

## Lies of Little Gods: The Cliff Jumper

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April 21, 2024

Matthew 19:16-30

*Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 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. Honor your father and mother. Also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."*

*Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or<sup>[c]</sup> children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold<sup>[d]</sup> and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*

Matthew 19:16-30 (NRSV)

Let us pray: *God, open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and open our ears that we may hear your word in the midst of these words. Open our hearts, God, that your word might fall in. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve, love, and give. Amen.*

I grew up in a youth group in high school, a wonderful youth group. It was really life-changing for me. One of the highlights was going on a canoe trip every summer. We took a week-long canoe trip camping and all of that on the Current River in Missouri. I grew up in Southern Illinois, and it was great fun. Along the way, there was one spot on the Current River called the Blue Hole. That was a deep spring, and you couldn't touch the bottom if you tried. It was cold, clear and it was awesome. There were these cliffs up the side of it, and the brave among us would go up onto these cliffs and either jump or dive into the water.

So, if I'm nothing else, I'm the brave among us, so I decided I would go up and jump off this cliff into the water. And so, you go up the pathway on the side, and you get to the rock at the top. There's a little tree kind of growing there that you can hang onto, and I stepped out onto that rock, and I'm hanging onto that tree. My friends are down at the base shouting, "Pace! Pace! Pace!" And I'm holding tight. I take a deep breath, and to make it worse, you feel the people behind you waiting in line. I couldn't do it. So, I turned and walked down the cliff, down the side path – the walk of shame. I got down to the bottom, and I just couldn't let go and take the jump.

Our passage today is found in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In various similar terms, it's about this man who comes to Jesus. It's interesting Matthew says he's young. Luke says he's a ruler. But all three say he's rich. He comes before Jesus, and he's an over-achiever. This is a guy who wants to do it right. I imagine he's got his iPad and he's got his stylus, that little thing that overachievers have with their iPad. And he says, "What good deed must I do to receive eternal life? Tell me what deed I need to do." And Jesus says, "Keep the commandments." And he says, "I need a specific job description here. Which ones?" Then Jesus immediately goes to what are referred to as the second table of the Ten Commandments which are the ones that have to do with how we treat other people.

He says, "Okay, don't murder." Then the young man says, "Check! Got that one! I'm in good shape." Then the next one is "Don't steal!" The other says, "Check! I'm good!" The next was, "Okay, then don't commit adultery." "Check! I'm humming along!" Then he says, "Well, then don't lie to anyone. Don't bear false witness." The other says, "Check!" "Honor your father and mother." "Check!"

Interestingly, he never says, “Do not covet your neighbor’s possessions.”

Then Jesus says to him, “And love your neighbor as yourself.” What I find so interesting is that he doesn’t even flinch. “Check! I even love my neighbor as myself!”

Look, here’s what I want you to hear. This is a good guy. This is a good man. There’s no implication... the picture is that he’s ethical in his business, that he goes to the right church, and he’s in the right Bible study. He gives himself to the right causes; he treats his family well, he treats his employees well, and he treats his servants well. He is a good person. I’m not being sarcastic here he really is a good person. And he feels like he can say, though I’m not sure I could – “Yes, I’ve loved my neighbor as myself – check!”

Then Jesus says, “Well, then, there’s just that one thing you lack. Sell what you have – give the money to the poor, and you’ll have treasure in heaven, and come follow me.”

Wait...what?

I love the way the Gospel of Mark puts it – “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21). I love you – there’s this one thing. You’re going to have to let go of the branch and jump.

Scripture says, “The young man went away grieving.” I learned the young man “went away sorrowful for he had great possessions.”

It’s just hard to let go, isn’t it?

We’re talking about these lies of little gods. The idea of this sermon series is that there are some things that are good, but we have this tendency to make them the main thing, the most important thing, and to elevate them over that sense of God being number one in our lives, of following Jesus as the most important thing.

We talked two weeks ago about respect and the sense of being well thought of. The Scripture is clear that that’s a good thing; a good name is above all things. The Scripture says not above all things – a good name is to be praised. This idea is that we’re to have a good reputation, we’re to have respect. We’re social beings. But it’s not the main thing. We want approval from God first. We talked about last week and productivity and being that person who actually makes a difference in the world. And by golly, that’s the most important thing: that I’m a person who pulls my weight, who works hard, who picks myself up by my bootstraps, who makes it happen.

But we have a tendency to make that the main thing. And that if we're not being productive, we think we're of no value.

Well, today, I want to talk about the king of little gods, and that king is money. It's the one thing that Jesus talks about more than most things. He talks about money more than prayer, money more than sex (which he talks about almost not at all), talks about money more than worship. The only thing that Jesus talks more about than money is service. Love and service to others.

Why is it we make money the most important thing? Why do we have this tendency to say, "I can let go of everything, but whew! Not that!" Well, it's because it's the one thing that brings along with it so many other gods.

If you've ever been to the Pantheon in Rome, it's a church now, but there are these little alcoves where there would have been different statues of different Roman gods. There would have been the goddess Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. And there would have been statues of Mars, the god of war, and Mercury, the god of speed. More importantly, he's the one who accompanies each person into the Underworld. There would have been Venus, the goddess of love, and there would have been Jupiter in the main position because all the other gods were subservient to Jupiter.

The truth is, in our little gods world, all those other things can come to us if we can just get money. So, what comes with it? We can get security – the god of security comes with money. The Bible says so. The Bible says, "Do not worry about what you will eat or what you will drink, or what you will wear because your 401K and your investments will give you all the security you need." No – that's not what the Bible says, but it does say you have to trust in God, who takes care of the sparrows. Who makes the fields grow? But we have this tendency to believe that if we can just have enough... and of course, we never quite have enough. But if I just have enough, I don't have to worry anymore. I don't have to be anxious. We put our trust in that. But you know what? Cancer comes anyway. And stock markets crash. And economies go into the tank. And so, it still doesn't hold up. It's the lie of the little god.

Along with money, we also get lifestyle. We don't want to let go of our lifestyle, and that's so important. I'm going to say that that's the hardest part for me. It's that I have a 1984 Jeep CJ7 and it's been fully restored. And I do not ever want to let go of that. It's very special. It was a gift! But surely, I don't have to get rid of that? Course not.

We say to ourselves that this stuff isn't all that important, and most of the time, I'm going to be honest with you: there are people probably here who are participating in our service for whom it isn't about lifestyle. It's about having enough to eat or drink and just getting by. And if so then this sermon isn't for you. But I would tell you that for many of us, what we're struggling with is that we just don't want to let go of the lifestyle we've grown accustomed to. I am of the age of Madonna. She's 14 days older than me. What does she say, "We're living in a material world, and I am a material girl." You know what, Pastor, it is so great for you to talk about spiritual things, but we're living in a material world. And I'm a material guy, and I like my stuff. I just don't want to let go of my lifestyle.

With the king god of money, we also get success. My daughters are now at that point in their lives – my oldest four – where they're going through their 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunions. There are lots of little gods at your 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. There's the god of beauty. There's the god of family – you've got your good family, and you think, "Oh, look how good she looks!" But one of them is, "How well off are you? How are they doing? Got a good job?" See, all these things we think come along with money. We think if we can just have that, then all these things will be ours, too. So, it is so tempting to just keep it up near the top of our list because it matters.

So, what are we supposed to do? Seriously, pastor, are you telling me that I'm supposed to sell everything I have, give the money to the poor, and come and follow me? Seriously? Well, I'm not going to quite let you off the hook. But I suspect most of you aren't going to do that. I'm not. So, what can we do?

I read some thoughts about how we might be able to loosen our grip just a little bit. We might be able to loosen our grip just a little bit. Let me share some very quickly. Here are the first things. I wonder if there's a way to simplify your life just a little bit. It's a gift to be simple, right? What I've discovered is the more stuff I have, the more stuff I have to work to hang onto and maintain. We have vacuum cleaners that vacuum by themselves. But ours keeps getting stuck in the corner, and I have to spend hours how to figure out how to keep the little thing from getting stuck in the corner. I have a wonderful television set and it's nice, but I can't figure out the television technology all the time. There's always something you have to worry about and take care of, and pretty soon, your stuff owns you; you don't own any of your stuff at all. Are there some things you can let go of, and you can think, "I don't need that?" That's an idea.

Here's another idea. I found this as I was doing research on ways we can do this. This one was kind of fun. While you're looking for things online to buy, institute a 24-hour hold from the time you see it to the time you actually purchase it. From the time you think you're going to need to buy it. Because 24 hours from now you may not very well think you have to have it after all. And besides, if you wait 24 hours, then you can buy it, and it'll be in your house in three hours. It's there right away. You talk about instant gratification. You buy it, and bingo! It's there. So, we get this kind of impulsive ... "I have to have that!" What if you just said, "Let's wait 24 hours." I thought that was a cool idea.

Here is the most interesting idea that I'm really praying about. This one's going to be a challenge. This person suggested that they'd decided they were going to count and document how much money they were spending on non-essential items. This person said, "I'm going to suggest that you can make whatever you want to count as essential." You can count what you see as essential. But then count all the money you're spending on non-essential items and then identify what percentage of that number you want to give away to something that matters to God and to you. So instead of saying, "I need to tithe my income 10% of my income, I need to give to the church or to charity." Instead, say, "Here's what I'm spending on non-essential items. What does this say compared to what I'm giving to things that matter about what matters to me."

I'm going to tell you: You probably won't ever get to one-to-one. You might, but you probably won't get to a one-to-one ratio. You might start with, "I'm going to give 10% of what I'm spending on non-essential items away to other things." And you might find yourself growing.

And here's another idea. This one I thought was really good. In 2 Samuel 24:24, King David says, "I will not make an offering to God that costs me nothing." So, what this person is suggesting is that whenever you decide to give money, whether it be to a charity or to a church or whatever, you do so by choosing what you're going to give up. Here's an example. I decided – I haven't decided this, by the way – but one might say, "I'm not going to buy a ten-dollar Starbucks latte every morning. Instead, I'm going to give that ... I'm going to give up on that. It's going to cost me to make this gift," so that I recognize that I'm giving myself I'm not just giving of excess. What an interesting idea.

You may have other ideas. To just say, "How can I begin to really turn my sense to trusting in God rather than thinking that this is the most important thing?"

It makes me so sad when I read the story to realize that the rich young man walked away. Because if he'd have stayed, he'd have heard Jesus finish the lesson. Because, Jesus says, "Hey, disciples, you know it's harder for a rich person to get into the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." Then they say, "Well, then, who can be saved?"

There's someone in the 9<sup>th</sup> century who created this sense that there was a gate in Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle" that a camel had to get on his knees to go through. And for every scholar I've ever looked up, I kept searching for where that came from. And every Biblical scholar and archaeologist said that's hooey. The truth is that Jesus was trying to make a point that, no, you can't get through the eye of a needle. No one can. So, they say, "Well, who then is going to do enough good deeds to get in?" And Jesus says, "Nobody can. Only God can get you through. Only God can get you into the kingdom. Only God's grace and God's power will get you to the place where you experience the kingdom of God. Even if you give everything away and come and follow him.

It's only what God can do. And so, we come before God, recognizing that we're not all in, we haven't jumped off the cliff. But God loves us and says, "I want you in my kingdom. Come join me anyway because that's my grace. And when you come join me, I will work in your life by my power and grace to help you unclasp your hands and begin to put first things first."

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, this is about your grace and power, and we stand convicted that we come down that mountain sad because we're not quite ready to be all in. To give away the things that have become those little idols for us. Forgive us, God. And work in our lives that we might let go just a little bit of our belief that money is the most important thing so that we'll know that you're the main thing. And everything else comes from that. In the name of Christ, Amen.*