

# The Rich Young Man

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The Trojans heeded too late the warning to beware of Greeks bearing gifts and admitted into their city a wooden horse full of Greek commandos. One had to be even more circumspect about Greek *gods* bearing gifts and the legendary Midas should have known better when he asked them for the gift of the “Golden Touch”. Yet when he touched his leaden goblet and saw the dull grey change to bright yellow he thought that his cup was overflowing. As indeed it was, until the wine touched his lips. Then the purple liquid congealed into solid gold. He stretched out a fatherly hand to pat his daughter’s head and withdrew it a fraction of a second too late; she froze there – a golden statue. For some people money is everything; for Midas everything was money.

The Synoptics recount the story of another gentleman with similar values:

“And behold, one came to him, saying, ‘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? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.’ He said to him, ‘Which?’ And Jesus said, ‘Honour your father and mother, and, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ The young man said to him, ‘All these things I have observed. What do I still lack?’ 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.’ When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Matthew 19: 16-22).

The young man might have been more sorrowful had he heard what Christ said when his back was turned, though his sorrow may have meant that he knew it already: “And Jesus said to his disciples, ‘*Truly* I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter heaven. *Again* I tell you, 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” (23-24).

This is one of those incidents in the Gospel where the persons involved seem unimportant except in so far as they illustrate a

point. For example, had the episode never occurred what Christ said would have had to be said anyway. And what he said was that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet the individual incident throws light on this general teaching and offers us a psychological insight into the conflict involved. The incident also stresses the important role of the *Question* in Christ's teaching.

There are several questions in the dialogue. The rich man asks Christ what he must do to be saved. Christ asks *him* why he asks this question: "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Finally, after saying that he already observes the commandments, the rich man asks, "What do I still lack?" But that is not really the final question, although it is the last to be grammatically framed as a question. The last and most penetrating question is put in the form of a conditional clause: "If you would be perfect . . ." The "if" is interrogative, with a raising of the eyebrows. "Now *if* you really want to be perfect . . ." allows space for the unspoken "Do you want to be perfect?" And it allows space for the answer to that question. Now let us see the progression of this subtle interrogation.

The rich man's first question seems to receive a rebuff: "Why ask me? One there is who is good." The man came to Christ as to a Rabbi or expert. Christ told him that no Rabbi could solve his problem for him except by reminding him of what he already knew: keep the commandments! In other words the rich man could not solve his problem by unloading it on to another man. It could be solved only by facing his own conscience and God, the "One there is who is good." Which is exactly what he did not want to do. Yet Christ teases him at first: "Why worry? You know the commandments as well as I do; what's the problem?" Those of us with Marxist leanings might like to see Christ as not wanting to waste his surgery hours with a rich hypochondriac who could afford the luxury of wondering what to do with his money, though the man himself made no reference to his wealth. We might be tempted to say impatiently what Christ said impatiently to the Pharisees when they were earnestly discussing what made the drinking vessels ritually clean: "Give the contents to the poor," he said, "And behold all is clean." Behold! Hey Presto! But to the rich young man Christ takes his time in saying this, and when he does say it, it is not primarily the poor he is thinking of, but the rich man. In this incident it is the sadness of the young man, not that of the poor, with which Jesus is concerned. That sadness is important.

"He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." But he had also arrived sorrowful, or he would not have arrived at all. He came with his wealth and with a problem, and Christ told him

that the wealth *was* the problem. Which he already knew. "What do I still lack?" Indeed! What does he lack? He keeps the commandments and his money; the best of both worlds? Not really; only the "good" of both worlds. And for the young man the merely "good" is not good enough. He wants the "best", the "perfect". Or does he? "*If* you want to be perfect . . ." In fact, he does *not* want perfection, or he would have paid the price demanded: "Sell what you possess and give to the poor." Yet he cannot rid himself of the conflict; so he goes away sorrowful. As Christ shakes his head, also sorrowfully, at the man's retreating back he utters in pity rather than in anger those two remarks: How difficult it will be for the rich to enter heaven; how impossible for the rich to enter heaven. We may now examine those comments more carefully.

"Truly I say to you it will be hard for a rich man to enter heaven." This is not so much a moral judgment, still less a passing of sentence, as a sigh of compassion. Mark's Gospel makes this clearer: "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" This is more of a sad, musing reflection which yet draws more attention to the rich man's refusal to accept the invitation. It also throws the choice on to the rich man, since what Christ is saying is, "See how hard it is for the rich to *want* to enter the kingdom of heaven." And this too is really a question: "Do you now see how hard it is for men to seek treasure in heaven?" Yet Christ is also making an excuse for the man, as he would by saying, "Do you see how hard life can be for the poor?" Again Mark seems to draw attention to this by noting: "And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." He loved him and pitied him because he saw his conflict. Christ's next remark is not the contradiction it seems to be: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven." Most scholars now take the camel-needle analogy literally; it does refer to a camel trying to negotiate the eye of a needle. That being so, we need hardly add that even if the camel were a Houdini it could never accomplish that feat. The poor beast is ungainly enough without being put through those contortions. Yet Christ is not saying that it will be impossible for the rich to enter heaven, but with a grim sense of humour employing the kind of hyperbole we have recourse to when saying that someone "hasn't a snowball's chance in hell" of performing something. The rather grotesque picture of the camel struggling through the eye of a needle invites us to gaze at the contortions we often prefer to subject ourselves to rather than make a clean choice. Our attachment to worldly and selfish ideals is the hump on our backs and the bulk that makes such manoeuvres both ludicrous and hazardous.

I referred to this incident as an example of the teasing, coax-

ing, questioning technique of Christ. To that we must add his impish and, at times, fiendish sense of humour which he manifests on other occasions. If we fail to take this factor into account then the incident with which we are now concerned becomes unintelligible, and Christ's comments contradictory. Let us start with the apparent rebuff: "Why ask me about what is good? Keep the commandments." This is not well received: "All these things I have observed; what do I still lack?" There seems to be impatience here: "Don't trot out that stuff to me. I know all about the commandments, and you know I do. Get to the point," To which Christ replies innocently: "What point?" After letting that sink in, and forcing the rich man to answer, to question himself, Christ gives him his full attention and tells him to disentangle himself from his wealth. In Mark's Gospel this advice is given immediately after we hear "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." Although the rich man may have felt that he could well survive without that kind of love he must have known that Christ was doing him a far greater favour than he could confer on the poor by doling out to them his cash. He was receiving a loving invitation. I must repeat here that we are in danger of being misled if we ignore the fact that this invitation was given to this particular individual, and that the whole incident is manipulated by Christ for this particular situation. Some commentators ignore this and set up a dichotomy between salvation and perfection: the man needed "only" (!) to keep the commandments to be saved, but to give away his wealth to attain perfection. The first is seen as a precept; the second as a counsel. However, it is absolutely essential to realize that there is no such dichotomy, that in the case of the man being addressed there is no distinction, as the "camel-needle" simile shows. *Does* he keep the commandments of loving God above all things if he loves his money so much? *Does* he love his neighbour as himself if he hangs on to his cash? Is the observance of the commandments like the following of a Book of Rules? For the rich man it clearly isn't.

"What do I still lack?" The man said that, not Christ. It is a cry for help: "Please tell me why I am so unhappy and unfulfilled." The man is a "ruler", a person in authority, and he has his dignity to think of. No throwing himself at the feet of Christ, or any of that nonsense for him. Yet his question is a pitiful plea for help, not a detached query on an academic theological detail, though that is how he tries to camouflage it. "Put me out of my misery," he begs. So Christ proceeds to do just that. If he wants to unload his problem he must unload his wealth. We must notice that the man tries to outwit Christ in a pathetic way by asking a question: "What do I still lack?" It is one of those cries for help that carries a defiance. We see it in adolescents who will not admit to needing help. We see it in those who want to get rid of the

toothache without getting rid of the tooth. But Christ makes the man ask the question, makes him even answer it to himself, by simply voicing the answer the man already knew to be the only answer. The diagnosis and remedy were known before the consultation. The surgeon shakes his head sadly as the patient walks away with a gangrenous leg he is rather attached to in more ways than one.

I said that we have to remember here that we are dealing with one individual rich man, not with all rich men. *This* particular man cannot reconcile wealth and happiness. "And Jesus, looking upon *him*, loved him," and told him to give his money to the poor. It is after we are told that Jesus loved him that the man is told to give away his money, as if this were the result of Christ's love for him, rather than his love for Christ. And, cynical though we may be, this is precisely what we are asked to believe, and asked to admit as true to our own deepest experience. Christ was saying to the young man, "All right, since I love you I shall ask you to give your money to the poor and to follow me." For this particular man the money is a disease which festers inside him and which Christ kindly offers to remove. To clinch this point we may read Christ's prescription with the three possible emphases it can accommodate. "*If you would be perfect*"; "If *you* would be perfect"; "If you would be *perfect*". They all hang together. If you seriously desire perfection (wholeness, no paralysing conflict) then for *you* there is only one remedy. There are some of us who have to resort to this drastic surgery, while others may find a more subtle detachment therapeutic – such as the responsible and generous employment of money. We all, however, need some detachment, and we shall know which kind by asking and answering ourselves and "the one who is good". This kind of questioning will remind us that the Gospel asks no favours; it confers them. But only if we ask and answer the questions it forces us to face; only if we resolve the doubts it sows in our minds. For before we can believe in Christ's values we have to doubt those of the world. Now let us return to the world of fiction.

I opened this meditation with a reference to Midas; I should like to close it by referring to Silas. George Eliot's Silas Marner was disenchanted with religion and humanity by a sad experience within a narrow and escapist Christian sect. He then found some solace in hoarding gold which one night was stolen. He was further isolated from reality by extreme short-sightedness and periodic fits which left him temporarily bereft of all consciousness. One night while in one of these fits a small child crawled from beside the frozen corpse of her mother and curled up on his hearth rug while he stood like a statue at his doorstep. When he returned to consciousness he saw what he took to be his gold spilling all over the

fireplace. Peering more closely he saw that it was the golden hair of the little girl whom he later adopted. She was to lead him out of himself and out of a tomb into life. Midas lost a daughter and gained a golden statue; Silas lost his gold and gained a flesh-and-blood daughter. The Midas—Silas experience presents us with extremes, which may seem to be useless because they are extremes. Life, we say, is more complicated than that, and brace ourselves for the encounter with the eye of the needle. But life is *not* more complicated than that. The fictional Midas and Silas do not remove us from reality; they force us to confront it. For we all desire extremes. The Gospel dares us to admit this, challenges us to act upon this admission. Silas, Midas, the Rich Young Man, feature in incidents which seem to be rather emotional, if not sentimental, but we dismiss them at our peril. Sentimentality is how something appears to *others*; we have to face ourselves and “the One who is good”, who is good to *us*, as well as perfection itself. In our attitude to wealth, in our responsible handling of it, in the more equitable distribution of it, we have to be aware of our own need that lies beneath the need for cash. If we ignore our own struggles and writhings for perfection we shall ignore the material needs of others. The golden statues must thaw into liquid love that will flow through the eye of any needle. That is the perfect love we need. Not merely the love we are commanded to attain, but which we want to attain. We desire this perfect love, and we settle, if we can only admit it, for nothing less. The Rich Man went away sad. Yet his sadness may have meant that he did not go away. It could indicate that he took with him Christ’s advice which healed while it festered. Had he gone away complacent he would have been doomed. His sadness was his only hope. We often have to accept such restlessness as part of the divine treatment, and thereby gain an insight into what Jesus meant by coming not to bring peace but a sword.