

**TFTD 2025.28 Saturday April 5<sup>th</sup>**

## **The treasure trap: Luke 18.18-30**



*A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother”.’ He replied, ‘I have kept all these since my youth.’*

*‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’* That’s the question that runs through this whole chapter: and Jesus comes up with some surprising answers. There’s the little story of the Pharisee who does everything right, and the tax-collector who knows he’s not good enough for God — but he’s the one who receives God’s mercy (v.14). Then there are the disciples, busily trying to protect Jesus from being ‘bothered’ by a crowd of noisy kids — but it’s the kids who are nearer the heart of God (v.17). And now here comes a really nice young man, well-off, polite, law-abiding — a young man who has everything. Just the kind of student any teacher would want, surely? But Jesus has a further challenge for him.

This is not the first time Jesus has been asked that question. It came right at the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, in the lawyer’s question at Luke 10.25: *‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’* There too, Jesus answers by referring to the law, which the lawyer summarizes in its positive form: *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself’* (Luke 10.27). Right answer, says Jesus: *‘Do this, and you will live.’* Only it turns out the lawyer has hidden reservations about who this love business applies to: *‘Who is my neighbour?’* (10.29). So Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan, to get him thinking about loving without limits, loving the way God loves us.

I wonder if something similar is going on here. Here’s a young man who thinks of the commandments in negative terms: a list of things to avoid if you want to keep on

good terms with God. All the “Thou shalt not’s”. And actually, for a well-brought-up young man with good intentions, that’s not so difficult (there’s no need to steal if you already have everything money can buy). But if you turn the commandments around and put them in their positive form, it’s much more challenging: what does it mean to love my neighbour as myself, if she has nothing and I have everything? That’s a different question.

*When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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.’*

You get the feeling that Jesus felt really sorry for this young man (Mark’s gospel tells us that he ‘felt love for him’ — Mk 10.21). Jesus has had a lot to say about wealth in this section of the gospel — but here we see its dangers in psychological terms. There’s an African equivalent to Jesus’ joke about the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle, about a monkey who finds some peanuts at the bottom of an empty kerosene tin with a narrow hole at the top. He can get his skinny arm in to grab the nuts — but he can’t get it out, as long as his fist is closed tight around his treasure. The treasure has become a trap: he can only get out of it by letting go.

*Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ He replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’ Then Peter said, ‘Look, we have left our homes and followed you.’ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.’*

So if we interpret the commandments positively, if we seek to love without limits, the way God loves us — is it truly possible to keep them? Isn’t that just a tantalizing ideal, way beyond our grasp? Is it worth even trying? Maybe the secret is in those little words Jesus adds: *then come, follow me*. Jesus shows us the possibility of unlimited love — and the cost of it. There’s no way we can do that on our own: we can only do it by following Jesus, starting (like the tax-collector) by recognising our need of God’s mercy, letting his love flood our hearts, taking baby steps in the way of love, letting his Spirit melt our stubborn hearts and open our grasping fists. And if we’re prepared to do that — who knows what God can do!

God bless,

Loveday

