

Luke 12:13-21 / Psalm 1

The Story of the rich young man is a difficult one to handle. Excessively wealthy people may read this passage and console themselves with the fact that selling all you have and giving it to the poor is not the advice that Jesus gives to everyone who is wealthy. The guidance Jesus gives here is not some timeless truth about how to handle wealth – it is context-specific, it was how this particular young man was being encouraged to handle wealth. It is difficult to read this with a Marxist like social agenda, and have Jesus always telling everyone with wealth to give it up.

But in the context in which this advice was offered, a Messiah could not help but make much wider statements about society, and demands about what it means to be a godly citizen in that society. What Jesus offers here, is not merely some tough advice for an unwilling recipient – he is offering a new way of being Israel.

The young man approaches Jesus with a question: ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ this was, of course, a question about what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. For a first century Jew, this has nothing whatsoever to do with the question, what must I do to go to heaven when I die. The question was rather, how must I act to be one of the people who benefits when Israel’s God becomes King, when the Romans lose their grip and God frees his people to be a powerful nation of self-determined worshippers.

The answer that Jesus gives, as he offers an alternative picture of the Kingdom of God, as he offers a new way of being Israel, the answer that Jesus gives is thoroughly traditional: what does it say in the Torah? The Torah was, after all, the boundary marker for God’s covenant people. Whose who followed the Torah would share the life of the coming age.

But the young man was not satisfied with the answer that Jesus gives. Now, from the text itself we cannot guess at his motives. Was he simply just wanting this radical teacher of a subversive and ground-shaking gospel, to endorse the lifestyle that this rich young man had always enjoyed? Or was he genuinely wanting to be a radically, remade follower of Jesus himself? We don’t know. All we do know is that he seemed a bit disappointed with Jesus traditional response – referring him back to the ten commandments. Well, in fact, not all of them – only the second half of them.

But the second challenge that Jesus offered was blunt and uncompromising: sell up, give to the poor, follow me! This is similar to the call that Jesus gave to his earliest disciples, but this time with the emphasis much more firmly upon the cost.

What was Jesus doing? Was he replacing the law of God with something better? Or was he making an emergency ethics for this bizarre little period of human history that future generations couldn’t possibly be expected to follow?

The passage suggests that none of these categories will do. The command to forsake his wealth and to follow Jesus appears, undeniably, to have been specific to this rich young man. We are not told that Jesus said this sort of thing regularly, or even that often. Sure, he issues plenty of warnings about the dangers of wealth and so on, but this is something different.

But - When you look at how the different Gospel writers report this story, something quite clear emerges. That Jesus does not quote the ten commandments – he quotes only seven of

the ten commandments – but then he adds three of his own! It appears that he is either replacing three of the commandments, or else he is interpreting them into the situation of this rich young ruler. What are the commandments that are missing?

They are to abandon idolatry, to love God, and to keep the Sabbath. And what are they replaced with? They are replaced with? Firstly the young man is told to sell all his possessions: that is, to get rid of the idols which were holding him enslaved to money instead of to Yahweh. Secondly, he must follow Jesus, that is, give his total allegiance to the way of life which, like the first commandment, was YHWH's immediate and urgent summons to Israel.

Jesus has relativised the Torah – the implication is that the point of Torah has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The young man was being summoned to join an Israel that was no longer defined by Torah, nor would it be vindicated on its fidelity to Torah. But by allegiance to Jesus – to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength – is to be a follower of Jesus – an allegiance that would involve the giving up of all idols.

Now this was quite a shock to many Jews of the period – who had been trained by the wealthy and powerful to believe that wealth and power were signs of God's blessing. Today, we might call it the prosperity Gospel – I saw posters on the way into London this morning about some guys ministry, advertised in precisely those terms. And a superficial reading the psalm we heard might suggest that this is legitimate – *blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night – he is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.*

Readings from certain psalms, and certain passages from Deuteronomy seemed to buttress this belief – that if you were wealthy it meant that you were already being blessed by God, already in receipt of the great covenant blessings. It is no wonder that when Jesus walks on water or casts out demons – they were astonished. But in Mark 10 Jesus said something that not only astonished the disciples, but that astonished them exceedingly – and what was it that had exceedingly astonished them? It was that the wealthy would struggle to inherit the Kingdom of God. The wealthy were already in the kingdom of God – and the question for most people was not whether or not the wealthy would inherit the kingdom, but who else would inherit it as well!

So when Jesus says not only that the wealthy are not guaranteed an inheritance in the kingdom, but were quite likely to be denied an inheritance in it – it was exceedingly astonishing! It turned their world upside down! As was so often the case in Jesus' preaching – he claims that the kingdom has come, but it is nothing like you expected – so you have to be blessed by God in order to see it.

And that is the command that is missing. The Sabbath command, which lies at the heart of what it meant to be part of God's covenant people. The Sabbath command to stop, and to be reoriented within the purposes of God. To celebrate Sabbath is to be radically attentive and open to God's personal word upon who you are today. The writer to the Hebrews says that God set a certain day, calling it today. And it is precisely this event that would enable you to hear from God about the things in your life that need to change. If this rich young man really

had practiced all these things from birth, then he would not have gone away sad from Jesus because he would already have known about his own enslavement in the idolatry of money. Yes, the advice was specific to this young man.

But this is no get out clause for modern wealthy people to excuse themselves from identifying with this young man. If anything, it sharpens the challenge to us, and it does it for this simple reason. That even someone who had carefully observed the teaching of scripture and its precepts, could be living in a state of utter self-deceit. Sabbath celebration is where we get a painfully liberating glimpse of God's view of who we really are. And we may well go away sad.

After church this morning I had a conversation with a journalist who told me something of how she had entered into journalism in the first place – a fascinating story, that breaks the norms of journalism career. And it reminded me of some journalistic advice I once read, and which I have quoted from once before :

Be wary of following the careers advice your college gives you. In journalism school, for example, students are routinely instructed that, though they may wish to write about development issues in Latin America, in order to achieve the necessary qualifications and experience they must first spend at least three years working for a local newspaper, before seeking work for a national newspaper, before attempting to find a niche which brings them somewhere near the field they want to enter. You are told to travel, in other words, in precisely the opposite direction to the one you want to take. You want to go to Latin America? Then first you must go to Nuneaton. You want to write about the Zapatistas? Then first you must learn how to turn corporate press releases into "news". You want to be free? Then first you must learn to be captive.

The advisers say that a career path like this is essential if you don't want to fall into the "trap" of specialisation: that is to say, if you want to be flexible enough to respond to the changing demands of the employment market. But the truth is that by following the path they suggest, you are becoming a specialist: a specialist in the moronic recycling of what the rich and powerful deem to be news. And after a few years of that, you are good for very little else.

The point is, that we get sucked into an entire way of living that is almost opposite to our ideals – without realising that it has happened. We become utterly unaware of who we really are, and how we have been ensnared. Sure, we may complain about it sometimes, but probably just shrug our shoulders and say that is how the world works. So our principles are sacrificed on the altar of wealth and power.

But unlike the rich young ruler, we don't go away sad. We simply reshape our Christian beliefs around the lifestyle we have already chosen. We order our Christian commitments around our prior commitments. Interpret Scripture in a way that confirms and endorses all we have chosen to be. Far from distancing ourselves from this rich young ruler – I wonder if we would dare to stand in front of Jesus and ask him the same question – “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And if we did, what on earth would he say to us? To you?

To what extent can we hear what we don't want to hear about ourselves?

What is it that might cause us to go away sad?

And ultimately, how much happier would that sadness make us?

Sabbath is the time and the place where God's work with us takes place. God set a certain day, calling it 'today'