

Come to Jesus: Sharing the Gospel with Conviction and Compassion

Rich and Famous

Luke 18:18-29

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"And a ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" ' And he said, 'All these I have kept from my youth.' When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'" (Luke 18: 18–22, ESV)

In college I had the experience of doing street evangelism in the city of Chicago. 15 students from a nearby college went out onto a busy Michigan Avenue on a Friday night with the hopes of sharing the gospel with multiple people. Nervous, I stood on the edge of a street corner and asked people walking by if they had a minute to talk. The first person I asked this to replied, "I'm not buying!" *This is going well*, I thought. The second person looked me in the eye and said, "You're weird." *He's probably right, but he could at least give me a minute*. The third encounter was quite interesting. A middle-aged woman was walking by and I asked, "Hi ma'am! Do you have a minute to talk?" Without replying, she walked closer with a confused look on her face. Thinking that she didn't hear me, I said again, "Do you have a minute to talk?" She continued to have a confused look on her face, so I thought, *She must have a hard time hearing*. So, practically shouting, I said, "Do you have a minute to talk?" She then smiled, waved, and said, "cómo estás?" I then realized that we are not speaking the same language.

Have you ever shared the gospel before and felt like you were speaking another language? Have you ever been met with resistance? Been thought of as a freak or a weirdo? Have you ever wondered why it is that when you share the gospel with family, friends, and neighbors that you are met with resistance, awkwardness, and even rejection?

In Luke 18, Jesus has a conversation with a man, and the conversation exposes three barriers this man, and people in general, face when confronted with the gospel. These are barriers that exist in every human heart no matter race, socioeconomic background, or upbringing. These are barriers that exist in your family members, your friends, your co-workers, and yes, even you. What are these barriers? Let's begin by looking at Jesus' conversation with this man:

"And a ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (v. 18)

Looking at the context, Jesus had just rebuked the Pharisees and confronted His own disciples for not allowing children to come into His presence, which led Him to say that you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless you enter like a child. It was shortly after this that Jesus is approached by a man, but not just any man. What is this man like?

- **He was young.** Matthew 19 points out that he was a young man.
- **He is described as a leader in society.** Luke uses the word "ruler" to describe him. He was most likely a civic leader who was well-known in the community for his character and good deeds.
- **He was rich.** A man of "great possessions." The reason this is so important is because in Jewish culture, a man who was rich was seen as blessed by God for his apparent righteousness. In other words, if you live a good life, God will grant you health and wealth. So according to this belief, not only was this man rich, he was also thought of as a morally upright person. And because he was morally upright, he was rich.

It is this man that Mark 9 describes as running up to and kneeling before Jesus to interact with Him.

And it is in this interaction with Jesus, we quickly see that he views the Son of God as a means to an end. First, in how he addresses Jesus, "Good Teacher." He recognizes that Jesus is quite unique from any other Rabbi he has heard of, so he labels Jesus not only as a teacher, but as a "good" one. But then notice the question he asks, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He feels as though there is something missing in his life, so he essentially asks Jesus, "What is one more thing that I can do to inherit eternal life?" He views Jesus as a good teacher that will aid him in his path to self-justification.

This my friends, is the first barrier many people face in being confronted with the gospel:

Barrier 1: Bad Theology

Theology, you say? Theology is for the scholars and pastors. Oh, but do you not know that theology, simply put, is the study of God. No matter who you are, where you live, what you do for a living, and even what your worldview is, you will have a view of God. Why does that matter?

In his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer writes,

*"The most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like... What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important things about us."*¹

At the end of the day, the most important thing about you is not what gifts you have, your upbringing, or the possessions you own. The most important thing about you what you believe about God, because what you believe about God will determine what you believe about the Gospel, and what you believe about the Gospel has eternal implications on your soul. The reason why this is such a barrier is because if your view of God is shaped by anything less than the Bible, you will inevitably recreate a gospel that meets your felt needs instead of your eternal needs and never embrace the Biblical Jesus. Or, as Augustine put it, "If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself."²

So how can we help unbelievers understand who God is? By building bridges of grace that support the weight of truth. We do this by spending time with them, getting to know their name, listening to what excites them, learning about what they love, and as we do this we look for opportunities to share about who Jesus is and what He has done. So here is the question: what can you do *this week* to start building bridges of grace with your neighbors? Let me encourage you to stop by our Local Outreach wall and get some ideas for simple ways that you can begin to build relationships with the people God has put in your path.

Notice how Jesus responds to the young ruler:

"And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" (vv. 19-20)

And without hesitation, the young ruler responds:

"And he said, 'All these I have kept from my youth.'" (v. 21)

¹ Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (HarperCollins, 1961).

² Augustine, of Hippo, Saint. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. (Mount Vernon :Peter Pauper Press).

Notice what he is saying. Not only is he currently obeying these commandments, but he has obeyed them since his youth! If you saw this man in the street and were to ask him, "Dear sir, do you believe you are a good person?" His answer would be an unshakable "YES!" And yet the point of Jesus listing these commands is to show this man how desperately broken and needy he really is. Well, you say, what's so wrong with that? He is after all a pure, honest, hard-working, and religious man. Why is this such a big deal?

Years ago, a chemist from Procter & Gamble developed a product that the company believed would revolutionize the world. It was a product that would eliminate any odor out of any material regardless of how strong it is. It was a ground-breaking product that had dollar signs in the eyes of the company's top executives. So Febreze was packaged, distributed into a few test cities, and marketed in those areas. The problem was no one was buying it. Even women who received the free samples weren't returning to the store to buy it. So, P&G hired a top marketing strategist to assemble a team and figure out how they could fix this problem. They sent out hundreds of test bottles to select households, and the idea was that after a month of use, the marketing team would then fly out to these various households to interview the users. One user was an elderly woman from Phoenix, Arizona. When the team arrived at her house and walked inside, they quickly smelt the stench of cats. They soon found out that this woman did not have just one or two cats, but *nine*. (I don't have a chapter and verse for this, but I can give a compelling case that cats are a result of sin.) The team asked her if she had found Febreze to be helpful. She replied with a stern, "No." Yet when the team looked at the woman's bottle of Febreze, they found that it was completely full. It hadn't been used even once! One of the team members asked the woman, "Why aren't you using the product?" The woman replied, "I don't see the need for it." It was after this meeting that P&G learned an important lesson: if the buyer does not see their need for a product, they will not buy it, regardless of how good it is.

This is the second barrier the rich young ruler and many people face today when confronted with the gospel:

Barrier 2: Self-righteousness

The ruler's response to Jesus' question revealed the self-righteousness that was residing in his heart. Self-righteousness is the belief that I am not a ruined, broken sinner in need of God's grace. And as a result, when I am confronted with the gospel (which tells me I am a ruined, broken sinner in need of grace), I say in my heart, "I don't see the need for it."

Have you ever shared the gospel with someone who responded by telling you, "Oh that's great and all, but I don't need all of that Jesus stuff yet. Maybe later in life." What they are really saying is, without even realizing it, is this: *I'm self-righteous. I'm not a ruined, broken sinner in need of God's grace.*

The scary thing is that this not only exists outside the church, but *inside* the church as well! "What do you mean?" You may ask. "How do I know if I'm self-righteous?" Here are a few warning signs:

- When I tell stories, I'm always the wise hero, making all the right decisions at just the right time. And because I want people to know how wise and great I am, I always come out on top in every story I tell.
- I always defend myself when someone points out a weakness or a wrong I've done because after all, "I know me better than they know me."
- I make myself feel good about what God says is bad. I am skilled in recasting the wrong I did in such a way that it doesn't look "that bad" so that I can avoid feeling guilty about what God calls sin.
- I don't celebrate the grace at work in others because I'm too busy thinking about how I could have done what they did, better.

Furthermore, the reason some of us become so dull in our worship is because of our self-righteousness. As Paul Tripp says, "*You'll never celebrate grace as much as you should when you think you're more righteous than you actually*

are."³ It is impossible to sing, "O Praise the One who paid my debt" with any passion if you believe that your debt is small.

The reason some people never believe the gospel is due to the simple fact that they, like the rich young ruler, believe they just don't need it. So...

"When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'" (v. 22)

Jesus is calling this man to do what all people who desire to follow Jesus must do: trust in Him alone. Trusting in Jesus cannot be a half foot in, half foot out posture. Jesus said earlier in Luke 16:13, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." Jesus essentially says, "So you want to inherit eternal life? Give up that which is most precious to you and place your trust wholly in me." And what will be the result? "You will have treasure in heaven." Scholar James Edwards puts it this way: "*Jesus is telling the rich young ruler, 'sell everything you have and in return I will give you myself.'*"⁴ What is this man's response?

"But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich." (v. 23)

This verse has been called by some the saddest verse in the entire Bible, because this man, when being confronted with the call to abandon all he had to follow Jesus, refused. The text says that when he heard the call to abandon everything and trust in Jesus alone he became, literally, "increasingly sad." Why the sadness? "*For he was extremely rich.*" He loved his money more than his Maker. He wanted to keep drinking from his broken cistern rather than from the fountain of living water.

The missionary Amy Carmichael once experienced something similar to this as she was sitting with a Hindu queen inside of her palace. As the conversation between the two developed, the queen shared with Amy Carmichael her spiritual hunger. "What is necessary for salvation?" She asked. Amy pulled out her Bible, turned to Luke 18 and read Jesus' words, "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor..." Amy would later write of her experience:

As I read her verse after verse of Luke 18, her face settled sorrowfully. At the end of my reading she looked with great sorrow on her face and said, "So far I must follow Jesus, so far? I cannot follow Him that far."⁵

And in the same way, the rich man, after hearing what it would cost to follow Jesus said in his heart, "I cannot follow You that far." And in doing so, Jesus reveals a third barrier people face when they are confronted with the gospel:

Barrier 3: False gods

This is the very barrier that kept the rich young ruler from trusting in Jesus and it is the same barrier that drives other people (and maybe even you this morning) from trusting solely in Jesus. What is a false god? Tim Keller defines this well when he writes:

*"A false god is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure. There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the word to use is worship.'"*⁶

³ Lane, Timothy S. and Tripp, Paul David. *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2006, 2008).

⁴ Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary), (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

⁵ Carmichael, Amy. *God's Missionary*, (CLC Publications, 2010).

⁶ Keller, Tim. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, (Penguin, 2009).

The question this morning is NOT, “Do I worship?” but rather, “What am I worshipping?” The quickest way to find out what you are worshipping is by completing this sentence: My life only has meaning if _____. For the rich young ruler, his answer was “Life only has meaning if I have my riches.” For others it might be:

- Life only has meaning if I am loved and respected by _____.
- Life only has meaning if I am highly productive and get a lot done.
- Life only has meaning if I have a particular look or body image.

On and on we could go. John Calvin said that the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. We love to worship the created instead of the Creator (Romans 1). And as a result, when unbelievers are confronted with the gospel they either see it as an add-on or a hindrance to their lives, thus they walk away from it all together, never obtaining that which their thirsty hearts long for.

“Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, ‘How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!’” (v. 24)

Why is it difficult? Because wealth has a way of tempting us to believe that our life has meaning based upon the number in our bank account. Money, more than any other asset, has a way of blinding us to our need for God. Because with money comes fame, status, comfort, pleasure, and if I have these things, why do I need Jesus? “How difficult it is...” Jesus says. But He doesn’t stop there. Jesus raises the bar another notch.

“For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” (v. 25)

The camel was the largest animal found on Palestinian soil and the eye of a needle was the smallest opening. The idea of fitting a large camel through the tiny opening of a needle is absolutely ridiculous. If I were to ask a child to take a camel and shove it through a small opening in a needle, they would immediately know that this is a sham! Why? Because it is impossible. In fact, the idea is not only ridiculous, it is impossible. And that’s the point. It is as impossible for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle as it is for a rich man (who was believed to have the favor of God on his life because of his riches & good deeds) to get to heaven. See, the point Jesus is making is plain: It is impossible for you to be wealthy enough, moral enough, or obedient enough to enter the Kingdom of God. You can’t do it. Jonathan Edwards agreed when he wrote, “To take on yourself to work out redemption (earning the kingdom of God, making yourself a Christian) is a greater thing than if you had taken it upon yourself to create a world.”⁷ In other words, it would be easier for you to create an entire planet than to earn your way to heaven.

Of course, Jesus is saying all of these things to His disciples and as they hear it they finally speak up.

“Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’” (v. 26)

Here is this man standing before the disciples, who is their superior in every respect. He is wealthy, moral, and obviously blessed by God. And yet, he leaves his conversation with Jesus saddened because Jesus has called him to abandon literally everything to follow Him. And their response to this interaction is simply, “Then who can be saved?” In other words, “If this guy can’t get in, what hope do we have?”

If we are honest, it is the same question we must ask when we think about the barriers of bad theology, self-righteousness, and false gods that our lost family members, friends, co-workers, and maybe even you face today. And on top of all of it, the Bible describes our natural condition as being blinded such that we are UNABLE to see the glorious light of the Good News (2 Cor. 4:4). But not only are we blind; the Bible sums up our natural condition as being “dead in our trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Your unbelieving spouse, child, friend, co-worker, neighbor, and yes even you, are blind, self-righteous, idol-worshipping sinners that are dead in their trespasses and *cannot* work themselves out of it. All of this leads us to ask: *What hope do we have?*

“But he said, ‘What is impossible with man is possible with God.’” (v. 27)

⁷Edwards, Jonathan. *Religious Affections*, (Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2013).

Several years ago, I came across a play that was a spin-off of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In the middle of the play is a young woman, living in peace and serenity in a village. Until one night, the woman wakes up in the middle of the night to a frightening sight. Her hands are covered in blood. Panicking, she ran to a nearby faucet to wash the stains off, but to her horror, the stain would not come out. She immediately went to a nearby doctor and was met with the bad news: this was a permanent stain. It would be impossible for it to be removed. As a result, this woman lived in shame and guilt, knowing that because of her stain she would never be loved and wanted. As a result she wore clothing that concealed her hands so that the stain would never be seen.

Not long after this she was walking in a park and met a man. The playwright described him as kind and humble man. Shining with a glory unlike any man in the village. The man came up to her and said, "Loved one, I can take your stain." Shocked that he knew anything about her dark secret, she replied, "You cannot! It is impossible to remove my stain." The man reached out his hands to the woman and said, "Loved one, give me your stain." The woman with hesitation revealed her blood stain hands, put them in his hands, and in a matter of moments her hands were clean. "What did you do to take away my stain?" She asked. The man lifted up his now blood-stained hands and said, "I took it upon myself."⁸

Our hope is not that we can work hard enough, that we can earn enough, or that we can be good enough. We do not call our unbelieving spouse, children, or neighbors to try and hide their stain of sin or work hard to wash their stain out. Our hope, our Good News has a name and His name is Jesus. Because through Jesus, God makes the impossible, POSSIBLE by taking your stain upon Himself. Why? "So that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

And the implications of this are huge:

1. That there is no such thing as someone being "too far gone."

If you are a Christian this morning, you are a walking testimony to this reality. Ephesians 2 says that before Jesus you were "dead in your trespasses and sins." But what happened? "...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). When you go to share the gospel with that hard-hearted son or daughter, resistant spouse, or skeptical neighbor look at your own life and remember, "If God can save me, He can save *anyone!*" Remind yourself that there is no barrier strong enough to withstand the grace of God.

2. This Good News will never cease to be Good News.

Do you realize that we will be celebrating this truth for all eternity? "God raise us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness" (Eph. 2:6-7). The resounding theme of heaven will not be "Look at me! I made it!" The resounding theme of heaven will be "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain," because the only reason I am alive and here is because of Him!

John Newton, the man who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace is known for saying on his deathbed, "Though my memory fails me, I still remember two things well: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great savior." And that will be our testimony forevermore.

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⁸ Sewing, Richard. *The Lovely Woman*, unpublished.