomination in the sight of God.” Luke 16:15.

William Beebe, the naturalist, used to tell this story about Teddy Roosevelt. At Sagamore Hill, after an evening of talk, the two would go out on the lawn and search the skies for a certain spot of star-like light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then Roosevelt would recite: “That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun.” Then Roosevelt would grin and say, “Now I think we are small enough! Let’s go to bed.”

“Then Jesus beholding him loved him.” Mark 10:21. Even though He has just met this inquirer, Jesus loves him as though he was the only lost sheep in the whole wide world. Jesus gives Himself to this young man as the Saviour of His soul. His eyes look into the eyes of the young man calling him to become His disciple.

Charles Dickens paints a picture of Mrs. Jellyby, one of his memorable characters in *Bleak House*. Mrs. Jellyby is working on starting a philanthropic project at “Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger.” And this engages her attention to the extent that, in her first scene in the book, one of her children gets his head caught in a railing and another tumbles down the stairs—yet she never notices. Dickens says her eyes seem “to look a long way off. As if . . . they could see nothing nearer than Africa!” She loves the idea of serving mankind corporately, but she fails to serve even her own children individually.

But God’s love is both corporate and individual. The images of Him as our Father and we as His children, as those adopted into His family show His love for each of us. God is not Mrs. Jellyby, loving us as a whole but neglecting our individual needs. God is the Father who knows His individual children.

“Jesus said unto him, **If thou wilt be perfect.” Matthew 19:22. Jesus’ love received into the heart will accomplish its work of character perfection. Only His love can perfect your soul and mine. That is what He desires to do in these last days before His coming. Will you let Him do His perfect work in you?**

When Jesus exhorted the young ruler to take inventory of his life according to the commandments, He did not specifically mention the tenth, "Thou shalt not covet." If the ruler had thought to examine his heart according to that commandment, he would not have readily stated that he had kept them from his youth. It was that one commandment which revealed his unknown sin. It was Jesus' responsibility in love to perfect his character by revealing that sin. So He said: "One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor." Mark 10:21. You see, the man loved his riches.

That one thing which he lacked was the main thing, the principal thing of the law, which was loving God above all things; the sum of the law is, to love God above all, and our neighbors as ourselves. Now our Lord (who had power to try his love by any way he thought fit), tried him in his love to God and his neighbor. He would convince him of want of love to God, or spiritual idolatry, making wealth his chief good; this was the main thing in which he failed, and the cause of his other failings.

The precept is very strict, and falls upon the heart of this young man, who was addicted to the world. "Go," without delay; "sell," not a part, but all, "whatsoever thou hast," and "give" not to your friends that may relieve you when you are in straits, not to the rich that may recompense you, but to the poor from whom you can look for nothing again: "Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor."

A notorious miser was called on by the chairman of the community charity. "Sir," said the fund-raiser, "our records show that despite your wealth, you've never once given to our drive."

"Do your records show that I have an elderly mother who was left penniless when my father died? fumed the tightwad. "Do your records show that I have a disabled brother who is unable to work? Do your records show I have a widowed sister with small children who can barely make ends meet?"

"No, sir," replied the embarrassed volunteer. "Our records don't show those things."

"Well, I don't give to any of them, so why should I give anything to you?"

The Lord of His bounty communicates many good things to us, but still He retains the dominion of them in His own hands, that He may dispose of them according to His own pleasure. If God says, Keep, you may keep it; but if He says, Go, sell all, who are you, man! that

replies to God? We are not absolute and perpetual owners, and must part with it when the Lord shall require it.

How do we forsake all? Not actually, but so as to be ready to forsake all if Christ please. The Christian lays himself and all he has at Christ's feet, his life, goods, and lands, to be used and disposed of as Christ shall direct, and not to take them up again but as Christ will permit; and so he forsakes all things, though not actually, till God calls him to it.

There is a reward for those that are faithful to Christ. "And thou shalt have treasure in heaven." Mark 10:21. Our reward in heaven is called "treasure," something that not only is equal to what we quit for Christ, but far exceeds it.

One of the better known treasure hunts in modern times is the quest to find the rumored wealth known as the "Beale treasure." The hunt began when an eccentric man, who left the East for the gold and silver mines of the West, returned home, supposedly hid a vast amount of wealth, then disappeared forever. All he left behind were several messages written in a mysterious code. One of those messages when deciphered told of the treasure and its approximate location. The other documents, then, would narrow down the site. Since the Beale documents first came to light, thousands of man-hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent attempting to break the codes and find the legendary treasure.

Here is our treasure in heaven, "The riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18). We shall have true riches instead of transitory, which we cannot long keep, and eternal riches that will last forever. Fellowship with Christ, the Father, the angels, and the saints in righteousness on the earth made new. Rest from our enemies, no more sin, suffering, and death is our treasure. No more worry about thieves which break in and steal. No more horrific manslaughter, kidnapping, rape nor embezzlement. The lost dominion of Eden restored by the last Adam is our inheritance.

The one thing needful to the inheritance of the saints is to be born again. To the ruler and us Jesus says, "Come, take up the cross, and follow me." Mark 10:21. The cross here is not the ruler's cross as though each one has a peculiar cross to bear. Rather, there is only one cross, the cross of Christ. Jesus bore the sin of covetousness and greed and grasping for power, position, the way of the world, and died an eternal death on His cross. He "thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon

Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” Philippians 2:6-8.

Jesus gives us the cross as He did that young man. The gift is the forgiveness of sin which is justification. The power of greed and covetousness is a heavy burden for any human to bear. It is the weight of worldliness and encumbrance that leads to death. What joy then comes through the deliverance of Jesus’ cross from such sin. That sin is overcome even as He overcame and has sat down on His Father’s throne.

The punishments that were in use when Christ lived in the world; the malefactors bore their own cross to the place of execution, and then they were nailed to it alive. Whoever follows Christ must prepare his shoulders for the cross. “There are some who seem to be always seeking for the heavenly pearl. But they do not make an entire surrender of their wrong habits. They do not die to self that Christ may live in them. Therefore they do not find” it. “They do not take up the cross and follow Christ in the path of self-denial and sacrifice.”

Like Nicodemus and the woman at the well, this ruler needed conversion. The steps to new life were come, take up Jesus’ cross, follow Him. The gift was his and ours. The choice to believe the gift remained his. But, “he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.” Mark. 10:22. He thought of this as personal sacrifice rather than great gain to follow Christ.

“And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” Mark 10:23.

James Dobson tells the family story of when my daughter, Danae, was a teenager, she came home one day and said, “Hey, Dad! There’s a great new game out. I think you’ll like it. It’s called Monopoly.” I just smiled.

We gathered the family together and set up the board. It didn’t take the kids long to figure out that old Dad had played this game before. I soon owned all the best properties, including Boardwalk and Park Place. I even had Baltic and Mediterranean. My kids were squirming, and I was loving every minute of it.

About midnight I foreclosed on the last property and did a little victory dance. My family wasn’t impressed. They went to bed and made me put the game away. As I began putting all of my money back in the box, a very empty feeling came over me. Everything that I

had accumulated was gone. The excitement over riches was just an illusion. And then it occurred to me, *Hey, this isn't just the game of Monopoly that has caught my attention; this is the game of life. You sweat and strain to get ahead, but then one day, after a little chest pain or a wrong change of lanes on the freeway, the game ends. It all goes back in the box.* You leave this world just as naked as the day you came into it.

I once saw a bumper sticker that proclaimed, He who dies with the most toys wins. That's wrong. It should say, He who dies with the most toys dies anyway.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Mark 10:25.

For the last two centuries it has been common teaching that there is a gate in Jerusalem called the eye of the needle through which a camel could not pass unless it stooped and first had all its baggage first removed. After dark, when the main gates were shut, travelers or merchants would have to use this smaller gate, through which the camel could only enter unencumbered and crawling on its knees!

Great sermon material, with the parallels of coming to God on our knees without all our baggage. A lovely story and an excellent parable for preaching but unfortunately unfounded! From at least the 15th century, and possibly as early as the 9th, this story has been put forth, however, there is no evidence for such a gate, nor record of reprimand of the architect who may have forgotten to make a gate big enough for the camel and rider to pass through unhindered.

Jesus' hearers believed that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God's blessing (cf. Leviticus and Deuteronomy). So their incredulity is more along the lines that, "if the rich, who must be seen as righteous by God by dint of their evident blessing, can't be saved, who can be?" Later Christians have turned this around to portray wealth as a hindrance to salvation, which it can be—but no more so than many other things, when the message is that salvation is impossible for all men for it comes from God alone.

"And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved? And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible." Mark 10:26, 27.

But beyond impossibility is possibility with God for, elsewhere, a Jewish midrash records: "The Holy One said, open for me a door as

big as a needle's eye and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and camels?"

In other words God only needs the sinner to open up just a crack for him and God will come pouring in and set up room for an oasis. God only needs a "foot in the door," so to speak.

The disciples' incredulity is that if even the rich cannot be saved, who can? But the verdict is that even the rich, not only the rich, will find it impossible to save themselves—but with God all things are possible.