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Sermon Title: Perfection
Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30
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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 only 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 children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Well, that's some Scripture! We were actually scheduled to study this at our weekly Bible Study a few weeks ago, but I thought, "Why annoy just a few people? Why not take it to the whole church and annoy everyone?" So here we are, just a few days after Fairfield County was ranked as the number-one area for concentrated wealth in all of America. In this little Fairfield-to-Greenwich corridor, this little corner of Connecticut, there's more money than anywhere else in America.

And I'm not pointing the finger at you. Whenever I preach or teach this Scripture lesson about "the rich young ruler," with its seemingly heavy condemnation of wealth, I am always quick to admit the finger is pointed at me. For someone in my profession, a church pastor, I get a very good salary. I live in a big house. I'm about to turn in my leased car for a new one. All our kids have gone to good private colleges. I'm doing fine. So if this Scripture lesson is a back-of-the-hand slap at rich people, I'm in line for the next slap.

But that's a long read of this Scripture. Jesus always takes people as they are and situations as they present themselves. So over the course of his ministry, he's faced with powerful people, arrogant people, nice people. Selfish or angry people, hungry people, sick or lonely or fearful people, bossy people, scary people. Helpful, happy, hopeful people. Doubtful, lost people, high and mighty people, poor and needy people. And he treats each one as an individual. In this particular instance, a man comes to Jesus, and he's variously described as "rich ... young ... and a ruler," a nobleman, a leader of some sort.

The young rich guy initiates the whole conversation. He comes up to Jesus and point blank asks, "How do I get to heaven? What good thing must I do? What's the bottom line if I want eternal life?" So they have a little back and forth about the nature of goodness, and they both agree that a good starting point is to obey God's laws. God's laws, like the Ten Commandments, are there to order our lives a little bit, to give us some obvious parameters for decent behaviors. Don't kill. Don't steal. Don't cheat. Don't lie. Be nice. Be respectful. Be true to God and each other.

The young guy says, "I do that already. All of that. Anything else, just to be sure? "Well ... " Jesus says, sort of slowly, sort of carefully, sort of taking the measure of the man, "Well ... " if you would be perfect, if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor. Then come, follow me."

There is so much in this story. So much. And unfortunately, it gets remembered for the sound bites, not the substance. The sound bites are first, "Go and sell all you have and give to the poor." (Mark 10:21) And second, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven." (Mark 10:25)

This makes easy preaching. Most people in the world aren't rich. Most churches aren't rich. So most people get to snicker and wag their heads when the rich young ruler, the Bible says, "walked away sorrowful because he had great wealth." He failed Jesus's test, He wasn't up to the level of commitment demanded by Jesus. This makes a lot of people feel morally superior, or if they would gladly give away everything they had and follow Jesus.

The "eye of the needle" always intrigues people. Some scholars think it refers to a very small, narrow gate that led into Jerusalem, so tiny that you couldn't get your pack animals through — your camel, your donkey. You would have to unpack everything. You couldn't get you and your stuff in at the same time. So that image of rich people learning the old adage, "You can't take it with you," well, people like that. People like it that it won't be easy to get into heaven. Not for their landlord, their boss. Not for the Lord of the Manor or Donald Trump, Lady Gaga, Alex Rodriguez, and Mayor Bloomberg. That just feels good. Instant karma is going to get them! The idea that they'll all have to suck it in and try to squeeze through the eye of a needle is a humorous and satisfying thought. Good for a cheap laugh, but it really misses the point of the Scripture.

It's actually a very interesting conversation begun by a very earnest fellow. The young guy is interested in goodness, in eternal life, in righteousness, in obeying the law and following the Scriptures. He even asks if there is more he can do! He says, "I've kept all the laws. I've done everything Moses taught us, everything the rabbis tell us, everything the Torah teaches ... is there more? What do I still lack? (Matthew 19:20)

This is not some selfish, snobbish, money-grubbing spoiled brat. This is an intense, dedicated, inquisitive, faithful young man. Think about it. Jesus goes over the Ten Commandments with him, one by one, and he does those! If you obey those Ten Commandments, you are doing right by your society, your community, and you're doing right by God. Jesus even tosses in, "Love your neighbor," and the young rich guy does that!

This is a good kid! And remember, he's the one who asks how to take it deeper. He already has the answer to his questions about eternal life. "Obey the commandments," Jesus said. The young guy already passed muster with 3,000 years of Jewish teaching. And so here's the Son of God, Jesus, telling him he's all set for eternal life! But he wants to go deeper, the kid does, he wants to take his faith to another level: higher, deeper, richer, fuller. Jesus catches that and says, "If you want to be *perfect*, perfection, all right, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor. Then come, follow me."

When I was a kid in Queens, we loved to challenge one another, push one another, see how far we could get one another to go. Somebody would say, "I dare you," usually with a macho shove to the chest. Then the ante would be raised. "I double-dare you." Now your masculinity was on the line, your place in the tribe. Then came the clincher: "I triple-dare you ... with a cherry on top!" If you were triple-dared, you were being called out. There was no backing off. Your standing in the universe was at stake. It was all or nothing. And if you met a triple-dare with a cherry on top, you were set for life, a legend forever.

Jesus was triple-daring this young man. "If you want to be perfect, if you really want to go deeper, if you dare to find out what you're really made of, if you want to stand side by side with me, O.K., go sell everything, give it all to the poor, and follow me ... deal?"

No deal. He backs down. He walks away. Then, Jesus does his riff on wealth, which is quite fascinating. In short order — check it for yourself — in short order, Jesus says, in effect (and I'm paraphrasing), "It's hard for rich people to enter God's kingdom. They are too encumbered, too burdened, too attached to other things; they really need to unburden themselves. But if they do, they'll end up with more than they ever imagined, sooner or later. Because, with God all things are possible. So put yourself last, you'll end up first. Sacrifice, you'll end up with gain. Dare to be perfect ... you'll be amazed!"

I didn't make that up. It's all there. Including ending up with more. The problem isn't stuff or riches or wealth or abundance. The problem is the place it has in our lives, the control it has over us.

I have no idea who Steve Madden is; evidently he's gigantic in the world of shoes. It so happens I don't often wear Steve Madden in the pulpit, but I may try. *The New York Times* had a huge article about him in the *Thursday Styles* section. His life evidently was a mess. He actually spent two and a half years in prison, but he's back in the fashion world. A new man. The

problem, he said, the problem that led him to prison, that nearly destroyed him, the problem he said, was drugs, alcohol ... and [my] love of money." Steve Madden, shoe maven to the world of fashion, a modern-day "rich young ruler," someone who had to figure out what's number one, and what isn't.

The crux is not money but what money means to us, or does to us. I think the most misquoted, misused verse in the Bible clears it all up. Everybody quotes the Bible as saying, "Money is the root of all evil." The Bible says no such thing! What it says is, "The LOVE of money is A root of evil. The LOVE of money, greed, obsession, abuse of money is ONE root of evil." (1 Timothy 6:10)

What Jesus does is dare us to let go, let go of addiction to stuff, love of stuff, attachment to stuff. Let go. In its place, try perfection. Try something impossible! And Jesus is consistent with this. He has extraordinarily high standards. Impossible standards. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "You've heard it said, 'thou shall not kill,' but I say, 'don't be angry.' You've heard, 'thou shalt not commit adultery.' I say, 'don't even lust.'" Face it. Jesus has just made two impossible demands.

I live along Rte. 95. I drive it every day, and I'm supposed to *never* get angry. I live in a nation where the most anticipated cultural event of the year is the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, and I'm never allowed to lust. If I want to be perfect. In each instance, Jesus is trying to help us get to the core of the problem. Everything in life has a surface and a core. If we want to glide along the surface, so be it. So we have Newtown, we have addiction and abuse. We have war and terror and poverty, and we can all just wring our hands and whine. Or we can dare to go deeper. To the core. Looking for real solutions. And aiming for perfection.

That's Jesus's triple-dare with a cherry on top: perfection. Don't be afraid of it. Don't shy away from it. Dare it. The problem for the rich young ruler was imagination, or lack of imagination. He couldn't imagine life without his stuff. And he couldn't imagine that God might have something greater in store for him. He didn't dare try it. He didn't even hear Jesus's promise of greater abundant blessing! All he knew was what he had. He couldn't imagine what he didn't have. All he knew was what he was worth. He couldn't imagine that God valued him even more!

As I said at the beginning, it's tricky talking about wealth. I'm wealthy. I live in a wealthy community with a wealthy church in a wealthy nation. And of course, here's one of the most obvious problems: we want your money. We need a million of it every year. We're not exactly standoffish when it comes

to money. So what's the real deal with money, wealth, stuff? The Bible is hardly anti-riches. Solomon was rich beyond our wildest dreams. Job started off the richest man in the nation and ended up even richer. King David, Queen Esther, even slaves like Joseph and Daniel ended up in palaces with lives of wealth and power. And this rich young ruler was assured of heaven with or without giving away every penny.

So where am I going with this sermon? Well, I'm not letting us off the hook. We started with a story that most of the world interprets as slamming rich people. And I dared to suggest that that's a way-too lazy way to read the story. The rich young ruler is actually a really good guy. Plus, Jesus promised that those who give up everything will end up even richer in wonderful ways. But I'm not letting us off the hook, and neither does Jesus. He challenges our affections. What do we really love? What drives us? Motivates us? Controls us? Needs us?

Alida and Carol get back from India in a couple of hours and typical of both of them, they return just in time to run our middle school youth group and come to the chili cook-off tonight. Thanks to modern technology, I've been in touch with them several times every day, and there has been one recurring theme (other than the bombs), one lingering impression: the overwhelming need.

The need is greater. The suffering is more. The poor are hurting. And we're in the middle of it. Just as we are in the middle of Appalachia, and we're in the middle of Bridgeport. And, truth be told, we're in the middle of all kinds of hurts right here in beautiful, bucolic, historic New England, wealthy Fairfield County. As you know, life is just as real here as anywhere else.

The world thinks of India as Gandhi and gurus and call centers. The world thinks of Bridgeport as hopeless. The world thinks of us as rich. The world thinks of Appalachia as ... well, I don't think the world thinks of Appalachia at all. But we do. We think constantly about how to use money to do extraordinary things.

Money is a challenge, whether you have it or don't have it. Money is a challenge. What Jesus is really asking is, "Are you up to the challenge?" Do you dare, double-dare, triple-dare to trust God to use your best? And be perfect.