

What We Leave Behind
By Jason Huff
Numbers 11:4-6, 10, 16-20, Philippians 3:10-14, Luke 18:18-30

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 18:18-30. Listen now to God's Word. "A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good -- except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'" "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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." Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

"My idea is to have nothing left. Absolutely nothing. Money is counterproductive – it prevents happiness to come." Those are the words of Austrian millionaire Karl Rabeder. He's giving it all away. He's raffling off his villa in the Alps at \$134 a ticket. He's sold his six gliders, his 42-acre estate in France, and his business. He and his wife are planning to move into a small studio. Why? He says, "For a long time I believed that more wealth and luxury automatically meant more happiness, [but I became] a slave for things I did not wish for or need." He set up a non-profit to give microloans to the needy in Central and South America, and now Rabeder said he feels "free."

In some small way, Karl Rabeder has begun learning the secret of today's scripture lesson. Luke's story about a ruler who comes to Jesus asking about eternal life challenges the very foundations of how we think the world works...and if we look carefully, we see the challenge isn't just to the way we handle our money, but to the core of how we live and how we see ourselves.

The story starts with this ruler coming up to Jesus, asking Him about eternal life. Jesus seems taken aback by the ruler's new greeting – "good teacher." He questions why the man has called him good. Only God is good, Jesus says. Now Jesus' protest sounds odd. Psalms and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes make reference to a "good" man, and there were commendable people throughout the history of Israel. But Jesus is making it clear that all goodness comes from God; the good that we do isn't of ourselves, but from God. Humans may do good deeds from time to time, but only God is genuinely good in His very nature. There a second subtle point...if Jesus is indeed "good" as the man says, then Jesus would have to be God Himself in the flesh. But ultimately, if Jesus is really the "good teacher," then His words have to be accepted as truth. Is the ruler really ready to do that?

The ruler knows something is wrong. He asks Jesus what He must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus quotes the commandments, something that any rabbi of the day would have done. But the ruler knows all that. He's kept the law. He knows he's guiltless as far as others are concerned, yet he still feels like something is missing. What is it? Jesus in His unique insight knows what's bothering him. Jesus says, "Here's the problem. Sell your stuff and give it to the poor – that will give you treasure in heaven. And then come, follow me." This is huge for Jesus. Many people followed Him around, but the last time Jesus personally invited anybody to follow Him was back in chapter 5. Jesus is asking the ruler to become a disciple...part of the loyal group that goes where He goes. Jesus is making an offer extended to a very limited number of people, the same way He called others like Peter and James and John.

But the ruler gets stuck. He's rich. He breaks down in front of them, upset because he knows he can't do it. The ruler has fallen short in keeping the first commandment. He has fashioned money into an idol. When faced with the choice between following Jesus and wealth, he chooses affluence over eternal life. Jesus seems genuinely sorry for him. He says, "How hard it is for a rich person to get into the Kingdom of God – harder than getting a camel through the eye of a needle!" This statement shocks the disciples. All of a sudden, their paradigm has changed. To their way of thinking, wealth is proof of God's favor. Instead, Jesus says that it's impossible for a wealthy person to get into the Kingdom! The disciples start freaking out about this. "If that's the case," they ask, "who can get in?"

That's where the story changes. Jesus says, "It's impossible for people, but possible for God." He's stressing once again the heart of His good news for us: we can't save ourselves, but God can. God can get us out of our slavery to other gods, whether idols of stone or money or sex or whatever. God can forgive us and release us to serve Him. Through Jesus Christ's sacrifice, we can be free to respond with joy.

This is when Peter pipes up, speaking what all the disciples are thinking. They've left behind everything...jobs, fishing gear and boats, homes, wives and children. Their paradigm still tells them that the rich are blessed by God – if they've got nothing left to give, what do they do now? Jesus assures them that there are eternal rewards for their sacrifice. Those who give up their lives – their possessions, their families, their jobs – these are the ones God will bless, and not just in ways they can see now. They don't yet understand everything, they don't see the full picture, but their belief – as tiny as it is – will be rewarded as they keep walking in faith.

Last week, we were challenged whether we would become the self-righteous Pharisee or the humble tax collector. This week, Jesus challenges us again to find who we would become: the rich ruler who falls away or a faithful disciple who follows to the end. I think there are three useful questions we can use to examine ourselves to see where we fall. First, *where does your devotion lie?* Second, *what have we left behind?* And finally, *what have I saved for myself?*

Let's look at the first question: *where does your devotion lie?* Does God get the first of you or the last of you? As with all of these questions, this isn't just about money. Some of us give the last of our money and the first of our time and talents. Some of us give the first of our money and the last of our time and talents. Neither one is really what God wants. God wants the first of us, the very best of us, and indeed the whole of us.

In the Old Testament, the first wheat, the first wine, the first oil, the first wool from the sheep, all of them were given to the temple. They were called the “first fruits.” The Israelites gave them acknowledging that all things come from God and they trusted Him to supply all they needed in the rest of the harvest. In the New Testament, Jesus is called the firstfruits of resurrection, a proof that God will resurrect us from the dead and bring us into everlasting life. God wants the firstfruits of our lives too, so that we trust in Him to supply what we need.

God also wants the very best of us. Under Jewish law, the people of Israel weren't allowed to eat the fat of any animal. The fat belonged to God. Leviticus 3:17 says, “You must never eat any fat or blood. This is a permanent law for you and all your descendants, wherever they may live.” While God doesn't make Christians follow the dietary laws, the point remains – God received the choicest part of the animal. Nowadays, people want to get rid of the fat, but I grew up remembering my dad saying, “The fat's where the flavor is!” In the same way, God wants the best parts of us. He wants us to give Him our best efforts, not just what's left.

What it comes down to is devotion. Does God fit into your life, or is your life dedicated to God? God is devoted to us. He loves us enough that Jesus ransomed us at the cost of His own life. His devotion to those who love Him knows no bounds! Our devotion to Him doesn't come from obligation but out of thanksgiving from knowing He has poured out His love on us. If we are devoted to Him, we will give the first and best of what we are to Him because He has given His all for us.

If we're devoted to God, we'll start seeing it in the answer to the second question: *what have we left behind?* Sometimes they will be literal things: the TV we didn't buy because the cash went to support a missionary or the pool that became money to support the hungry. But there are other things following Jesus will cost us. What friends no longer drop by because we talk about God too much? What cousin thinks we're a loon for belonging to a church? Some of you come here without your spouse because of your faith...I salute you for that. There are still other things we leave behind. What social events do we skip to fellowship with other Christians? How have we limited our family's participation in sports and activities on Sunday mornings? Being devoted to God and devoted to a church requires sacrifice. There's no way around it.

Sometimes, we'd like God to be satisfied already. We'd like for our sacrifices to end, to have somehow paid our dues and be able to slide comfortably into eternity. But God knows that things we don't leave behind us shackle us, and He's going to keep nudging us to give them up. We can't straddle the fence. If you are a faithful follower, you're going to keep leaving things behind. Be honest with yourself. Look at it all and say, “What have I given up for the sake of the Kingdom, and what is God still calling me to give up?” The disciples *did* leave everything behind...but they gained eternal life. Our hope is the same as theirs.

That leads us right into the final point – *what have I saved for myself?* There's a favorite movie of mine called **Gattaca**. It's set in a future where many parents pay for their children to be genetically enhanced into their perfect selves. Vincent, on the other hand, is like one of us. He has the high probability of heart disorders and bad eyesight, and he's destined for menial labor. His parents have Anton next – and because he's been enhanced, he's stronger, taller, and faster. They become the fiercest of rivals.

Vincent and Anton live by the sea, and as children they play a game called “chicken.” They both swim out as far as they can; the loser’s the one who heads back to shore first. Anton always wins. But one day, Vincent doesn’t head back first. Anton eventually tires out and Vincent has to rescue him. Years pass and the two don’t see each other. As adults, they finally meet, rivalry as fierce as ever, and they swim out to sea. With all his genetic perfection, Anton still can’t win – and Vincent again saves him. Anton wonders aloud, “How is it that you could beat me?” Vincent answers, “I never saved anything for the swim back.”

“I never saved anything for the swim back.” Vincent put his all into the race, knowing it might cost him everything. That’s the thought we face as we consider our devotion to God. What are we holding back? What is it we keep in reserve in case God doesn’t come through? What’s our plan if things don’t turn out? Are we swimming toward God’s Kingdom, or are we still looking back at the shoreline? I want to be clear – we are told to care for our families and our obligations, to be wise stewards. Next week, we’ll hear about a wealthy man who Jesus welcomes into the Kingdom of God, even though he gives much less away than Jesus called for from the rich ruler. But when God calls, *we must follow*. We put a lot of time and energy into things that please us but aren’t important to the Kingdom of God. What would it be like if instead of holding back for fear that God won’t do as He promised, we move forward and give all of ourselves to Him in faith? As Hebrews 10:39 puts it, “We are not among those who shrink back and are lost; we are the sort who keep faith until our souls are saved.”

This is a tough time to trust in God. The economy is doing better, but will it take a turn for the worse? Will my pension hold out, or my health insurance? Will my job still be here in six months? All these are real and honest questions, and God isn’t bothered by them. But God’s answer is still, “trust me.” He is the solution to every last worry and concern we have. He will see us through. And here’s the great news behind all of these questions...if you’ve come up short, don’t worry. God doesn’t condemn you for what you have or haven’t done. He wants to be the one you come to, the one you trust to change you from the inside out, so that you can take these leaps of faith. With men it’s impossible to leave everything behind to follow God. But with Him, all things are possible. Trust in Him and He will show you the way through.

I want to share with you an answer to prayer and a way to practice what we’re seeing today. As we discussed a few months ago, we are spending more than we are receiving each month. On top of that, we need another \$13,000 or so to replace our roof. We’d pledged what we thought we could give out of our tax refund; that came through and we gave it. Knowing that the roof was going to cost more, we still wanted to give, but we had no idea where it was going to come from. I prayed God would show us an answer. Well, this week, we got a notice from our bank saying that they had charged us \$700 too much for our escrow account. They have to return that money in the next month or two. When I saw that, I knew that was our next donation to the roof. It wasn’t money we expected or needed...it would be nice to go spend it, but God provided it to us so we could help the church. I am confident of that, and when the check comes, the whole thing will go to “Raise The Roof.”

And what's more, I am confident that similar stories are just waiting to happen over the next month or two. God is going to show you where you can put your trust in Him. Maybe it will be in your tax refund; maybe it will be a gift from a friend or an insurance policy or something else. I believe God will make it clear to you. It doesn't mean it will be easy to give, only that God will make the way for it to happen. It might be for our general fund, which needs it; it might be for the roof. God might have you use it another way for His Kingdom – He works in mysterious ways. But be on the lookout for ways you can trust Him, ways you can be confident of your devotion to Him and show it. He will make a way.

As I conclude this morning, I want to take just a moment to think about the troubling story we heard from the Old Testament this morning. God led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt towards a land He promised to give them. He provided for them along the journey in the middle of a harsh wilderness. But the people started complaining bitterly about how much better it was in Egypt because they had good food. They had been beaten and whipped and worked ruthlessly, the Egyptians had murdered their sons...yet they wanted to go back for the things they left behind. That generation who longed for the things they left didn't make it into the promised land; they all died in the desert, and their sons and daughters received it. The rich ruler in this morning's story turned away from Jesus' personal invitation because he was too consumed with what he would have to leave behind. It's not easy to put our chains behind us, but chains they are. Will you trust God with everything you have and everything you are so that He can release you from bondage and bring you into the glorious riches of His Kingdom? May it be so for all of us.