

## Leave It All Behind

Matthew 19:16-30

### Introduction

**Choice to Make:** Tonight's message continues our discussion of the values of God's kingdom and, in particular, what it looks like to follow him (i.e., discipleship). We're going to be looking at what it looks like to leave something behind to follow Jesus. I almost titled the sermon "Let It Go" but that phrase has been ruined by the movie *Frozen* (e.g., *Princess Frozen*). BTW, that movie is terrible, I can't get behind a protagonist who mindwipes her sister instead of *telling her the truth* then goes on an ice rampage rather than deal with her feelings. I contend that "Let It Go" is a villain's song (change my mind). But, the music is good and Olaf is funny (though every DVD should come with earplugs for parents).

- I've always wondered if it was a call back to one of the great movies of my childhood (*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, 1989), which I watched countless times (because we didn't have cable but we did get the Pizza Hut VHS deal). The blond haired villain (sound familiar), is hanging over a giant crevice holding on to Indy for dear life yet reaching for the famed chalice. He tells her to "let it go" (coincidence?!?) but she can't. She ultimately died because she valued this "thing" more than her own life.

To be a disciple of Jesus, you must value God's kingdom above anything the world has to offer.

- You can't enjoy the benefits of eternal life while holding on to the values of this world.

<sup>16</sup> And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" <sup>17</sup> And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." <sup>18</sup> He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>20</sup> The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. <sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, 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." <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" <sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." <sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

### 1. The Most Important Question (vv. 16-22)

**Great Question (Sort Of):** This man, who we learn from this passage is both **young** (v. 20) and **rich** (vv. 22-23). Jealous? He's got it all (but compare the warning of ESPN's *30 for 30* documentary, "Broke"). And he's asking a great question (sort of)! "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Give the guy some credit! At least he's asking this question.

- **Are you even asking the right question?** What is *real* life that lasts forever and how do I get it? What is a life that is worth living and a life that will last? \*Half of evangelism is just getting people to stop talking about the weather and Philly sports long enough to ask deep, meaningful questions.

**Assuming the Wrong Answer:** what good deed must I do Assuming that there is something he **must do** to gain eternal life, that he can earn eternal life through personal righteousness (e.g., "be a good person," whatever that means). Starting **on the wrong foot**. None of us are able to earn salvation/eternal life (e.g., *contra* Pelagianism).

- <sup>17</sup> And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. This man misunderstands his ability to do good on his own: only God is good so he is not capable of *earning* his favor (he is light years away from *humble* faith). The best human effort is still inadequate.
- He calls Jesus "teacher" (Διδάσκαλε, Aramaic "Rabbi"). In Matthew's Gospel that term is used differently than other books. Term of reverence/respect (*sort of*) but in Matthew it is only used by outsiders. Calling Jesus "Rabbi" gives the impression this man is asking Jesus' religious opinion. **He's not interested in following Jesus, he just wants his advice.** How many of us want Jesus to give us a little pep talk or a clear path to success but we're unwilling to "deny [ourselves] and take up [our] cross and follow [him]" (Matt 16:24).

**A (Simple) Test:** Jesus plays the game by giving straightforward advice: If you would enter life, keep the commandments." (1) Those not familiar with his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount or overestimate their ability might start to think, "Ok, then, let's get to work and obey" (e.g., try harder, discipline more, etc.). (2) Others, familiar with the Bible's teaching that we can't do anything to earn our salvation, it is only by grace will object.

- Be careful to understand the full counsel of God. Don't create a false split between grace and obedience, between the law and the gospel. Jesus told us that he did not "come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" but rather to "fulfill them" (Matt 5:17). Paul himself reminds us that "the law is good, if one uses it lawfully" (1 Tim 1:8).
- God wants us to obey his commandments, but obedience is never a means of earning salvation or finding life, it is the fruit of the life we have been given (cf. Rom 8:2-4).
- The law functions to restrain and reveal sin. It is a good and necessary gift of God to point us to salvation, but it can never give us life. Hence why Paul describes the law as having a "ministry of death carved in letters on stone" (2 Cor 3:7).

This young man missed it: (1) obeying the letter of the law will not bring spiritual life and, regardless, (2) he can't really keep it if he wants to.

- The young man continues in his lack of self-awareness. <sup>18</sup> He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal,

You shall not bear false witness, <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Let’s just start here with these observable, straightforward commands (e.g., murder, adultery, stealing, lying, honoring parents).<sup>1</sup> But then he adds the summary command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) which he’s already mentioned in Matt 5:43 and is gonna remind them again in Matt 22:39 (almost like it’s important if it shows up **three times**).

He has the **audacity** to say “All these I have kept.” But we know this isn’t true: no one has kept all the commandments all the time. And Jesus showed that outward behavior is an incomplete reckoning of the law (e.g., lust = adultery; anger = murder). And there is very little chance he actually *loved* (from his heart) his neighbor as much as himself (he might have treated him as nicely, but did he love?).

**Lack:** And you get the sense that the young man knows this. He’s tried his best. He’s been a good boy, *yet he’s missing something*. What do I still lack?” Still uncertain. He doesn’t have **assurance** of his eternal reward. There is no assurance of salvation as long as we think we can save ourselves (e.g., **control**; kids want grocery store cart that looks like car; they’re not steering or it’d go into the shelves). Assurance comes from faith in the one able to save, not in our abilities (“if you could lose your salvation, you would”).

**Getting to the Heart:** Despite his good behavior, he knows his heart **is not “all in.”** <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Don’t get distracted by the word “perfect,” it has the sense of “complete”, not lacking anything. He’s not saying if you do this one thing you’ll be perfect in the way we think (only God is perfect). He’s saying, this guy still is lacking something. There is still something he’s holding out from God. There is one thing that is keeping the rich young man from **completely** following God: **his money**. Jesus is saying “follow me” but to do that you’ve got to drop the money.

- #Truth: (1) The more I’m one-foot-in and one-foot-out, the less joy I have and the more discontentment. (2) The more all-in I am, the harder life is but the more joy I have.

**Something More:** Jesus is inviting him into life (“come, follow me”) but to do that he has to let go of what’s in the way (“go, sell what you possess and give to the poor”).

- “The dispossession is a prelude to something more: The essence of Jesus’ demand is not disinvestment but discipleship. It’s not just a trade of one treasure for another (thought it is); it is a freedom from slavery to money, wealth, and stuff in order to be free to enjoy the treasure of belonging to God” (France).
- “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matt 16:26).
- He’s not buying his way into heaven by giving away his wealth, he’s freeing himself to follow Jesus. Jesus is calling him to freedom because he is not actually wealthy, he is a slave to his money. We are not just saved from sin and death but for kingdom life.

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 20

**Real World Faith:** We like to limit faith to an internal attitude. Jesus is showing that faith affects real-world priorities. The true measure of your discipleship is not your theological acumen but your radical obedience (purpose of theology). You know the easiest way for me to tell what you *really* worship? **Your calendar and your checkbook (how do you spend your time and your money).** Come to church, get filled up with Bible and encouragement, but then you return to the same habits and patterns. You watch the same entertainment, spend time doing the same things, spend your money on the same stuff. So much remains unchanged. Intention is important but not enough! Following God involves all sorts of spiritual rhythms like prayer and worship but, at some point, if your faith doesn't impact your dating, marriage, money, job, etc. then it is incomplete.

- Jesus is saying, "Give up what this world has to offer and come and find life in me." He is the greatest treasure!

## 2. The Most Pressing Danger (vv. 23-26)

<sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, 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." <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" <sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

**Wealth is a Common Stumbling Block:** <sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus talks a lot about money: \*Finances in church (uh oh). "Pastor wants my money." Jesus said too much about earthly treasures, material possessions, and money to ignore it (e.g., more than heaven, hell, salvation, etc.). I don't want your money and Jesus doesn't want your money. He only asked for money once (i.e., as a coin for illustration). He isn't trying to get your money but to keep your money from getting you. Why does Jesus talk a lot about money? Because it is one of the most pervasive idols in all of history. What do people worship in America? Money (politicians, follow the money).

- Most people want God **and** the world. They want God to cosign on their desire for wealth (e.g., follow God and be rich). Following Jesus looks a lot less like a fancy car, a posh house, or an instagram lifestyle and looks a lot more like washing feet, serving the poor, and maybe even homeless (e.g., Jesus is; why do we think homeless folks need Jesus? They need housing but they might already have Jesus).

If you're wealthy, pay attention. But, if you're not, don't think you're in the clear. **Even if you don't have money, you can worship it** (i.e., daydream). Do you think life would be better if you won the lottery? Do you think God's blessing equals financial prosperity? Do you daydream about being rich? Are you jealous of wealthy people? Then you have the same problem as the rich young ruler. The Bible says the "love of money" is the root of all sorts of evil. **You can love money whether you have it or don't.**

**Don't Minimize the Radical Call:** <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, 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." I have heard people try to

explain this away as a gate (“eye of the needle”) that camels had to kneel through or the Greek word for rope which sounds similar (hard but not impossible). The illustration is supposed to be hyperbolic (camel is the largest animal of the region; other regions might say “elephant”).

**The Impossibility of Discipleship/Salvation?:** <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” <sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Can he really mean what he just said? They assumed (like we all do) that the wealthy are the blessed ones (Jewish view based on Deut 28:1-14). That is **human** thinking. God makes clear that earthly “success” is no prerequisite or guarantee of God’s blessing. God calls the weak, foolish, and poor to him. He tells us to “become like children” (the opposite of a wealthy, upwardly mobile influential person).

- Every salvation is a miracle. We want to be part of something that can only be explained by the power of God. Only God can make this miracle happen (for the rich and for any of us). This should push us to depend and hope on God’s power rather than our own.
  - Do we go to God with dependence and trust and hope for the salvation of others? “It is the road of confident, God-centered, courageous, loving evangelism and prayer” (Piper).

**Allegiance of Your Heart:** “No one 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. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt 6:24). You cannot serve both God and \_\_\_\_\_? Devil? Evil? **Money**. The #1 competition for my heart is my stuff. It’s not somebody, it’s my money and my stuff. My time, love and attention are dominated by my stuff. We have to surrender *everything*, especially our stuff to Jesus. The reason money, wealth, and “stuff” gets in the way of discipleship is because it is a power struggle. It is a battle of allegiance. We don’t like ultimatums, we like a little Jesus sprinkled into our worldly desires. **You can only have one ruler of your life**. You can be involved in lots of things and have a lot of hobbies but you can only have one master. Only one thing can have ownership of your life!

- Divided loyalties end up meaning you will love one and hate the other. If the love of money grows, your love for God diminishes.

Do you own your stuff or does your stuff own you? Materialism is not just a cultural phenomenon but a false religion (e.g., commercials, evangelism, temples, malls, etc.). “Materialism (i.e., treasuring earthly things more than God himself) is a subtle but certain form of idolatry” (Quarles). Materialism is such a serious form of idolatry that it is incompatible with genuine Christian discipleship.

### 3. The Ultimate Reward (vv. 27-30)

<sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

**Is it worth It?:** <sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” The disciples did receive the call to “come and follow.” They did “leave” their jobs and houses to follow Jesus. They traveled itinerantly (e.g., nowhere to lay their head). What blessing awaits them? **Is it worth it?**

**Eternal Blessing:** <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. Following Jesus is **costly** but it’s **worth** everything you have or could dream of. The blessings we have in Christ, now and forever, are greater than any sacrifice we make.

- If stuff isn’t the blessing on earth, then it isn’t the blessing in heaven (e.g., not literal; don’t give up a mother and get 100 mothers; don’t give up \$1000 and get \$100,000; **we get something better**). If we just got *more* money then wealthy people would have joy. We get something money can’t buy—God!
  - **Most people I find are living but they’re not alive**, and even their dreams of the good life (a nice car, a fat bank account, etc.) aren’t life (and certainly not anything that will last for eternity).
- We participate in the Christ life. We reign with him, we serve with him, we **live in him**.
- “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3).

Whatever he calls you to leave will be worth it. You won’t be in the new heavens and earth sad about what you left behind (no one in heaven is reminiscing on the good ole days).

**Foretaste:** And the beauty of the gospel is that God gives us a foretaste of our eternal blessings in Christ and his church now.

- Earthly family for church family
- Wealth for incorruptible treasure of Christ
- Comfort for purpose (that can’t be purchased)

God gives us new life in Christ, even as we wait for all things to be redeemed by God.

**Upside Down Values:** <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first. Jesus is trying to give us a glimpse into the values of his kingdom. He’s trying to help us see from an eternal perspective. He’s pulling back the curtain to show us the things of this world are not sufficient to build your life on, no matter how impressive they seem from earthly standards. Your wealth can’t save you or bring you real life, joy, and peace. It’s a pretender (e.g., Brazil perspective cliffs pictures). Can you see with kingdom eyes and not be fooled by the illusions and false promises of the world?

- No one at the end of their life is going to wish they had more money in their bank account, or had a nicer car, or fancier clothes.
- **When your treasure is in heaven, when your heart’s affections are resting completely in God, then wealth won’t tempt you and poverty won’t sink you.**

## Conclusion

To be a disciple of Jesus, you must value God's kingdom above anything the world has to offer.

- Which means, God is calling you to let go of the things of this world so you can depend completely on him.

Consider the tragic death of high wire superstar Karl Wallenda (1905-78), the great grandfather of current highwire artist Nik Wallenda. Karl at 73 performed a walk he'd done thousands of times (10 stories high in Puerto Rico). On this occasion, gusty ocean winds picked up between the high rise buildings. The wire visibly vibrated and swayed in the wind. Wallenda never cancelled a show and he trusted his abilities, his balance, and his experience. He inched across the wobbly wire, struggling for balance as he reached midway, the 25 foot balancing pole he was holding swayed back and forth until it was almost vertical to the ground. He soon fell to the ground and died.

- Tightrope walking relies on the balance pole. Experts say it's key to survival. Wallenda once said, "The pole is your safeguard, you can almost always keep your balance with the pole." But, in certain situations, to save your life, you have to let go of the pole to grab hold of the rope. But letting go of the pole is an admission of failure, so letting go, even to save one's life, can be difficult. Rather than let go, to save his life, Wallenda clutched the pole all the way to his death.

"What does God want me to let go of that I'm tempted to grip on to and what does God want me to grip on to that I'm tempted to let go of?" (Allberry).

- What are you holding on to that prevents you from following Jesus?
- **The path of joy, peace, contentment, and purpose is not in achieving your dreams but in letting go of your dreams and following God's dream for you.**
- What is weighing you down and tripping you up? Let it go and cling to Christ.