

# Overcoming the Riches trap!

## *Breakthrough Christianity:*

Luke 18:18-30

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*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* (Luke 18:18)

That question came from a hungry person. I'm not talking about someone seeking roast beef and mashed potatoes. This ruler, this very religious leader, felt spiritually empty. He didn't ask, "What must people do to inherit eternal life?" Those are the words of the curious. He didn't ask, "In your opinion, what must people do to inherit eternal life?" Those are the words of philosophers. He asked, "What must **I do** to get eternal life?" All of this man's experience with the synagogue and temple, left him still wanting and wondering, "What must I do?"

I often see that hunger, not just in the people who populate the pews, but also in those who preach from the pulpits. I have witnessed parishioners and pastors echo that same sense of want and then go through remarkable transformations. That's why I call this series of messages *Breakthrough Christianity*. I don't want people to worship here week after week and still go away hungry. I want you to leave satisfied, full of joy, excited about your life and future.

The reason we need breakthroughs is because there are traps that hold us in bondage and prevent us from knowing and enjoying what God desires. Trap #1 we discussed two weeks ago. It's *The Righteous Trap*. Jesus often pointed to it. We considered it when we looked at Jesus' story about a wicked tax collector and devout Pharisee who both prayed at the temple. We found that we don't get right with God by meeting some ethical standard. Inevitably we lower the

standard so we can come off looking good. Our efforts at meeting a standard produce self-righteousness. True righteousness comes from a righteous spirit, not a righteous standard. It comes as God's Spirit frees our hearts with forgiving love. That Spirit sows righteous desires in us that eventually grow into fruit that others can taste. Trap #2 is *The Reliance Trap*. What people think they know gets in the way of them really knowing. Since they already know, what's to learn? That's why Jesus told his disciples that anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a tiny child will not enter it. Breakthroughs come when people shed their self-reliance, their pride and fear to receive. Remember the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is not about what people achieve; it's about what they receive.

When the ruler or leader in Luke 18 came to Jesus, he was close to a breakthrough. He was hungry and seeking. He even went to the right person. Most turn elsewhere. Some friends of mine spent years trying to fill their emptiness with parties. However, when the drink wore off and the people were gone, their lives and situations became even more desperate. Other friends tried the achievement track. Time after time they achieved, but the euphoria would recede and the hunger resurface. Other friends pursued all kinds of philosophies and spiritual practices, yet their lives and relationships continued to deteriorate. Despite their pursuits, they still needed a breakthrough. The ruler brought his situation to Jesus and listen to how Jesus responded?

Jesus first challenged his notion of good: "You call me good teacher? Why do you call me good? Only God is good."

Jesus confronted this man with the truth that we are not acceptably good. Our efforts and actions aren't acceptably good. We have a better chance of getting to the moon by driving a Ford than we do of pleasing God by trying to be good. Genuine goodness comes from a change in heart that happens as God writes his good into the heart through his holy and loving Spirit.

That change occurs only as people receive Jesus. You don't receive Jesus by trying to be good or trying to follow his commands. You receive Jesus by welcoming him into your life. He doesn't come in bodily form, knock on the door and say, "What's for supper?" He comes in spirit. When you ask him to come into your spirit and life, to forgive you and to change it anyway he pleases, you have then invited him to be your Lord and Savior. You can confess all day long that he is your Lord and Savior, but that means nothing until you've invited his rule in your life. It's not only important for you to invite him. It's important for you to receive him. That means let him forgive you and by faith embrace the forgiveness. Let him work with your heart, soften it, and then go ahead and respond to his promptings.

To drive the truth home that no one achieves goodness or acceptance, Jesus continued in answering the question about getting eternal life by saying:

***You know the commandments: "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother."*** (Luke 18:20, NIV)

St. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:19-24 that those very words of law should bring us to our knees in repentance. They were given to expose our sinfulness and lead us to Christ. Unfortunately, the man thought, "I might flirt a lot, but I haven't slept with anyone's wife. I might hate a few people and get even with them, but I haven't killed anyone. I might take credit for other people's ideas and use them for my benefit, but I haven't stolen anyone's money. I might shade the truth to make me look good, but I haven't gotten anybody into trouble by bearing false witness about them. I might have made my mother cry, but I always send a Mother's Day card." So he said, "Yup, I've kept all of those rules since I was little."

Jesus knew better, but he didn't argue. He probably saw in the dress of this leader both his prosperity and power because he was wearing peasant clothes. Jesus looked at him with love

and said, “There is still one thing you lack?” Do you know what it was? The ruler lacked a relationship with Jesus where he could discover true love and righteousness. He lacked what God’s Spirit does in human hearts; but Jesus didn’t tell him that. Instead, Jesus said, “Sell everything you have, give it to the poor and come follow me.”

The man turned away because of riches. Money was his true god. His heart was captured by what it offered: pleasure, power, protection and prestige. He trusted riches rather than God. He served riches rather than God. It was his idol; and like an idol, all that it offered was temporary and illusionary. It was temporary. On your death bed, riches do you no good. They leave you haunted and hurting. They often multiply the pain because of the sacrifices of integrity and relationships made in gaining them. Riches are also illusionary. You can work for riches, but they are powerless to reward you. It is God who blesses you. Without God’s blessing your work is futile. One explosion, one disease can steal them all away.

Are you caught in the riches trap? It’s not just money. It’s anything that you trust and want more than God. Is there something that has your heart and trust more than God? Is there something you find more rewarding? It’s an idol, and it demands the place of Jesus. That idol will steal your joy, erode your love and destroy your life. As days progress, you’ll find yourself empty and haunted. Renounce it. Give it up, and turn to Christ. You won’t be sorry.

One day a young mother walked into my office. She had worked on a church project with some members that were passionate about their relationship with Jesus. Tears filled her eyes as she told me, “I feel so empty.” She felt God was so distant. In the next few minutes she renounced her idols and surrendered her life to Christ. Asking forgiveness, she invited Christ to come live and rule in her heart. Jesus came, and she was so excited and so changed. She became an intimate partner of God on this earth. That’s God’s design for you.