

“Shocking Riches of Grace”

6/16/19; Mark 10: 17-31 continued

by Rev. Steve Hammond for FBC of Newport, NH

//24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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.”

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”//

—Mark 10:24-27 (NIV)

Do you recall the quote I put on the back of the bulletin for the weeks I was away on vacation? It was from a biography on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written by Eric Metaxas. What an interesting book. What an inspiring life. And what a way to view the changing times around World Wars One and Two, when Hitler rose to power in one of the richest, most civilized and Christian countries in the world. I urge you to read it, as I can't review it all for you here. But I do want to give you what I see in that quote. Here it is again.

“Somehow Bonhoeffer’s time in New York, especially his worship at the ‘negro churches,’ played their part in all of this [deepening of his prayers and Bible reading]. He had heard the gospel preached there and had seen real piety among a suffering people. The fiery sermons and the joyous worship and singing had all opened his eyes to something and had changed him. Had he been ‘born again’?”

“What happened is unclear, but the results were obvious. For one thing, he now became a regular church goer for the first time in his life and took Communion as often as possible.”

—from *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, © 2010, by Eric Metaxas, p. 123, speaking on the effect of a trip to America in 1931 on the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945.

My intention for putting it on the back of your bulletins was to show the importance of worship. It was the spiritually moving experience of worship in those black churches that spoke to Bonhoeffer in a way that touched his life profoundly. And it was his own worship that became an evidence of the change within him.

This quote, and that man, serves a purpose for our message today. Like the rich, young ruler in Mark 10, Bonhoeffer was a rich man, a young and upright man. He was raised in a Christian home with a wonderful, loving family. He was more or less homeschooled, with his mother being sure to guide his study of the scriptures. But there was no emphasis on church going. His father was more a believer in science than Christ, but he respected his wife’s faith and upbringing of the children. When Dietrich chose to be a theologian (at age 14) it was not popular in the family as other brothers chose to be a scientist and lawyer as expected. Germany was a Christian nation as well, but it was floundering. Churches were stagnant, the country was reeling from World War I, and the political landscape seemed hungry for the rise of a man named Hitler.

Yet, unlike the figure in the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a rich, young, religious leader in his country indeed chose to follow Jesus, as reflected in that quote. In doing so, he brought a vitality and depth to the German church. He became one of the earliest and most faithful voices opposing Hitler. He organized and led the “Confessing Church” which differentiated itself from the traditional German Church which was increasingly embracing the political and theological doctrines of the Nazi party. He played a vital role in keeping the world informed as to what was really happening in Germany during the darkest days of WW II. And in the end, Bonhoeffer was martyred, two weeks before the end of the war, for his part in supporting the failed assassination attempt against Hitler. He died willingly and faithfully, in keeping with his determination to walk graciously in obedience to Jesus Christ.

Yet, didn't Jesus say how difficult it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Didn't he say it was like a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle? Here it is:

3. The third shock: Mark 10: 22ff //At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. 23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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."//

The shock of this statement comes in light of the great respect the people of Jesus' day had for rich people. They were most often considered to be blessed by God. Sure there were rich tyrants, but for those seeking to follow the ways of God, riches seemed to be a special blessing of approval. Their riches could only make that following better than that of the average person.

In fact, this would seem to be the case with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The wealth and position of his family did play a role in Dietrich's Christian life and ministry. It got him off to a start with a solid family, happy childhood, and good education. And it played a role in his getting away with opposing Hitler as far as he did.

But let's not put the cart before the horse. Why did those riches play a role in opposing the evil of the Nazi regime in the first place? It wasn't the riches themselves. For if that were the case, then rich people everywhere would have risen up and never allowed those evils to take place.

Instead, Dietrich's voice was rather unique, even lonely at times, as a theologian, as a pastor, a leader and as an opponent to Hitler. And any of Bonhoeffer's wealth employed against the evils of the Third Reich were simply the consistent, daily, faithful decisions of the man who's heart was sold out to Christ long beforehand.

In light of what Jesus said about camels and needles, we can be assured that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's faith and following of Jesus Christ would have been impossible for anyone to fake. Such a life would not be lived by human strength, or smarts, or riches. It would have to come from God himself.

And it did.

But God's saving of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a "rich man's special." God did not give him an extra amount of grace reserved for the extra-difficult case of a rich man. No. God gives the same miracle of his rich, lavish love and grace to everyone who will receive it through his Son Jesus Christ. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved... and saved miraculously. It's just that it's so rare for the rich to call upon that name and receive it. Especially when they're aware that giving one's life over to Christ means giving one's checkbook over to him as well.

It's always the case that when anyone comes to Christ, rich or poor, we all of us need a miracle. No, not just "a miracle," but the greatest miracle of all. We need the sacrificial death of the Son of God. We need his shed blood to cover our sins. And we need this death to be the defeat of sin and of death itself, as proven by his resurrection on the third day. It's not that we're all rich. It's that we're all sinners. And we all need the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

This is what is behind the fourth shock coming from Jesus in our text.

4. Fourth shock: Mark 10:26ff //26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."//

I wonder if we sometimes have difficulty being shocked by what an "impossible" thing God has done to make it possible for sinners, like us, to be saved. I know we're expecting some of that sense of shock (or maybe even most of it) to come over us when we meet Jesus face to face. But I urge you not to simply wait for that day. Do not expect tomorrow to give you a joy and gratitude and desire to worship, if you do not at least have the seed of such things already planted in your heart today.

Look at what Jesus says to Peter after Peter observes quite frankly, "We have left everything to follow you!" Jesus assures Peter and the others that they will know a richness to their lives—in this age—even though they've left everything. If they've left their homes, they will find richer homes. If they have left family, they will still find an abundance of brothers, sisters, mothers and children. If they have left their fields of work, they will find fields white unto harvest here and now.

He also does mention that they will find persecutions, but I think there's a hint of blessing even in that. For everybody has opposition in life, in some form or another. But these persecutions will be for the sake of Christ, of which there is no better calling. In those very persecutions a believer in Christ will find an intimate fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.

All these things Jesus says his followers will be able to find *in this life*. It's not a life of worldly poverty, nor of worldly riches. It's a life in the riches of God's grace through Jesus Christ. Then in the age to come, that richness becomes eternal, eternal life in Christ.

But you see the seeds, and even some flowering of that life, are planted here and now, “this side of heaven” if you will. It doesn’t just pop into existence in the next world. In fact, if there’s no seed of salvation, no seed of faith in Christ and life of following him planted in our hearts here and now, then there’s nothing to grow and live eternally in the next world. Or if there’s only but a little such seed planted now and only a little watering of it, on account of our preoccupation with the temporary joys of our homes and families and fields of work, then we may well find a small reward awaiting us in the next age. I believe this is what is behind Jesus’ summary words in verse 31. “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

This isn’t to say eternal life in the new heaven and new Earth will be kind of ho-hum-familiar. I’m sure there’ll be a wonderful shock to it all. Like the corny movie I saw about a boy raised on Mars coming to Earth for the first time and experiencing the ocean, the atmosphere and the green grass and trees. He never used what I thought would be the perfect line in describing this experience. I thought he should say, “You people already live in heaven. You know that don’t you?” But he never said it. And like I say, it was a popcorn-corny kind of movie.

Of course we don’t live in heaven. There is much trouble and trial in this world. And even the rich things of this world can deceive us, tempting us to think we’ve arrived, that this is all the heaven and saving we need. Don’t believe it. Don’t put your faith in the riches of this world.

What we need to believe in is the riches of God’s grace.

The beauty and wonder of God’s creation is only a hint of the eternal life God intends for his people to live.

But the beauty and wonder of God’s Son is not just a hint. He’s the heart of heaven itself, come to us in the here and now. Jesus is the shocking reality of God’s miraculous grace for saving, not only the impossible rich man, but every man, woman or child willing to believe in Jesus.

Give him your life as he’s already given you his. Surely that’s the richest bargain you’ll ever come across in this world or any other.