

Rich Man, Poor Man

By: Keith R. Keyser

In Mark 10:17-31 we read the account of “the rich young ruler,” as he is often called. This memorable incident is instructive for modern times, for it shows us the difference between human and divine values. The man in this passage discovered that he was completely wrong about himself. More importantly he totally misread the true identity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Modern people often make the same mistake—thinking too little of Christ and overestimating themselves.

At first glance, the man in our passage seems like a prospective convert who is not far from the kingdom. Verse seventeen shows him running to the Lord; therefore, we conclude that he is keenly desiring to speak with Him. Secondly, he kneels before the Lord. This posture indicates that he thinks of Jesus as someone greater than himself—indeed, One Who commands respect. Thirdly, he refers to the Lord in complimentary terms, calling Him “Good Teacher.” (NKJV) Lastly, he asks Christ a spiritual question: “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” Unfortunately, this interrogative betrays the man’s utter spiritual ignorance of his own condition, as well as the true character of the Lord Jesus. Of course, the Lord already knows the man’s heart, and orchestrates the conversation in order to enlighten the affluent man.

Christ first asks him what his motivation is for calling Him good. The Lord assures him that in the ultimate sense only God is good. What is more, the Scripture affirms that among men “there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” (Ps. 14:1) Does the man comprehend that Jesus is God? Or is he merely being polite?

Since the man asks what he must do to be saved, the Lord reviews the horizontal “love thy neighbor as thyself” section of the commandments. The man maintains that he has kept all of these since his youth. If man insists on coming to God by human effort, then the Almighty will direct him to the perfect standard as revealed in God’s Law. Of course, fallen man is unable to keep the Law, and therefore should conclude that there is nothing that he can do to gain eternal salvation. The rich man misses this truth, self-confidently believing that he has kept all of the Lord’s commandments perfectly. Undoubtedly, he had a righteous reputation as being an upright pillar of the community. Nonetheless, the Lord Jesus is not fooled by outward appearance, and is privy to the contents of the duplicitous human heart. Christ gives the man instructions that expose his sin. He tells him to divest himself of his many possessions, and disperse his assets to the indigent. He does not do this to cause the man unnecessary pain. Rather, the text plainly states that Jesus “loved him” (v.21.) The man was not expecting this turn of events. Mark tells us: “...he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.” (v. 22) Alas, he forgot that the first commandment is “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength...” (Mk. 12:30) If he had done this, then giving up his substance in favor of heavenly riches would have been easy. In fact, his reaction shows us that he did not really love his neighbor as himself or love God with all of his being.

The Lord uses this incident to illustrate the danger of material things stealing the human heart away from God. Those who trust in their wealth find it virtually impossible to humble themselves through repentance and faith towards the Lord Jesus. They think that their possessions and bank accounts will bolster them against adversity and calamity. Sadly, those who take this view will rudely awake in eternity, finding that they are naked before their Maker (Heb. 4:13.) They will lack an adequate covering before the Holy God of the Universe. It is much better to proclaim yourself poor before God, not trusting in earthly riches or human righteousness to gain favor before the Creator. Thankfully, what is impossible with man, is possible with God. The New Testament gives us numerous examples of people of means who came to faith in Christ (e.g. Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, Barnabas, and Lydia, to name a few.) It is not a question of your portfolio, so much as a question of what you think of yourself and what you think of Christ. He wants earnest seekers to have the attitude: “I am nothing, Christ is everything!” I cannot buy salvation, I can only receive it as the free gift of God’s grace.