

## Threading the Needle

*Say What? The Hard Saying of Jesus: Pt.1*

I hope you know that Jesus didn't actually say that! No, that is a parody. But the truth is, Jesus said an awful lot of things that make us go, "Say what?" You know, almost everybody says Jesus Christ, whatever else he was, was a great teacher, but when you actually get down to studying Jesus' teaching, he has a lot of sayings we can call hard sayings. They're hard partly because they're hard to understand, but just as much, and maybe even more so, they're hard because they're hard to swallow. They're hard to accept. They're hard to receive.

Everyone should have gotten a piece of candy on your way in this morning. Not melts in your mouth chocolate, no, a completely different sort of candy. They are called "jawbreakers". Because unlike chocolate...you pop in a chocolate, you eat through it, you digest it, and there it is. But if you bite down on a jawbreaker – well, aptly named – you'll end up in the dentist office.

I have something called a "Mega Bruiser" here on stage with me. You could not get through this one during service. On the box it says the official record for eating one is 17 days, 4 hours, 8 minutes and 19 seconds! So how do you consume something like

this? Slowly. You have to take this layer after layer. You have to just suck on it, just keep after it. It takes a long time to get it into your system.

Well, the hard sayings of Jesus are not – with apologies to Forrest Gump- like a box of chocolates. They are like jawbreakers. And some of them are mega jawbreakers. The hard sayings of Jesus are things that on the surface look pretty difficult and maybe even look absurd, but as you go into them, as you reflect upon them, as you meditate on them... You work on them. You work *through* them. You work *into* them. And after a while, you'll find layer after layer after layer of increasing significance and wisdom and sweetness.

So that's what we're going to be doing this fall. Between now and Thanksgiving, we're going to tackle a different saying or teaching of Jesus' that sounds outrageous or difficult and see if the Holy Spirit will help us to digest it. And we're going to start out with one from **Mark 10:17–27**. And this one we're looking at is in verse 25, but we're going to read the whole narrative in which this very famous hard saying is embedded. Let me read it to you.

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

20 “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” 21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” 22 At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Now this particular hard saying is in verse 25, where Jesus says, “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*” And that’s as controversial now as it was then. It was as controversial then as it is now. And what’s striking about this, is that the difficult saying comes in response to something so incredibly basic. If Deanna asked me, “Do you love me?” And I said, “Well, Aristotle had an interesting take on the concept of love...” Well, I wouldn’t need a candy to get my jaw broken. It’s a basic question!

And likewise, you can’t get more basic than this question: “...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus is addressing the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. He’s actually explaining here to the listeners how to become a Christian, and yet right in the middle of Jesus telling us how to become a Christian, he brings up money.

Another way to put it is if you want to be a Christian, money is an issue. Jesus is not being super-spiritual, you know. This is very nuts-and-bolts. What we’re being taught here exposes the spiritual dangers of money and wealth. And what we’re going to learn as we look at the passage is, first of all the *fact* of this danger, secondly the *reasons* for this danger, and then thirdly, how we *deal* with the danger.

**First, The fact of the danger. Verse 25:** “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*” Now to understand that, first of all we have to see Jesus sets up a delicate balance here. Let me show it to you. The disciples’ response in verse 26 to how this man goes away is interesting. Jesus has taken this man - we’re going to look at their interaction in a second - and he has given the man something he can’t accept, and he walks away.

So Jesus is clearly calling into question whether this man has eternal life. This man seems to have blown it. This man seems to have failed. So *as* he walks away, what do the disciples say? Do they say, “Oh, the rich can’t get into heaven. Great! I didn’t like them anyway. Good riddance. They made me feel drab and shabby. I can’t dress like them. They don’t let me into their clubs”?

Do they say that? No. They don’t say, “Great! The rich can’t get into heaven? No skin off my nose.” That’s not what they say. What do they say? They say, “If *he* can’t get into heaven, what hope is there for *us*? If he can’t get into heaven, who can?” I mean they are giving this man a remarkable amount of credit. This is more than just a rich man.

This incident comes up in Matthew and Luke as well as Mark. Especially in Luke, we’re told he was *young*, and we’re told he was a *ruler* - he was the rich young ruler. But he was more than just rich.

See, what’s intriguing is there are many people who believe - and some people have made it into a political philosophy, an economic philosophy – that you can’t accrue great wealth without exploiting or defrauding or doing injustice to people. There are plenty of folks who say *nobody* can accrue money, nobody can really grow into great wealth without being ruthless and stepping on people. Or even just *holding* it is an exploitation. Even just holding a lot of wealth is an injustice.

But look what Jesus does. Jesus begins to list the Ten Commandments – he doesn’t list all of them and in fact, he adds one that’s not in there, “Do not defraud”. And you understand what he’s doing? He’s basically asking him, “Do you...dishonor your parents, commit adultery, murder, steal.” And then Jesus specifically adds, “Do you defraud” which means, “Have you misrepresented in business?” Interesting. He says, “Have you stolen, have you robbed, have you exploited, have you taken from people things that really are by rights theirs?”

And when the young man says, “No. With all my wealth, I have always acted in justice and kindness and fairness. I have never sinned in any of these ways,” Jesus doesn’t say, “Liar!” He accepts it. And you see, the disciples’ response shows this. The principle that, of course you can make your wealth through vice, but you can also make it through virtue, and you can hold it in virtue. You can also make money through discipline and vision and delayed gratification and patience and all that.

So what’s intriguing is the disciples obviously know this is a man of enormous moral attractiveness, of great character, public virtue. That’s the reason why, when he walks away, they say, “If *he’s* not worthy of the kingdom of heaven, who in the world is?” So what does this mean?

On the one hand, we see that Jesus Christ has no ideological problem with wealth creation. He does not say that having wealth and having money is *intrinsically* bad, it’s automatically evil, or it’s wrong or unjust in itself. *But*, on the other hand, then he says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

People have been trying to explain this away over the years in some funny ways. If you’ve been around church over the years, you’ve probably heard some of these. Some people say, “Well, it’s not a literal needle. Back in those days, there were these little gates, these little openings in the walls of Jerusalem, and they were real narrow, and it was hard to get a camel through there, but if they just sucked it up and if they held their breath, and you pushed them on through...It was hard, but not impossible.”

Other people say, “Well, it’s not a literal camel. There’s an Aramaic word for twine that sounds a lot like camel, and maybe what it’s really trying to say is it’s very difficult to get twine through the eye of a needle, but if you suck on it, and you push it, and all that sort of thing...So it’s hard, but not impossible.” But it’s pretty clear what Jesus means by this image.

Every culture has vivid metaphors like this. We have one called “a snowball’s chance in hell.” “A snowball’s chance in hell,” and “a camel through the eye of a needle,” is simply this. He even uses the word at the very end, in verse 27. “It is *impossible* to get a camel through the eye of a needle, and *therefore*, it is impossible for the rich to get into the kingdom of God.” That’s what he’s saying.

But we just saw there was a nuance here. Isn't this interesting? It's not because wealth is bad in itself. It's not because accruing of wealth has led this person into breaking any of the commandments. So on the one hand, Jesus cannot mean that it's a sin in itself to be rich, *nor* on the other hand is he saying, "Well, it's not *that* serious. You know, you have to be careful, don't get into greed, be a little generous..." No.

You cannot get it down any further than this. We have to be careful to leave nuance and mystery to Jesus' words. Especially in a capitalistic, rich nation where we desperately want to remain comfortable. But this is as palatable as I can get it. Jesus Christ is saying that money has a power to **blind us spiritually** that is so great that anybody with any kind of money will automatically be blind to the gospel of the kingdom, and therefore, nobody with any money will ever be saved unless God directly intervenes.

It's impossible...without God. It's impossible without intervention. It's impossible without a miracle. It's impossible without grace coming in. But money has such a spiritual power to blind us to the kingdom of God and to the gospel that unless there is direct intervention, it will keep us away. *All* of us away. Utterly away. Anyone with any kind of money will be kept away.

That's as good as I can get it. I tried. And if you say, "Boy, that's kind of extreme..." That's only because we are rich and we don't want it to be true. There's always somebody "richer", but that's not what this is saying. On a global scale, on an historical scale, we are all rich. And that is problematic in historical Christianity.

Let me just give you one little piece of evidence just considering the 2,000 year history of Christianity. First of all, consider the other great world religions, wherever they began, that is *still* their center. Where did Islam start? It started in Mecca - in Arabia - and that is still the center of Islam today. Buddhism started in the Far East, and that's still the *center* of Buddhism today. Not Christianity. Christianity's geographic center is always on a pilgrimage.

The original center of Christianity was Jerusalem, but then what happened was the people who were considered unwashed barbarians, the Hellenistic Gentiles, *so* embraced Christianity and with such force that pretty soon the center of Christianity moved to the Hellenistic Mediterranean world - to Alexandria, to North Africa, and to Rome. And it stayed there for a number of centuries.

But *then* the people who were considered the unwashed barbarians - who were the Northern Europeans, the Franks and the Germans and the Britons and the Celts and all - the barbarians out there in the hinterlands *so* took hold of Christianity that soon the center of Christianity migrated again, and it became a white European center.

And that's where it was for a thousand years, but it's changing again. In the twentieth century, the change was already well under way. In the twentieth century, while in Europe Christianity was receding, and while in North America it has just barely kept up with population growth, in Latin America, Asia, and Africa it has been growing at ten times the population, so that in the last decade - let me surprise you a little bit here - we went into the situation where today 61% of the 1.3 billion Christians in this world live in the southern hemisphere.

Let me give you a couple of examples. In the United States there are 1.8 million Episcopalians – that's a 17% decline over the last decade by the way. In the whole of the United States. Meanwhile, in Africa...in Nigeria alone, there are 17 million Episcopalians. In Uganda alone, there are 11 million Episcopalians. There are 16 countries that have Episcopal churches in Africa. In just those *two*, there are 28 million; more than 15 times the number of Episcopalians here. And I can do that with many global denominations – including my own.

You say, “How did that happen? In the year 1900, wasn't Africa only one percent Christian?” Yes, but now it's more than 50 percent Christian. And what is happening is, in the next 50–70 years, the center of Christianity will change again. It will no longer be in the heart of white European countries. It will migrate, as it *always* migrates. The question is, why does this happen? Why does the center of Christianity constantly change? It doesn't do that for Islam. It doesn't do that for Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. So why?

This is why. At the heart of the gospel is the cross, and the cross is all about giving up power, pouring out resources, and serving. It's not at all about gaining and attaining power and resources. And therefore, when Christianity is in a place of *power*, is in a place of *wealth*, for a long period of time, the radical message of sin, grace, and the cross, and its radical implications, begin to get muted. Quite honestly from a historical perspective, the geographic center of Christianity always rots from the inside.

The true gospel becomes less and less easy to comprehend. And then Christianity starts to transmute for a while into a very nice religion like all other religions where people try to be good, and it's for respectable people, and eventually it *dies*. And the center of Christianity is always migrating out to the margins. It's always migrating to the periphery. It's always migrating *away* from power and *away* from wealth. Doesn't matter whether it's Rome or Madrid or London or Colorado Springs – which some call the “Evangelical Vatican City.”

Now, that may sound like bad news for us – because America is the current geographic center. But I have to tell you, this is *great* news for Christianity. Christianity is really going to explode in the coming century and I'll tell you the reason why. The original heyday of Christianity, in the very beginning, was Christians out in the margins, out in the colonies, the backwater, the people out of power... The missionaries all went *toward* power. They went *to* Rome. They went *to* Alexandria. They went in that direction.

And seventy years from now, the vast majority of the Christian missionaries of this world will be going *from* Africa, from Asia, from Latin America, from the periphery *to* the wealthy west and white European and North American countries. And when the missionaries are not coming from power to the margins but from margins to the power, things are going to change.

The true gospel - not a political chaplaincy, not a Christian nationalism – the *true* gospel will be preached. And when Austin intellectuals come to realize Christianity is not a white European religion, because *nobody* owns it, because at the heart of it is the cross, things are really going to change.

What does this mean? It means money and power, Jesus Christ says, have *such* an ability to blind us to the very heart of the gospel that unless there is *constant* intervention from God, unless there is gracious, miraculous intervention from God, we will be lost.

Are we saying all individual rich people are bad, and all individual poor people are good? No! I'm trying to show that Jesus is very nuanced about this. He's simply saying the fact that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. So that's the fact. "Well," somebody says, "Why? What's the reason for the fact?" Good question!

**Second point: The reasons for the danger.** I mean, why is it so bad? What does it do? Well, if you want to understand that, you need to look at how Jesus is counseling this young man. And this is so relevant for Austinites. Don't you recognize this guy? Let me show you who he is. He's troubled. He's not *nearly* as pulled together as he looks. Oh, on the outside he looks unbelievably pulled together. We've already seen this. He's rich! He's young! He's probably good-looking. It's hard to be rich and young and not be good-looking. There are some people who pull it off, but it's very difficult.

And he's virtuous, and he has character, and he's a person whom the disciples - surely these fishermen would not be the kind of people who would just naturally gravitate to and like a rich guy. But there's something so *attractive* about this fellow. He has it all together. But no, deep down he doesn't. Why? Because he comes and says, "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?"

Now we have to put this in context. Any devout Jew would have known the answer to this. The rabbis were always, in their teachings and their writings, posing this question...What must we do to inherit eternal life? It was a wonderful way to teach. They'd pose the question and then teach. And the answer was *always* the same. Always the same. There were no schools of thought. There were no parties about this. They might quibble over the details - oh they'd *definitely* quibble over the details - but the basic answer was always, "Obey the statutes of God and avoid all sin."

So he would have known. So why was he asking Jesus? That's the interesting question. Why would he ask Jesus? See, Jesus' answer, when he says, "One thing you lack..." shows us the gist of what he was saying. What he is saying is, "Do you know what? I have been so accomplished, and I have done everything. I have been successful economically, successful socially, successful morally, successful religiously."

So what is he going to the rabbi for? That's what he means when he called Jesus a "good teacher" - "I've heard you're a good rabbi." What's he asking? What he's really saying is, "I'm wondering if there's something I've missed. Maybe there's one thing I'm overlooking. I'm wondering if there's something I'm *missing*."

And you know what? Of course. Because anyone who is - look what he asks - *doing* to get eternal life...Anyone who is *doing* and *accomplishing* to get eternal life is always going to find that in spite of everything they try to do, there's an emptiness, there's an insecurity, there's a doubt, there's something missing. Because how do they know whether they were good *enough*?

Put it this way, since we're talking about needles - and I know this isn't quite the same kind of needle. But you know how they say you should never use a hypodermic needle more than once? That's a real problem because when people look at the needle - even after several uses, it looks perfectly fine. In fact it looks flawless - perfect, smooth, spotless. But put it under a microscope? Have you seen this? Put a needle under a microscope - even after just one use - and it's all filled with pocks and deformities. But you won't see that with the naked eye.

But if you look closely enough at anything, you're going to see the deformities. *Now...* here's a guy whom you should recognize in Austin. He's put together. He's done everything. He has degrees from the right places, on a partnership track, already made a million dollars and he's only 28 years old. Everything's going well.

And *yet*, to their surprise, they find themselves seeking out gurus, seeking out rabbis, and even seeking out, occasionally, Christian ministers, coming and saying, "I'm still missing something. Do you know of anything I'm missing?" And here's what they're doing. What they're really saying is, "I've accomplished everything. I need one more thing to do. I'm sure one more thing will do it. I'm ready to open a "Spiritual" category on my portfolio. You know, Business, Personal, Spiritual."

"What do I have to *do*? I'm willing to start going to church, reading the Bible, learn meditation techniques. I'm even willing to make some changes to some things I probably have done that haven't been right, and all that sort of thing. What do I have to do?" And Jesus Christ tells him. And Jesus' counseling is astounding. First of all, he telegraphs the punch. In **verse 18**, he says, "*Why do you call me good?...No one is good—except God alone.*" That's a hint. That's a preview.

Jesus is not saying, as some people are a little worried about, that he himself is *not* good. He doesn't say, "Why are you calling me good. I'm *not*." He is saying, "Why are you walking up to somebody you think is just a normal human rabbi, and calling him 'good'? I have a correction for you about your whole idea of goodness and badness."

So that's the hint. But then the punch comes, and it's in verse 21. He says, "Sure. I'll tell you one thing you need to do. I'd be very happy to add one little thing." He says, what? **V. 21**, "*Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*" Now here's what he's doing. He has already accepted what the guy said about the commandments, but now he's doing something else.

He says, "I am not that concerned about the bad things. Of course, if you want to follow me, if you want eternal life, if you want to come after me, *of course* you shouldn't commit adultery. You shouldn't murder. You shouldn't defraud people. I don't want my followers doing that. Of course, I'm not saying that's not important."

But he says, “You know what? If you repent of your sins, all it will do is bring you up to be a Pharisee. If you want real eternal life, if you want intimacy with the divine, if you want to get over that nagging sense that there’s still something missing...If you really want eternal life, you have to change how you relate to your *good* things.” If you just repent of your sins, it just makes you a religious person. If you want to be a Christian, you have to repent of how you’ve been using your **good things**.

What do you mean, “...how you’ve been using your good things”? Well, what you have here is a concrete application of the way Jesus deals with everybody. Because if you go to Jesus, one way or another, through a sermon, through a book, through the Bible, he’s going to say this to you. He’s going to say, “How are you doing with the deformity that’s under the surface? How are you dealing with that sense that you’re not quite right? How are you dealing with the pockmarks? How are *you* dealing with that?”

I’ll tell you how you’re dealing with it. There’s something in your life that you’re looking to in order to deal with that. Some of you are desperately trying to turn material wealth into a spiritual treasure to deal with that inner sense of poverty. Some of you are desperately trying to turn physical beauty into spiritual beauty to deal with that inner sense of deformity. Some of you are looking to love. Some of you are looking to romance. Some of you are looking to family.

Some of you are looking to getting into the art world. Some of you are looking to making a hit in some professional world. Some of you are trying desperately to get into some inner ring, to be included, to be accepted...to deal with that inner sense of exclusion and alienation and unworthiness that you feel. Everybody’s trying to do something.

Jesus says, “You, young man, are doing it with money. You are doing it with your career, and with your socioeconomic status. And as a result, it is making you proud. You feel better than other people. Secondly, it is going to make you nervous inside and worried and scared about anything going wrong with your money. And it’s alienating you from God. God is your boss. God is your helper. God is your example. But God is not your Savior. And I’m going to prove it to you.”

Then he says the *coup de grace* here as a counselor. He says, “I want you to imagine life without money. I want you to imagine all of it away. I want you to imagine no trust funds, no houses on the beach. All that’s gone. You’re just a *schmo*. All you have is me.” And what happens to him? There’s an extremely important word for which the NIV translation we have here kind of lets us down. It says he got “sad”. He got sad and went away.

The old King James Bible does a little better job of it. It translates it “grieved”. He grieved. That’s closer to it. And I’ll tell you why. There’s another place where the same Greek word – *lupomenos* - which is used here of this young man, is used of Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed just before he was arrested, we’re told that Jesus went into shock. Jesus started to sweat blood. And we’re told in **Matthew 26:38** that he said to his disciples, “*Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”*” That’s the same Greek word that is used of the young man in Mark 10.

Why? Why was Jesus going into shock? Because he was experiencing the ultimate dislocation, the ultimate disorientation. He was losing the joy of his life. He was losing the meaning of his life. He was losing the core of his identity. He was losing the core of his significance and security. He was losing his *Heavenly Father*. He was losing his utter spiritual center. He was losing his very *self*.

And when Jesus calls this young man to lose his money, the young man starts to sweat blood. He starts to grieve, because money for that young man is what the Father was to Jesus. It was his center. It was his identity. In other words, when he thought of the idea of losing his money, to lose his money was to lose his self. To lose his money was to lose his identity.

And Jesus Christ says, “Let me tell you. It’s one thing to have God as a boss. It’s one thing to have God as an example. It’s one thing to have God as a sugar daddy. It’s one thing to have God as a helper. But if you want God to be your Savior, you have to *replace* what you’re already looking to. And everybody has something, and for you it’s this.”

He says, “If you want to be a Pharisee, repent of your sins. And you do have to do that. But if you want to be a *Christian*, you have to repent of not just your bad things, but how you’ve used the good things in your life. If you want intimacy with God, if you want to finally get over this sense that there’s something missing, *that’s* what you have to do.”

Now do you see the reason money is so dangerous? Do you see how nuanced this is? On the one hand, it’s not his financial wealth that is his problem. It is his *moral* wealth. It’s his sense that he doesn’t need the grace of God. He doesn’t *see* that it’s impossible...Verse 27 tells us the only people who are Christians are people who know that their Christianity is impossible.

The only people who are saved are people who know their salvation is a miracle. There's nothing natural about it. There's nothing routine about it. It is not a matter of course. It's an absolute intervention. It's a complete miracle. It's against everything...all my accomplishments, all my merits, everything. And that's why he's really saying *everybody* has to recognize there's *something* you're looking to like this.

It's your *moral* wealth keeping you from Christianity. It's your moral wealth keeping you from the cross and understanding the cross. It's your moral wealth, *not* your financial wealth. That's what's keeping him away. It's that intense spiritual trust in his performance in this area. And it can be any number of things. *But* for every one time Jesus Christ says in the Bible something like, "Watch out for building your life on sex and romance..." For every one time Jesus talks about sex, he talks *ten times* about money.

What he means is, money, especially in our culture, is one of the most, if not *the* main way...Your career, your ability to go out to nice restaurants, your ability to have nice new things, your ability to move around in a professional culture and peer group and world...all that stuff is much more important to you than you know. It's the main vehicle, perhaps, in our culture. Money isn't just money to you.

That's the reason you can't give it away in amazing proportions. That's why you get scared all the time if you don't have enough money, because money is not just your money. It's your father. It's your savior. It's your essence. It's your identity. It's your self. It's your name. All these things. And therefore, that's the reason money, though it's not intrinsically evil, is one of the main ways...It has this incredible power to keep us from understanding the gospel.

Now lastly, what are we going to do about it? Third point: **How we deal with the danger.** How do we deal with the power of money in our lives? Well, let me just tell you. You have to deal with it thinking of it kind of in a tree illustration. You have to deal with the root, trunk, and leaves. The root is the level of trust. The trunk is the level of attitude. The leaves are the level of action, when it comes to money.

Here's what I mean. First of all, the most foundational thing is the root. If you're going to keep money from having its power, you have to go to the root. How do we do that? Why does Jesus look at this young man and say what he says *filled with love*? See, in **verse 21**? "*Jesus looked at him and loved him.*" Why was his heart suddenly filled with love? You say, "Well, Jesus was a loving person." Of course he was. But this is striking in it's rarity. This is the *only* place in Mark's gospel where Jesus is said to love an individual. The parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke don't even include it. It's meant to stand out.

Why was Jesus filled with love? Because of what the man was doing? Because of what the man said? What did the man just say? He says, “Oh, I have been a very good little boy. I have obeyed my mommy and daddy, and all that.” Is that what happened? Jesus says, “Ahh... you are just so filled with virtue and goodness...I could just eat you up!” No, I don’t think so.

Why was his heart filled with love *as* he says what he’s saying? I think it goes like this. You never understand any particular story in the Bible unless you always are able to understand it in the context of the *main* story of the Bible. You have to take every little story in the Bible and always put it in, understand how it fits in, to the overarching, main, big story of the Bible. I like to say, in order to understand anything in the Bible, you have to read it through cross-colored glasses.

So how do we read this story through the lenses of the gospel? Well, it goes something like this. Jesus was probably feeling something along these lines. He looks at this guy and he says, first of all, “I’m a young man too.” You don’t think of it that way, but Jesus is probably 31 years old here. So first of all, Jesus is saying, “I’m a young man too.”

Then secondly, he says, “I’m a *rich* young man, far richer than you, far richer than you can imagine.” In **Ephesians 3:8**, Paul says that he has been given an assignment, “...*to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ*,” As a member of the eternal Godhead, Jesus lived in incomprehensible wealth, love, joy, power, glory and he *left* it.

Paul summarizes the gospel message itself in **2 Corinthians 8:9** by using a money analogy. “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*” Christmas is still few months away, but remember the manger?

Seek not in courts or palaces,  
Nor royal curtains draw;  
But search the stable,  
See your God extended on the straw.

He says, “I’m a rich young ruler. I have riches beyond anything you’ve ever had, and I’m going into a poverty deeper than anything anyone has ever known. I’m a rich young ruler, and I have given it all away. I am giving it all away. Why? For *you*. For the poor. The people who would be lost otherwise. I’m doing it to follow you. Now *you* give away everything to follow me. If I gave away my *big* all to follow you, why can’t you give your *little* all to follow me?”

“I’m not asking you to do anything I haven’t already done,” Jesus says. “I’m not asking you to do anything I haven’t already done millions and millions of times, times greater than any sacrifice you could make. I’m the ultimate rich young ruler who has given away the ultimate wealth to get you. Now why in the world can’t you give away yours to get me?”

You know what? Does that move you, to think of what Jesus did for you? Let’s be perfectly practical. Only when that begins to *really* move you, thrill you, amaze you, make you weep...*That’s* how you deal with the root of the power of money. *That’s* what will make money only money. That’s what will make it something you are *able* to give away. That’s what will make it something that’s not that important anymore, something that’s unbelievably free. “I’m free from worry, free from envy, free from all those things.” Only when you see what Jesus has done on the cross, only when that moves you to your depths, does human status just become human status. Approval just becomes approval. Money just becomes money. They don’t become your *life*.

You have this incredible freedom. You can pick it up, or you can let it go. You can take it on, or you can walk away. You can give it, or you can keep it. It all depends on what’s the best thing at the time. You’re not driven, you’re not controlled by it at all. The only way to deal with the *root* of the power of money in your life

is to see the *real* rich young ruler, the *ultimate* rich young ruler, who gave away everything to get you, to follow you, to love you, to have you.

So Jesus says, “Why in the world can’t you be willing to change your attitude toward all of your money to get me? Of course you can.” So that’s how you deal with the root. Then secondly, you have to deal with the trunk. Here’s what I mean by that. You have to deal with the root through the gospel. You also will find the trunk, meaning the attitude of your heart toward money, is still there.

Sometimes you just have to fight it directly. You don’t say, “Well, I’ll work on the root for three years, and then I’ll worry about my attitude.” No, no, no. You work at it all at once. But what do I mean by attitude? The attitude means you have attitude problems you have to work on if you want to live out of the power of the gospel when it comes to money. You have to get away from it. You have to take an axe to it.

What do I mean? There are some examples of this. Envy. Do you find that as you look around, people who have more than you, or are doing better than you, though you have worked harder or maybe you’re a better person, it *bothers* you, and it *grinds* you, and you resent it, and you envy? Money is too important to you. It’s not just money.

Or secondly, do you just *worry* a lot about money? Are you just always anxious about it? See, you don't have to *have* money to be under its power. A lot of you said, "Well, I'm not well off so this doesn't apply to me." You can still be under its power. I know some really greedy poor people. Envy and anxiety. Or thirdly, do you have a clear bias in who you hang out with? Do you hang out with people at *your* educational and socio-economic level or above? Or are you really, really open to all kinds of people? If you're not, if you have that bias, money isn't just money.

Let me just ask you a real simple question. Do you find buying new, beautiful, cool things is disproportionately important to you emotionally? Do you shop when you're depressed, and then the depression subsides? Then money is not just money. Do you get a sense of freedom, a sense of power when you're able to say, "I can go out and buy something like this"? You have to go after the attitude directly. You have to work on the root, or the attitudes will never go away. But when you see that sort of thing happen, you fight it. You stop it. You *chop* it – chop at the trunk.

Then lastly, the leaves. The leaves are the action. In other words, it's not just your trust of money, not just your attitude towards money, but the action. You can't say - and I've heard people actually say something like this - "Oh, money is not important to me. I don't trust it. I don't love money." Ok, well show me your balance statement, show me your budget. Because if your attitude changes, your actions change. It's not enough just to say, "Well, the important thing is how I feel about the money." No, that's not all there is to it. If you change your attitude and your trust in money, it's going to change your *behavior*. Let me just give you three real practical things you can get out of the text.

First, the poor. Jesus told this guy, "If you understand *I'm* the real rich young ruler, your attitude toward the poor... You're going to be engaged. You're going to care. You're going to get far more involved in their cause and their needs than you ever were before." If you see your salvation is impossible, if you *know* you're a sinner saved by grace, you'll care about the poor. If you think your salvation is perfectly natural on a matter of course, you won't care. So the first thing is very, very practical. How much do you care? What are you doing about it?

Secondly, forget any legalistic idea of percentages. He says to this guy, “Give away *everything*.” Now what’s interesting is this story is also found in Luke 18, and in Luke 19 you have the place where Jesus confronts Zacchaeus the tax collector about the gospel. And he calls Zacchaeus to give 50 percent of his income to the poor. Well you’re reading along in the book of Luke, and you say, “Okay, which is it? I need to get my percentage right. How do I inherit eternal life? Is it 100%? Is it 50%?”

Fortunately, they’re put together to show...Don’t get hung up on percent. Your attitude toward *all* of it has to change, and you need to be giving absolutely as much as you possibly can. You ought to be straining. You ought to be stretching. You ought to be doing everything you possibly can. Don’t say, “I give 10 percent, I tithe, and that’s fine.” That’s not Jesus’ attitude here at all, obviously.

Lastly, the real way to know how generous you should be is the cross. Jesus is basically calling this guy to do what *he* did. He is basically saying, “I want your attitude toward your money to be utterly impacted, utterly changed and reworked by what I did on the cross.” That means you give until you know you’re sacrificing.

If what you’re giving right now has no impact on where you live, has no impact on where you eat, has no impact on your clothing, has no impact on your lifestyle...you’re not giving sacrificially. Jesus Christ did not give of himself out of his over-the-top extra. He did not give out of his surplus. He went to the bone.

And therefore, of course, it depends. The more money you have, if you’re a Christian, the greater the discrepancy between the lifestyle you *could* be at and the lifestyle you voluntarily *choose* to be at. The less money you have, the less that discrepancy is going to be, but there should always a discrepancy.

Get rid of the idea of, “How much do I *have* to give?” You give sacrificially. You live sacrificially. Jesus Christ says, “My power is always moving away from people who love power and money. My power is always moving toward people who are giving it away. Where do you want to live? I suggest you move to where I’m going.”

Let’s pray...

I would be remiss to talk about Jesus warnings on money and not give you an actions step. Last week I ran into Nick and Kimbra Stuva who are leading a new initiative called the **Rapid Intervention Network**. Specifically engaged with the spiritual needs that accompany humanitarian crisis. Basically wherever Convoy of Hope would show up to do their humanitarian aide thing – food, shelter, clothing, water, stuff like that – RIV will show up to partner with the aide to create long-lasting church planting movements that will continue to make a spiritual impact on the backside when the crisis has died down and is no longer in the headlines.

Remember after 911 how everyone wanted to be in church? A physical crisis brings about a spiritual awakening. But it didn't last. The churches weren't equipped for it. The Stuva's are looking to change that oversees by maximize the missionary resources that we already have and just train them to do crisis management in a spiritual context.

The first project is working with Ukrainian refugees. There are a whole bunch of them in Poland. And the Assemblies of God – through Convoy and others – is taking an active role in caring for them. But all our missionaries in Ukraine had to leave as well. So let's gather them all in Poland and minister and start

churches among the refugees that they will take back home with them when this war is over.

Nick and Kimbra are leading that and hope to be back on the ground oversees in December. They need to raise about \$20,000 in cash still so I told him we would take up and offering toward that. So this week and next, let's see what we can do for the Stuva's and for the gospel of Jesus Christ in the troubled spouts of our world. There is a QR code that you can use to give through any of the normal SWFF sources. Just look for the category: Rapid Intervention Network.