

Encounter with Jesus – Rich Young Ruler

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. Last time we looked at James & John and in the discussion we talked about what it meant to give up everything to follow Jesus. To follow that up, tonight we are looking at the Rich Young Ruler's Encounter with Jesus and what prevented him following Jesus. Hilary is going to read us the story from two different versions for comparison.

Lk 18:18-30

Who was the Rich Young Ruler?

We are not told his name, either here in Luke or the other gospels, just that he was a ruler or official and therefore had a position and authority to maintain, and that he was a man of great wealth.

How did he encounter Jesus?

On this occasion it is the Rich Young Ruler who initiates the encounter by asking Jesus a question. A pious or religious man at the time would normally seek out his own teacher; a man of wealth could find the best or most popular teacher for himself. For a man of wealth to bow (as Mark recounts the story) before a teacher indicated tremendous respect. So he seems to genuinely want to know the answer from Jesus, it is not a trick question like the Pharisees asked. From other accounts we know that at least some disciples asked their teacher's questions like the one this rich man asks Jesus. To "inherit eternal life" meant to share in the life of the coming world, the life of the kingdom of God, so it seems he was genuinely seeking to enter into God's kingdom and eternal life.

What happened during the encounter?

In response to the man's question, without denying that he himself is good, Jesus reminds him of the standard Jewish concept of God's goodness (others could be good, but no one compared with God). He then lists five out of the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament which deal with human relationships (rather than those dealing directly with God) that people could test practically (not, for instance, a prohibition against a sin of the heart, coveting, which is unseen). If only God is good, the man would have to admit he has broken some commandment; but the commandments Jesus had listed were kept by most well-raised, educated Jewish people, so he could answer that he has kept them. Jesus then effectively follows up with the first commandment (You shall have no other gods before me), with the one thing the man was putting before God – his wealth. Judaism stressed charity heavily, but Jewish teachers did not normally require a prospective disciple to give up all their wealth. Some radical Greek teachers did make such demands on rich students to see if they would value true teaching above their wealth; a few rich people would give up their goods, but most disappointed such teachers.

Jesus then turns the social order upside down by saying how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Wealth and prosperity were seen as a mark of the favour of God, and indeed there are some prosperity theologians around today who tell people to ask God for things and expect to get them. The well-to-do were often hailed because of their generosity (of course they had more to give) as being godly men; being less educated in the law, the poor were sometimes seen as less pious or righteous (although poverty itself was certainly not seen as a sign of sin, especially by the poor themselves).

What effect did the encounters have on the Rich Young Ruler and the disciples?

The Message version says “This was the last thing the official expected to hear. He was very rich and became terribly sad. He was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let them go.” Matthew and Mark’s versions of the encounter say “he went away sad” – he was not prepared to do what Jesus had asked of him. We don’t know what happened to him after that. Some people can still have an encounter with Jesus and go away sad because they are not prepared to give up something – they put it before God.

Seeing his reaction, Jesus goes on to say “It’s easier to thread a camel through a needle’s eye than get a rich person into God’s kingdom.”. This image reflects a Jewish figure of speech for doing something impossible (a large animal going through a needle’s eye). The saying, a hyperbole, refers to a literal needle. (There are those who think Jesus refers here to a gate in Jerusalem called the “eye of a needle”, but they are mistaken because that gate was built in medieval times.) A wealthy person can relinquish wealth only by God’s grace. This amazes the disciples, because Jewish tradition said if you were rich you must be favoured by God and hence must be righteous.

But most Jewish people also understood that the day of judgment would turn things upside down; those who appear great in this world will be nothing in the next, and those who were nothing in this world will be great in the next. They applied this principle to the exaltation of Israel over the other nations, the oppressed righteous over their wicked oppressors (the Romans) but Jesus applies it also to individual rank and status. Most of Jesus’ disciples had not been poor (being fishermen and tax gatherers) but had abandoned their economic position, their homes and families to follow him. Jesus tells them their reward would be found in believers sharing possessions as a family in this world (Acts 2:44 “All the believers were together and had everything in common”) and receiving the life of the kingdom in the world to come. Our hope as Christians is not for a good life here on earth, we will be subject to the same difficulties in life as anyone else and probably more because Jesus has told us we will be persecuted for following him. Our hope is in the life to come for eternity. Paul refers to this many times in his letters, for example 1 Cor 15:19 “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” And Phil 1:21-23 “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain ... desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”

Discussion – There are some questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we’ll then have a short feedback from each group:

What might we be putting before God or holding onto that stops us following Jesus?

Are we looking for security and reward in this life or in the life to come?