

**THE HAZARD OF WEALTH**  
***The Rich Young Ruler***

**November 24, 2019**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Luke**  
**Revision F**

**Gospel: Luke 18:18-27**

The subject of today’s Gospel lesson, The Rich Young Ruler, is also read in the Orthodox lectionary from Matthew 19 on the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. In commenting on this, the Church Fathers have followed two main themes. One is the hazard of wealth, which we will cover today. In leading up to Christmas<sup>1</sup>, we take a close look at wealth; “When Jesus comes to us in complete poverty, possessing nothing, this is a good question for us to consider”. The other use of this Reading centers on the ruler’s reference to Jesus as “Good Teacher” and Jesus’ reply, telling him to keep the Commandments. This has been the proof text for many heretics, who said that it proves that Jesus is not God. This we address on the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. In the West today’s Gospel lesson is read from either Matthew or Mark on either the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Trinity.

**Table of Contents**

Gospel: Luke 18:18-30; (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31).....	1586
A Camel passing Through the Needle’s Eye .....	1587
The Problem with Wealth .....	1590
What Does It Mean to Become Perfect? .....	1593
Following Christ .....	1597
Our Free Will to Follow Christ .....	1598
Following Christ out of Love .....	1599
Following Christ as a Bishop in the Church.....	1601
Difficulties in Following Christ .....	1602
Following Christ Means Giving Up Something .....	1604
Selling Everything to Obtain Treasure in Heaven .....	1605
Wealth is Not Evil by Itself .....	1609
Impossible with Men, But Possible with God.....	1612

**Gospel: Luke 18:18-30; (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31)**

The central figure in today’s Gospel lesson is a young man (Matthew 19:20) who was referred to as “a certain ruler” (Luke 18:18), and who was the ruler of the local synagogue. He would be the equivalent of a pastor of a Church today. He had been well educated and schooled in the Mosaic Law and had kept the Law from his youth (Luke 18:22). Yet he seemed to realize he was missing something and asked Jesus, “What good thing shall I do that I may have, or inherit, eternal life?” (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18; Matthew 19:16). In keeping with his dutiful observation of the Law, he figured there was something he could do for Jesus or for His disciples or for the poor that would guarantee him eternal life. This practice was common for political leaders then

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<sup>1</sup> Lev Gillet, The Year of Grace of the Lord, St Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1992, p. 93.

(today, also!!). For example, King Herod, whom the Jews despised, spent many years rebuilding the Temple into the ornate structure it was in Jesus' day. All this Herod did to curry the Jews' favor, even though they still despised him.

Jesus' first response struck at the heart of the matter. The young ruler addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher" as if Jesus was merely another man whose influence was important. Jesus pointed out that no one was good but God alone. [This was the whole point of the Old Testament sacrificial system: to atone for the sins of the priest first, then for all the people since no one was good]. If the rich young ruler could accept Jesus as good, then here is the Word from the Good One: Keep the commandments. From his youth the young ruler had learned the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) as a Creed as had all Jewish boys. He knew the Ten Commandments by heart as well as a great deal of commentary and interpretation on the Law.

### **A Camel passing Through the Needle's Eye**

Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again, I say to 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." When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" (Matthew 19:23-25). This is a difficult saying to interpret. One might argue that since it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, and this has never happened in the history of mankind, this implies that no rich man has ever entered the kingdom of God<sup>2</sup>. Yet Abraham and Job were very wealthy, and they are referred to as saints and as models for the righteous to imitate.

The illustration that Jesus used of camels and needles needs explanation. The main gates of most cities in ancient times were huge wooden structures set in an archway and often overlaid with brass for strength and flame proofing. At night, the gates were closed and locked with a bar on the inside and they were not opened until morning. Travelers that arrived late in the day after the gates were closed were forced to spend the night outside the city unless there was some provision for them to get into the city. Outside the city, law and order did not exist at night and travelers were at the mercy of outlaws. This is still the case today in some third world countries.

To deal with this situation, many ancient cities had a "needle's eye gate" which was a small, low door beside the main gate. Such a feature existed on at least one of the gates of Jerusalem and Damascus<sup>3</sup>. A man could fit easily through the "needle's eye gate", but a camel, being a large animal, could not fit easily. If the camel's pack (which could weight up to 1,000 pounds) were removed and the camel were made to kneel, the camel could just barely crawl through the "needle's eye gate."

The statement Jesus made, that it is easier for a camel to go through the needle's eye gate than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, made use of the above imagery. Like the camel, the rich man first needs to unload his pack or burden. The Parable of the Sower refers to this pack as "the cares of this world, the deceit of riches, the desire for other things" (Mark 4:19) and the

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<sup>2</sup> Jerome, Against the Pelagians, I, 10.

<sup>3</sup> G. Christian Weiss, Insight into Bible Times and Customs, Good News Broadcasting Association, Lincoln NE, 1972, pp. 24-25.

pleasures of life (Luke 8:14). These are things that appeal to our flesh and which can lead us away from God. Some of the early disciples, like Barnabas (one of the Seventy) sold a large amount of property and brought the entire proceeds to the Twelve (Acts 4:34-37). Everyone else in the Early Church did the same, except the price of their property wasn't as much as that of Barnabas. Ananias and Sapphira on the other hand, were caught in the deceit of riches and held back part of the proceeds – and paid dearly (Acts 5:1-10).

This does not mean that no Christian can be rich. The Patriarch Job was very wealthy (Job 1:1-3, 42:12-17), yet the Lord referred to him as a blameless and upright man who had no peers in his righteousness (Job 1:8, 2:3). The Patriarch Abraham was also very wealthy, and was referred to as “a Friend of God” (2 Chronicles 20:7, James 2:23). Although Job and Abraham were rich, they entered the Kingdom of God because they spent their riches on good works. In doing so, they ceased to be rich for themselves, but were stewards of their wealth for God in helping others.

Jerome noted<sup>4</sup> that wealthy men have entered the Kingdom of Heaven, just as camels can pass through the needle's eye when they have laid down their packs.

“As the preacher says, ‘wisdom is a defense and money is a defense’ (Ecclesiastes 7:12). We must not hastily conclude that this statement conflicts with that of the Lord, ‘How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! 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’ (Luke 18:24-25). Were it so, the salvation of Zacchaeus the publican, described as a man of great wealth, would contradict the Lord's declaration. But what is impossible with men is possible with God (Mark 10:27), and we are taught by Paul, ‘Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. *Let them* do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life’ (1 Timothy 6:17-19). We have learned how a camel can pass through a needle's eye, how an animal with a hump on its back, when it has laid down its packs, can take to itself the wings of a dove (Psalm 55:6) and rest in the branches of the tree which has grown from a grain of mustard seed” (Matthew 13:31-32).

In Jesus' illustration, nothing is said about the camel's pack being loaded back up once the camel is inside. The key here is discerning the deceitfulness of wealth and the strength of its pull on one's heart. Job was able to let his pack be taken off without remorse. He said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord” (Job 1:21; also Job 2:9-10). Many Christians throughout the ages have been unable or unwilling to continue fighting this pull and have taken oaths of poverty to thrust a sword (so to speak) into the heart of the demon of wealth.

The early Church Fathers made a connection between the life of the Early Church after Pentecost and the Lord's words, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21). The Early Church after Pentecost exhibited one method regarding how to sell everything they had and follow

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<sup>4</sup> Jerome, Letter to Salvina, LXXIX, 3.

Christ; there are other methods also. In most cases in the Early Church, “wanting to be perfect”, meant some form of monasticism. There are many aspects to this also, and they are overlapping and interconnected. In the following pages, we will try to separate them a little to examine what this subject meant from the perspective of the Early Church.

John Chrysostom stated<sup>5</sup> that wealth is a major impediment to the Kingdom of Heaven, like a needle’s eye is an impediment to a camel. Poverty is not such an impediment, but is actually conducive to obtaining Life.

“The advantages which we gain from riches include drunkenness, gluttony and kinky pleasures. If we were so minded, we could win heaven itself for our inheritance by our riches. ‘So then riches are good’. It is not riches, but the will of the possessor that accomplishes this; it is the will that does this, it is in the power even of a poor man to win heaven. God does not regard the amount of the gifts, but the will of the givers; it is possible even for one in poverty, who has given little, to surpass everyone. Since God requires a measure proportioned to our ability, riches won’t secure heaven to us, nor will poverty secure hell; but a good will can obtain heaven. These then let us correct; this let us repossess; this let us regulate, and everything will be easy for us.”

“As the craftsman works the wood the same, whether his axe is made of iron or of gold, or rather he does it the better with an implement of iron, so the straight path of virtue is more easily kept in a state of poverty. Regarding riches we read, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven’ (Matthew 19:24). But God has made no such declarations about poverty; in fact, the opposite. ‘Sell your goods, and give to the poor, and come follow Me’ (Matthew 19:21); as if the act of following were to spring from the selling of one’s goods.”

“Never then let us flee from poverty as an evil, for we can use it to obtain heaven. Again, let us never follow riches as a good; for they are the ruin of such as walk unwarily. In everything let us direct our eyes to God, let us, as occasion requires, use those gifts which He has granted us, both strength of body, and abundance of money, and every other gift.”

John Chrysostom also stated<sup>6</sup> that affliction and poverty can be good things in that they keep us off the broad way that leads to destruction, and on the narrow way that leads to Life (Matthew 7:13-14). Paul took this path. On the other hand, great evils have arisen from wealth. Just as a true father might send his son’s mistress into exile rather than allow her to lead the son astray, so our heavenly Father might choose to send our wealth into exile.

“Affliction is a great good. ‘Narrow is the way’ (Matthew 7:14), so that affliction shoves us into the narrow way. He who is not pressed by affliction has difficulty entering. Notice how Paul enters into this narrow way. He ‘disciplines his body and brings it into subjection’ (1 Corinthians 9:27), so as to be able to enter. Therefore, in all his afflictions, he continued giving thanks to God. Have you lost your property? This has lightened you of the most of your wideness. Have you fallen from glory? This is another sort of wideness. Have you been falsely accused?

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<sup>5</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philippians, X.

<sup>6</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXXIII, 9.

Have the things said against you, of which you are not aware, been believed? ‘Rejoice and leap for joy’. For ‘blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven’” (Matthew 5:11, 12).

“Do you wish to be set free from temptations? Paul wished to be set free, and often requested of God, but did not obtain. ‘Three time for this I sought the Lord, and He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). By ‘weakness’, he means ‘afflictions’. When Paul heard this he received it thankfully, and said, ‘I take pleasure in infirmities’ (2 Corinthians 12:10); that is, I am pleased, I rest in my afflictions. Let us give thanks, both for comfort, and for affliction. ‘Naked I came out of my mother’s womb, naked shall I depart also’ (Job 1:21). You were brought to life naked, penniless, having no glory, and no honorable name. Consider how great evils have often arisen from wealth. ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of Heaven’ (Luke 18:25). Wealth is a hindrance for many good things, and do you still seek to be rich? So narrow is the way, which leads to the Kingdom; broad is the way of wealth. Therefore Christ said, ‘Sell what you have’ (Matthew 19:21), that the narrow way may receive you. Why do you yearn for wealth? For this cause He took it away from you, that He might free you from slavery. When a mistress corrupts a son, and his father can’t talk him out of parting with her, true fathers send the mistress into exile. Abundance of wealth is a mistress for some of us. Because the Lord cares for us, he delivers us from the harm, by taking wealth away from us. Let us not then think poverty is an evil: sin is the only evil. Wealth is not a good thing by itself; to be well pleasing to God is the only good. Let us seek poverty; by doing so, we shall we lay hold on heaven.”

### **The Problem with Wealth**

The young man said to Jesus, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me”. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions (Matthew 19:20-22).

The young man seemed to have a desire for the things of God, and his keeping of the Commandments was an indication that he had prepared himself to receive the things Christ asked. Jesus didn’t ask the rich young ruler to do anything that the Twelve Apostles hadn’t already done. Each of the Twelve had not only left their jobs and their worldly wealth, but they had also given up worldly pleasures<sup>7</sup> with their spouses (Matthew 19:29).

Clement of Alexandria noted<sup>8</sup> that the rich young ruler was confident about the things of the Law, but he realized he lacked something. Jesus did not charge him with violating the Law, since the Law was meant to lead one to Christ (Galatians 3:24). As a free man, Jesus gave him a

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<sup>7</sup> The Twelve lived as celibates the rest of their lives; those who were already married often traveled with their families, but living as brother and sister with their wives.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, Salvation of the Rich Man, 8-10.

choice, in order that he might take ownership of his own salvation. The choice Jesus offered was similar to that illustrated in the example of Mary and Martha<sup>9</sup>.

“The rich young ruler was perfectly persuaded that nothing was lacking to him regarding righteousness, but yet he felt himself entirely destitute of life. Therefore, he asked Him who alone is able to give it. With reference to the Law, he carries confidence; but the Son of God he addresses in supplication. He is transferred from faith to faith. As perilously tossing on the waves and occupying a dangerous anchorage in the Law, he goes to Jesus to find a haven.”

“Jesus does not charge him with violating all things out of the Law<sup>10</sup>, but loves him, and fondly welcomes his obedience in what he had learned. He says that he is not perfect regarding eternal life; that is, he had not fulfilled what is perfect, and that he was a doer indeed of the Law, but ignorant of true life. The things of the Law are good, for ‘the commandment is holy’ (Romans 7:12), as far as a sort of training with fear and preparatory discipline goes, leading as it did to the culmination of grace. But Christ is the end ‘of the Law for righteousness to everyone that believes’ (Romans 10:4); not as a slave making slaves, but as sons, brethren, and fellow-heirs, who perform the Father’s will.”

“Consequently, he was not yet perfect. The expression ‘if you want’ showed the self-determination of the soul speaking with Him in a divine manner. The choice depended on the man as being free; but the gift depended on God as the Lord. God gives to those who are willing, those who are eager, and those who ask, so that their salvation may become their own. For God does not compel us, for compulsion is repugnant to God, but He supplies to those who seek, grants to those who ask, and opens to those who knock. If you want, then, if you really want, and are not deceiving yourself, acquire what you lack. One thing the rich young ruler lacked, the one thing which lasts, the good, that which is above the Law, which the Law does not give, which the Law does not contain, which is the special right of those who live. He who had fulfilled all the demands of the Law from his youth, was not able to complete this one thing, which the Lord asked, so as to receive the eternal life he desired. He departed sad, bothered at the commandment of the life, which he sought. He did not truly want life, as he claimed, but aimed at the mere reputation of having made the good choice. He was capable of doing many things; but the one thing, the work of life, he was powerless and unable to accomplish. This is similar to what the Lord said to Martha, who was occupied with many things, and distracted and troubled with serving. She blamed her sister, who quit serving, and set herself at His feet, devoting her time to learning. ‘You are troubled about many things, but Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her’ (Luke 10:39-42). Similarly, Jesus asked the rich young ruler to leave his busy life, cling to Him and adhere to the grace of Him who offered everlasting life.”

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<sup>9</sup> That is, Jesus offered the rich young ruler the choice of leaving the busy life pursuing worldly things for the life as an apostle.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus did not charge the rich young ruler with violating the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment, although that may very well have been the case with his fixation on his wealth.

John Chrysostom stated<sup>11</sup> that Christ advised the rich young ruler to “strip himself of his money, not that he would lose what he had, but that he would add to his possessions. Christ would give him more than He required him to give up; and not only more, but as much greater as Heaven is greater than earth. He called it a treasure, showing the plenteousness of the recompense, its permanency, its security, so far as was possible by human examples to convey to the hearer.”

“For they that have little are not equally held in subjection, as they that are overflowed with great affluence; for then the love of it becomes more tyrannical. The increase of acquisitions kindles the flame more and renders the consumers poorer, inasmuch as it puts them in greater desire, and makes them have more feeling of their want”.

John Cassian stated<sup>12</sup> that the Lord tests people’s faith, examining our faith in two methods, those in prosperity and those in adversity, and these come about in three ways. The three ways are (1) proving our faith, (2) improving our life to rid it of minor sins and (3) discipline because our sins deserve it. Cassian went into great detail regarding the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ways. We don’t normally think of prosperity as a method of examining our faith, but it can be just exactly that, if our love of our goods overpowers our love for God. We don’t usually think of great prosperity as a time when God is testing us, but that is exactly what He did with Israel (Deuteronomy 8:2, 11-18) when they became prosperous after the Conquest.

When His disciples heard Jesus’ statement about the difficulties of a rich man entering the Kingdom of God, they were astonished (Matthew 19:25, Mark 10:26) and said, “Who then can be saved?” (Luke 18:26) As part of their culture, their concept of a rich man was someone who was blessed by God more than most people. If he’s more blessed than most<sup>13</sup> and still he can’t be saved, who can? Cyril of Alexandria comments<sup>14</sup> on this as follows:

“But what does the Lord reply? ‘The things that are impossible with men, are possible with God.’ He has reserved, therefore, for those who possess wealth, the possibility of being counted worthy. Yet it is possible for them in another way to obtain honor. Christ Himself has shown us how this can happen, ‘Make to yourselves friends of the unrighteous mammon; that when it has failed, they may receive you in an everlasting house’ (Luke 16:9). There is nothing to prevent the rich, if they will, from making the poor partakers and sharers of the abundance, which they possess.”

At the end of today’s Gospel reading, Jesus addressed this in the lives of the Twelve. Peter asked, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” (Luke 18:28). Jesus answered:

- You, the Twelve, will sit on 12 thrones and judge the 12 tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28)

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<sup>11</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXIII, 2.

<sup>12</sup> John Cassian, Conferences, VI, xi.

<sup>13</sup> For more details on their cultural understanding of a rich man’s blessings, see the Gospel lesson for the 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Luke.

<sup>14</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Gospel of Luke, Chapter 18, Homily 123, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 491.

- Everyone who has given up riches or relationships for My Name’s sake will receive a hundredfold in this life (i.e. spiritual gifts) along with persecutions<sup>15</sup>, and in the age to come, eternal life (Mark 10:30).
- Many who are first will be last and the last first (Mark 10:31). That is, those taking oaths of poverty may do quite well on their investment after all!

Another aspect to the question, “Who then can be saved?” is found in Old Testament Law. Being rich under the Old Testament Law meant being blessed by the Lord (Deuteronomy 28:1-12). But there were strings attached to these blessings: those that were blessed were expected to be very generous with their wealth (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 15:7-11, 26:12-15). But the Law by itself cannot legislate conditions of the heart. The Law was meant to bring the believer to Christ (John 5:39-40, 45-47), for with God all things are possible (Luke 18:27).

While the direct subject matter in this Gospel lesson was riches, by extension it can be applied to other worldly endeavors. Isaac of Nineveh wrote<sup>16</sup>:

“The mind of a man engaged in spiritual endeavor who enters into a relationship with the world, is like a navigator who is calmly sailing the sea, but suddenly finds himself amidst submerged rocks and suffers shipwreck. You must first learn and understand the term ‘world’ in its purely inward significance; you will be able to learn about your soul, how far is it removed from the world and what is it mixed with that is of the world. ‘World’ is a collective name, embracing what are called passions, carnal life and minding of the flesh”.

### **What Does It Mean to Become Perfect?**

Jesus said to the rich young ruler, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21). Jesus’ advice is not a command; it is a call. We don’t have to do this; but we can if we want to. If we want to be perfect, we are invited to follow Christ and do as He and the Apostles and the Early Church did. The means to doing this is to sell what we have, such that we will have treasure in heaven.

Ambrose of Milan summarized<sup>17</sup> this in his treatise “Concerning Widows”, where his subject was whether widows should remain celibate. The same advice applies here: we have the opportunity of going beyond the precepts and Commandments if we want to. The rewards for doing so are immeasurably greater.

“You will see the difference between precept and advice. The Law commanded us not to murder, commit adultery or bear false witness; that is a Commandment, which has a penalty for its transgression. But when the young man said that he had fulfilled all the Commandments of the Law, he is given advice that he should sell all that he had and follow the Lord, for these things are not imposed as commands, but are offered as advice. There are two ways of commanding things, one by way of precept, the other by way of advice. And so the Lord in one way

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<sup>15</sup> For more details of this, see the study under the Special Feast Days for the Unmercenary Healers.

<sup>16</sup> Isaac of Syria, Directions of Spiritual Training, Texts 59, 22, 23

<sup>17</sup> Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, XII, 73-74.

says, 'You shall not kill', where He gives a Commandment; in the other He says, 'If you want to be perfect, sell all that you have' (Matthew 19:21). He is, then, not bound by a Commandment to whom the choice<sup>18</sup> is left."

"Those who have fulfilled the Commandments are able to say, 'We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do' (Luke 17:10). The virgin does not say this, nor does he who sold all his goods. Instead they await the stored-up rewards like the holy Apostle who says, 'See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore, what shall we have?' (Matthew 19:27). He doesn't say, like the unprofitable servant, that he has done that which was his duty to do, but he has been profitable to his Master. He has multiplied the talents entrusted to him by the increase he has gained, having a good conscience; without anxiety as to his merits, he expects the reward of his faith and virtue. And so, it is said to him and the others, 'In the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matthew 19:28). And to those who had faithfully preserved their talents, He promises rewards indeed, though smaller saying, 'Because you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Good faith, then, is due, but mercy is in the rewards. He who has kept good faith has deserved that good faith should be kept with him. He who has made good profit, because he has not sought his own benefit, has gained a claim to a heavenly reward.'"

Cyprian of Carthage stated<sup>19</sup> that a blind love of material things is like a chain that anchors us to this world, possesses us and leaves us as food for the serpent. By contrast, everyone in the Early Church sold what they had and laid the proceeds at the Apostles' feet.

"The truth, brethren, must not be disguised; nor must the cause of our wound be concealed. A blind love of one's own property has deceived many; they could not be prepared for their departure, when their wealth fettered them like a chain. By those bonds, virtue was retarded, faith was burdened, the spirit was bound, and the soul was hindered. Those, who were involved in earthly things, become food for the serpent, which, according to God's sentence, feeds upon earth. Therefore, the Lord the teacher of good things, warning about the future, says, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come follow me' (Matthew 19:21). If rich men did this, they would not perish by their riches; if they laid up treasure in heaven, they would not have a domestic enemy. Heart and mind and feeling would be in heaven, if their treasure were in heaven. He could not be overcome by the world if he had nothing in the world whereby, he could be overcome. He would follow the Lord loose and free, as did the Apostles, and many in the times of the Apostles. Many left both their means and their relatives<sup>20</sup>, and clung to Christ with undivided ties."

"How can they follow Christ, who are held back by the chain of their wealth? Or how can they seek heaven, and climb to lofty heights, who are weighed down by earthly desires? They think that they possess, when they are rather

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<sup>18</sup> This implies that the rich young ruler was, in fact, capable of making this choice.

<sup>19</sup> Cyprian, *Treatises*, III, 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> It is more difficult for us to do this today since the support structure that was present in the Church after Pentecost is missing today. The only practical way to do this today is in a monastic community.

possessed; they are slaves of their profit, and not lord of their own money. Paul indicts these men, when he says, ‘But those that will be rich, fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and in perdition. For the root of all evil is the love of money, which, while some have coveted, they have wandered from the Faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows’ (1 Timothy 6:10). With what rewards does the Lord invite us to contempt of worldly wealth? ‘There is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life’ (Luke 18:29-30). If we know these things, from the truth of the Lord who promises, not only is this loss not to be feared, but even to be desired. The Lord Himself announces to us, ‘Blessed are you when men shall persecute you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall cast you out, and shall speak of your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy; for, behold, your reward is great in heaven’” (Matthew 5:11-12 loosely).

Jerome wrote<sup>21</sup> to a priest-monk who had abandoned the solitary life in the desert to return to clerical duties in Aquileia. Jerome called the celibate life “perfect”, in that it was an imitation of the life of the Apostles.

“See how Peter left his net; see how the publican (i.e. Matthew 9:9) rose from the receipt of custom. In a moment he became an Apostle. ‘The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Matthew 8:20), and do you plan wide porticos and spacious halls? If you look to inherit the good things of the world you can no longer be a joint-heir with Christ. You are called a monk, and has the name ‘monk’ no meaning?”

“Listen to the words of the Lord, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow Me’ (Matthew 19:21). You have already promised to be perfect. For when you left the army and made yourself a celibate for the kingdom of heaven’s sake, you did so that you might follow the perfect life. Now the perfect servant of Christ has nothing beside Christ. If he has anything besides Christ, he is not perfect. If he is not perfect when he has promised God to be so, his profession is a lie. ‘The mouth that lies slays the soul’ (Wisdom 1:11 LXX). To conclude, then, if you are perfect you will not set your heart on your father’s goods; and if you are not perfect you have deceived the Lord. The Gospel thunders forth its divine warning, ‘You cannot serve two masters’ (Luke 16:13), and does anyone dare to make Christ a liar by serving both God and Mammon? Repeatedly does He proclaim, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’ (Matthew 16:24). If I load myself with gold can I think that I am following Christ? Surely not! ‘He that said he abides in Him ought to walk even as He walked.’”

Jerome also wrote<sup>22</sup> to Demetrias, a highborn Roman lady, who had recently taken up the celibate life, to help guide her on her new mode of living. He advised her that we can choose to

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<sup>21</sup> Jerome, Letter to Heliodorus, XIV, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Jerome, Letter to Demetrias, CXXX, 14.

be perfect, just as Jesus advised the rich young ruler to choose. This is what the Apostles and the Early Church chose to do.

“I think it is unnecessary to warn you against covetousness, since it is the way of your family both to have riches and to despise them. Paul tells us that covetousness is idolatry (Ephesians 5:5), and there was one who asked the Lord, ‘Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?’ He thus replied, ‘If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me’ (Matthew 19:21). Such is the climax of complete apostolic virtue — to sell all that one has and to distribute to the poor (Luke 18:22) and thus freed from all earthly burdens to fly up to the heavenly realms with Christ. To us, or I should rather say to you, a careful stewardship is entrusted, although in such matters full freedom of choice is left to every individual, whether old or young. Christ’s words are ‘if you want to be perfect’. I do not compel you, He seems to say, I do not command you, but I set the palm before you, I show you the prize; it is for you to choose whether you will enter the arena and win the crown. Let us consider how wisely Wisdom has spoken. ‘Sell what you have’! To whom is the command given? Why, to him to whom it was said, ‘if you want to be perfect’. Don’t sell just a part of your goods but ‘all that you have’. And when you have sold them, what then? ‘Give to the poor’. Not to the rich, not to your kinsfolk, not to minister to self-indulgence; but to relieve need. It does not matter whether a man is a priest, a relative or an acquaintance; you must think of nothing but his poverty. Let your praises come from the stomachs of the hungry and not from the rich banquets of the overfed. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how, while the blood of the Lord was still warm and believers were in the fervor of their first faith, they all sold their possessions and laid the price of them at the Apostles’ feet (to show that money ought to be trampled underfoot) and ‘distribution was made to every man according as he had need’ (Acts 4:34-35). But Ananias and Sapphira proved timid stewards, and deceitful ones; therefore, they brought on themselves condemnation. For having made a vow, they offered their money to God as if it was their own and not His to whom they had vowed it. Keeping back for their own use a part of that which belonged to another, through fear of famine, which true faith never fears, they drew down on themselves suddenly the avenging stroke, which was meant not in cruelty towards them but as a warning to others. In fact, the Apostle Peter by no means called down death upon them, but he merely announced God’s judgment by the spirit of prophecy, that the doom of two persons might be a lesson to many (Acts 5:1-10).

Jerome wrote<sup>23</sup> to Pammachius, a Roman Senator, whose wife and daughter had passed away, and who had become a monk, encouraging Pammachius to continue what he had started.

“‘If you want to be perfect’, the Lord says, ‘go and sell what you have and give to the poor and come and follow me’ (Matthew 19:21). Great enterprises are always left to the free choice of those who hear them. Paul refrains from making virginity a positive duty, because the Lord in speaking of celibates, who had made themselves such for the kingdom of heaven’s sake, finally said, ‘He who is able to accept *it*, let him accept *it*’ (Matthew 19:12). ‘It is not of him that wills, nor of him

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<sup>23</sup> Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, LXVI, 8.

that runs, but of God that shows mercy' (Romans 9:16). If you want to be perfect! There is no compulsion laid upon you; if you are to win the prize, it must be by the exercise of your own free will. If therefore you want to be perfect and desire to be as the Prophets, as the Apostles, as Christ Himself, don't sell a part of your wealth, but all that you have, lest the fear of want become an occasion of unfaithfulness, and you perish with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). And when you have sold everything, give the proceeds not to the wealthy or to the haughty but to the poor. Give each man enough for his immediate need, but do not give money to swell what a man has already. 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain' (1 Corinthians 9:9), and 'the laborer is worthy of his wages' (1 Timothy 5:18). Again 'those who serve at the altar partake of *the offerings of the altar*'" (1 Corinthians 9:13).

John Chrysostom noted<sup>24</sup> that just because something is permitted by the Law, doesn't mean that we ought to do it or stop short at what the Law commands. To the rich young ruler, Jesus didn't say, "Sell what you have", but "If you want to be perfect, sell". This leaves much to our own desire regarding how blessed we want to be.

"Let us not despise the poor or the weak, beloved, 'lest we hinder the Gospel of Christ' (1 Corinthians 9:12); that we may not betray our own salvation. Do not say when your brother is offended, 'this or that, whereby he is offended, has not been forbidden; it is permitted'. I have something greater to say to you, 'Even though Christ Himself has permitted it, yet if you see anyone injured, stop and do not use the permission' (1 Corinthians 8, 10:23-33 loosely). Paul did this; when he might have received, Christ having granted permission, he chose not to receive. Thus, our Lord in His mercy has mixed much gentleness with His precepts that everything might not be merely of commandment, but that we might do much also of our own mind. It was in His power to extend the Commandments further to say, 'he who doesn't fast continually, let him be chastised; he who doesn't keep his virginity, let him be punished; he that doesn't strip himself of all that he has, let him suffer the severest penalty'. But he didn't do so, giving you occasion, if you will, to be forward in doing more. When He was speaking about virginity, He said, 'He who is able to accept *it*, let him accept *it*' (Matthew 19:12). In the case of the rich man, some things He commanded, but some He left to the determination of his mind. He didn't say, 'Sell what you have', but, 'If you want to be perfect, sell' (Matthew 19:21). Not only do we refuse to do more, and to go beyond the precepts, but we fall very short even of the measure of things commanded. Whereas Paul suffered hunger that he might not hinder the Gospel; we don't have the heart even to spend what is in our own accounts, though we see innumerable souls destitute."

## Following Christ

Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21). But just what does He mean by "following Him"? There are several aspects to this.

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<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXI, 8.

## Our Free Will to Follow Christ

Irenaeus stated<sup>25</sup> that all things are possible for us, since we are in the image of God, have freedom and a free will, and it is in our power to do what we want. Christ advises us to do some things and abstain from others. If we choose right, all things are possible for us. Thus Jesus spoke at several occasions, “According to your faith, let it be done to you”, where it is our own faith that does this.

“It is in man’s power to disobey God, and to forfeit what is good; but such conduct brings no small amount of injury. On this account Paul says, ‘All things are lawful to me, but not all things are helpful’ (1 Corinthians 6:12). Referring to man’s liberty, in which respect ‘all things are lawful’, God does not force anyone to do anything; by the expression ‘not helpful’, Paul pointed out that we ‘should not use our liberty as a cloak of maliciousness’ (1 Peter 2:16), for this is not helpful. Again, he says, ‘Every man speaks the truth with his neighbor’ (Ephesians 4:25). And, ‘Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth’ (Ephesians 4:29), not filthiness, foolish talking, or dirty jokes, which are not helpful, but rather let us speak the giving of thanks. ‘For you were sometimes darkness, but now you light in the Lord’; ‘walk honestly as children of the light’ (Ephesians 5:8), not in carousing and drunkenness, not in bed-hopping with no moral restraint, not in strife and envy’ (Romans 13:13). ‘And such were some of you. You were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (1 Corinthians 6:11). If then it was not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the Apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to advise us to do some things, and to abstain from others? Because man possessed free will from the beginning, and God possesses free will, in whose likeness man was created. Advice is always given to man to hold onto the good, which is done by obedience to God.”

“In works, and in faith, has God preserved the will of man free and under his own control, saying, ‘According to your faith let it be to you’ (Matthew 9:29); thus, showing that there is a faith especially belonging to man, since he has an opinion especially his own. Again, ‘All things are possible to him that believes’ (Mark 9:23); and, ‘Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done to you’ (Matthew 8:13); and ‘O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire’ (Matthew 15:28). Now all such expressions demonstrate that man is in his own power with respect to faith. And for this reason, ‘He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God shall remain upon him’ (John 3:36). In the same manner the Lord, both showing His own goodness, and indicating that man is in his own free will and his own power, said to Jerusalem, ‘How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing! Therefore, your house shall be left to you desolate’” (Matthew 23:37-38).

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<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, xxxvii, 4-5.

## Following Christ out of Love

John Chrysostom noted<sup>26</sup> Paul's words, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3). This implies that there were some in Corinth, who had given up all their goods to feed the poor (the ascetics), and that some were being martyred by being burned alive (the martyrs). Jesus spoke to this regarding what rewards the ascetics and the martyrs can expect. Paul spoke to this pointing out that loving one's neighbor is also crucial, and that this is implied in Jesus' words to the rich young ruler, when He said, "come follow Me".

"Paul didn't say 'if I die', but he names the most terrible of all deaths, the being burned alive (1 Corinthians 13:3), and said that even this without love is no great thing."

"To the rich man Jesus said, 'If you want to be perfect, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me' (Matthew 19:21). Speaking of love for one's neighbor, He said, 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man may lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13). Even before God this is greatest of all. Even if we should lay down our life for God's sake, and not merely lay it down, but so as even to be burned, we shall have no great advantage if we don't love our neighbor. That the gifts are of no great profit without love is no marvel, since our gifts are a secondary consideration to our way of life. Many have displayed gifts, and yet on becoming vicious have been punished, such as those who 'prophesied in His name, and cast out many demons, and performed many mighty works' (Matthew 7:22). An example is Judas the traitor; others, exhibiting a pure life as believers, have needed nothing else in order to obtain their salvation."

"That the gifts should require love is no marvel. But Christ appears to announce His great rewards to both the ascetics and the martyrs. To the rich man He said, 'If you want to be perfect, sell your goods, and give to the poor, and come, follow me' (Matthew 19:21). Speaking to the disciples about martyrdom He said, 'Whoever shall lose his life for My sake, shall find it' (Matthew 10:39); and, 'Whoever shall confess Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father who is in heaven' (Matthew 10:32). For great indeed is the labor of this achievement, and nearly surpassing nature itself; this is well known to such as have had these crowns granted to them. No language can set it before us; so noble a soul does the deed belong to and so exceedingly wonderful is it."

"But how, after Christ had said that both the ascetics and the martyrs belong to perfection, does Paul state that these without love are imperfect? Paul is not contradicting Jesus, but harmonizing with Him. In the case of the rich man, Jesus said not merely, 'sell your goods, and give to the poor', but He added, 'and come, follow Me'. Not even the following Him proves any man a disciple of Christ so completely as the loving one another."

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<sup>26</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXXII, 8, 10. For similar arguments, see John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Paphnutius, I, iii, 7.

Chrysostom also stated<sup>27</sup> that almsgiving is at the center of the hearts of those who follow Christ. This was true of the Church following Pentecost, and Daniel even advised King Nebuchadnezzar to embrace it in Babylon.

“For what reason was Christ maintained by women (Luke 8:2-3), since women followed Him and served Him (Mark 15:40-41)? This was to teach us from the first that He is concerned for those who do good. Could not Paul, who supported others by his own hands, have maintained himself without assistance from others? But you see him receiving and requesting aid. Hear the reason for it: ‘Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account’ (Philippians 4:17). At the beginning too, when men sold all their possessions and laid them at the Apostles’ feet, the Apostles were more concerned for the givers than for those who received their alms. For if their concern had only been that the poor might be relieved by any means, they would not have judged so severely the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, when they kept back their money. Paul would not have charged men to give ‘not grudgingly or of necessity’ (2 Corinthians 9:7) either if he was discouraging giving to the poor. No, but he considers the good of those who give. When Daniel gave that excellent advice to Nebuchadnezzar, he did not merely consider the poor. He did not just say, ‘Give to the poor’; but ‘Break off your sins by almsgiving, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor’ (Daniel 4:27). Part with your wealth, not that others may be fed, but that you may escape punishment. Christ again says, ‘Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and come and follow Me’ (Matthew 19:21). The commandment was given to the rich young ruler that he might be induced to follow Christ. Riches are an impediment; therefore, he commands them to be given to the poor, instructing the soul to be pitiful and merciful, to despise wealth, and to flee from covetousness. Doing this makes men like God. Yet celibacy, fasting, and sleeping on the ground<sup>28</sup>, are more difficult than this, but nothing is so strong and powerful to extinguish the fire of our sins as almsgiving. It is greater than all other virtues. It places its adherents by the side of the King Himself, and justly so. The effect of celibacy, fasting, and sleeping on the ground, is confined to those who practice them, and no one besides the celibate is saved thereby. But almsgiving extends to everyone, and embraces the members of Christ; actions that extend their effects to many are far greater than those which are confined to one.”

“Almsgiving is the mother of love, which is the characteristic of Christianity, which is greater than all miracles, and by which the disciples of Christ are recognized. It is the medicine of our sins, the cleansing of the filth of our souls, the ladder fixed to heaven; it binds together the body of Christ. In the time of the Apostles, men sold their possessions and brought them to the Apostles, and they were distributed. ‘Distribution was made to every man according to his need’ (Acts 4:35). Setting aside the future, let us see who in the present life gains: those who received, or those who gave. The ones who received murmured and quarreled with each other. The ones who gave had one soul. ‘They were of one heart, and of one soul, and grace was upon them all’ (Acts 4:32). And they lived in great simplicity! Do you see that they were the ones who gained, even by thus giving? With whom

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<sup>27</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Titus*, VI, Moral.

<sup>28</sup> This refers to the practice of monks, in their very simple lifestyle, sleeping on the ground on a bed of straw.

would you wish to be numbered, with those who gave away their possessions, and had nothing, or with those who murmured and received the goods of others?”

### **Following Christ as a Bishop in the Church**

There are some of the Lord’s Commandments that apply to Bishops in the Church that don’t apply to others. John Chrysostom mentioned<sup>29</sup> that if the government of the Church has been entrusted to Bishops or Apostles, they do not have an option; they must direct the people in godliness, and they will have to answer for it. The Bishop does not have a choice in this matter.

“The preaching committed to Paul included the Gospel, things present, things future, life, godliness, and faith. As a herald proclaims in the theater in the presence of all, so also Paul preached, adding nothing, but declaring the things that he had heard. The excellence of a herald consists in proclaiming to all what has really happened, not in adding or taking away anything. If therefore it is necessary to preach, it is necessary to do it with boldness of speech; otherwise, it is not preaching. On this account Christ did not say, tell it ‘on the housetops’, but ‘preach on the housetops’ (Matthew 10:27); showing both by the place and by the manner what was to be done.”

“The expressions, ‘committed to me’, and ‘according to the commandment’ (Titus 1:3), show the matter to be worthy of credit, so that no one should think it discreditable, hesitate about it, or be discontented. If then it is a commandment, it is not Paul’s option. He fulfilled what was commanded. Of things to be done, some are in our power; others are not. What Christ commands, that is not in our power; what He permits, is left to our choice. For instance, ‘Whoever shall say to his brother, you fool, shall be in danger of hell fire’ (Matthew 5:22). This is a commandment. And again, ‘If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift’ (Matthew 5:23, 24). This also is a command. But when He says, ‘If you want to be perfect, go and sell all that you have’ (Matthew 19:21); and, ‘He that is able to accept it, let him accept it’ (Matthew 19:12); this is not a command, for He gives His hearer the option, and leaves him the choice, whether he will do it or not. But Commandments are not left to our choice; we must either perform them, or be punished for not doing so. This is implied when he says, ‘Necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel!’ (1 Corinthians 9:16). This I will state more plainly, that it may be clear. He that is entrusted with the government of the Church, and honored with the office of a Bishop will have to answer for it, if he does not declare to the people what they ought to do. But the layman is under no such obligation. On this account Paul said, ‘According to the commandment of God our Savior, I do this’ (1 Timothy 1:1, Titus 1:3).

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<sup>29</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Titus, I, vv. 1-4.

## Difficulties in Following Christ

John Cassian pointed out<sup>30</sup> that following Christ with His light and easy burden sometimes seems neither light nor easy due to our own perverseness. The devil uses our possessions and our corrupt desires to torment us with worldly cares like an executioner. Instead of walking in the right paths, we find ourselves in dark trackless places, littered with brambles and occupied by snakes.

“Sometimes Christ’s yoke seems neither light nor easy, when it is supposed to be easy (Matthew 11:30); this must be ascribed to our perverseness, as we are downcast by unbelief and lack of faith. We fight with foolish obstinacy against His advice, ‘If you want to be perfect, go sell (or get rid of) all that you have, and come follow Me’ (Matthew 19:21), for we keep the substance of our worldly goods. The devil holds our soul tight in these worldly labors. When he wants to sever us from spiritual delight, he bothers us by diminishing these and depriving us of them, using his crafty wiles. When the lightness of Christ’s burden become grievous to us through the evil of a corrupt desire, when we are caught in the chains of that property and substance, which we kept for our comfort, he torments us with the scourges of worldly cares, and we end up torturing ourselves. ‘Each one is caught in the cords of his own sins’ (Proverbs 5:22), and again, ‘You all kindle a fire, and feed a flame; walk in the light of your fire, and in the flame which you have kindled’ (Isaiah 50:11 LXX). Solomon witnesses, ‘Each man shall be punished, according to how he has sinned’ (Wisdom 11:16 LXX). The pleasures, which we enjoy, become a torment to us, and the delights and enjoyments of this flesh, turn like executioners upon their originator. One who is supported by his former wealth and property is sure not to admit perfect humility of heart. We endure all the trials of this present life, and whatever losses the enemy can contrive, not only with the utmost patience, but with real pleasure, because all these implements of goodness help us. When they are lacking, a pride springs up that we are actually wounded by the deadly strokes of impatience at the slightest reproach. It may be said to us by the prophet Jeremiah, ‘why take the road to Egypt, to drink the troubled water? And why take the road to Assyria, to drink the water of the River? Your own wickedness will correct you, and your apostasy shall rebuke you. Know and see that it is an evil and a bitter thing that you have forsaken the Lord your God, and that the fear of Me *is* not in you, says the Lord’ (Jeremiah 2:18-19). We feel the wondrous sweetness of the Lord’s yoke to be bitter, because the bitterness of our repugnance injures it. The exceeding lightness of the Divine burden becomes heavy, because in our obstinate presumption we despise Him. ‘Had they gone in good paths, they would have found the paths of righteousness easy’ (Proverbs 2:20 LXX). It is plain that we make rough the right and smooth paths of the Lord with the nasty and hard stones of our desires. With our wedding garment torn, we seek trackless and thorny places; blinded by the enticements of present delights, we tear our way with torn legs through dark paths. We are overrun with the briars of sins, so as not only to be pierced by the sharp thorns of the brambles but actually struck down by the bites of deadly serpents and scorpions lurking there. Solomon said, ‘Thorns *and* snares *are* in the way of the perverse; He who guards his soul will be

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<sup>30</sup> John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Abraham, XXIV, 24.

far from them' (Proverbs 22:5). Jeremiah added, 'My people have forgotten me; they have offered incense in vain, stumbling in their ways, *leaving* the ancient paths, to enter upon impassable paths' (Jeremiah 18:15 LXX). 'The ways of those, who do not work, are strewn with thorns, but those of the diligent are made smooth' (Proverbs 15:19 LXX). And thus wandering from the king's highway, they can never arrive at that metropolis, where our course should always be directed without swerving. Solomon also said this, 'The labor of fools wearies those who don't even know how to go to the city' (Ecclesiastes 10:15); that is, that 'heavenly Jerusalem, which is the mother of us all' (Galatians 4:26). But whoever truly gives up this world and takes up Christ's yoke, learns from Him, and is trained in the daily practice of suffering wrong, for He is 'gentle and lowly of heart' (Matthew 11:29). He will always remain undisturbed by all temptations, and 'all things will work together for good to him' (Romans 8:28). The words of God are 'good to him that walks uprightly' (Micah 2:7); and again, 'The ways of the Lord are straight, and the righteous shall walk in them; but the ungodly shall fall in them'" (Hosea 14:9).

John Chrysostom pointed out<sup>31</sup> that the poor have the advantage over the rich regarding entry into the Kingdom of God. Poor men have far fewer impediments than rich men, and thus are much more likely to enter. This is apparent in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, and the Lord calls us to become poor in order to become perfect. Some common notions are that the rich and poor will enter the Kingdom equally, and that the poor man is subjected to many evils because of his poverty. Chrysostom refutes these notions and shows that the rich have a much more difficult time in this life.

"The poor have the advantage over the rich in the things of this life; and not in the things of this life only, but also in those that are higher. What leads us to the kingdom of God: riches or poverty? Let us hear the Lord Himself saying that 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:24). But of the poor the contrary, 'If you want to be perfect, sell what you have, and give to the poor; and come, follow Me; and you shall have treasure in heaven' (Matthew 19:21). But if you will, let us see what is said on either side. 'Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it' (Matthew 7:14). Who then enters by the narrow way, he that is in luxury, or he that is in poverty; he that is independent, or he that carries ten thousand burdens; the lax and debauched, or the thoughtful and anxious? Consider the example of the beggar Lazarus! Lazarus was very poor; and he that passed him by as he lay at his gate was rich. Which then entered into the kingdom, and was in delight in Abraham's bosom? Which of them was scorched, with not even a drop of water at his command? But, said one, 'many poor will be lost, and many rich will enjoy those unspeakable goods'. Rather, one may see the contrary; few rich will be saved, but of the poor there will be far more. Consider making accurate measurements of the hindrances of riches and the defects of poverty. 'The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil' (1 Timothy 6:10). Who stands close to this root of all kinds of evils, the rich man, or the poor man? Is it not very plainly the rich? For the more things anyone surrounds himself with, the more he desires more. Vainglory also damages many good deeds, and close to this again the rich

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<sup>31</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XIII, vv. 11-12.

man has his dwelling. ‘But’, said one, ‘you don’t mention the evils of the poor man, his affliction, his difficulty’. This is both common to the rich and the poor, and is more a problem for the rich man than the poor man. Those, that appear to be evils from poverty, are common to either; while those that appear to be evils from riches are problems for rich men only. ‘But’, said one, ‘for lack of necessities the poor man commits many horrible things’. No poor man commits as many horrible things from lack, as do the rich for the sake of surrounding themselves with more, and of not losing what belongings they have. The poor man does not so eagerly desire necessities as the rich does luxuries; nor has the poor man as much strength to put wickedness in practice as the rich man has. If then the rich man is both more willing and able, it is quite plain that he will rather commit such, and more of them. Nor is the poor man so much afraid with respect to hunger, as the rich man is anxious with respect to the loss of what he has. Since the rich man is close to vainglory, arrogance and the love of money, the root of all evils, what hope of salvation does he have except he displays much wisdom? And how shall he walk the narrow way? Let us not carry about vague notions of the multitude, but examine the facts. Here is something absurd! Respecting money, we do not trust others, but refer to figures and calculations. But in calculating about facts, we are easily drawn away by the opinions of others; even though we possess an exact balance for all things; that is, the divine Laws. I exhort you all, disregard what the multitude thinks about these things, and inquire from the Scriptures; and having learned what true riches are, let us pursue them that we may obtain also the eternal good things.”

### **Following Christ Means Giving Up Something**

John Chrysostom asked<sup>32</sup> what it was that made Peter and John stand out when they raised up the lame man (Acts 3:1-11). It was the giving up of their possessions that Christ commended, not the working of miracles. Christ doesn’t ask us to perform miracles; He does ask us to retreat from a concentration on worldly possessions.

“Which sort of thing then made Peter glorious and blessed, the raising up of the lame man (Acts 3:1-11), or the casting away his money (Acts 3:6)? This we may learn from the Master Himself. What does He Himself say to the rich man seeking eternal life? He did not say, ‘raise up the lame’, but, ‘Sell your goods, and give to the poor, and come and follow me, and you shall have treasure in Heaven’ (Matthew 19:21). Peter again did not say, ‘Behold, in Your Name we cast out demons’; although he was casting them out, but, ‘Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what shall we have?’ (Matthew 19:27). Christ again, in answering Peter did not say, ‘If any man raises up the lame’, but, ‘whoever has left houses or lands, shall receive a hundredfold in this world, and shall inherit everlasting life’” (Matthew 19:29).

“Let us also then emulate Peter that we may not be confounded, but may with confidence stand at the judgment seat of Christ; that we may win Him to be with us, even as He was with His disciples. He will be with us, like He was with them, if we are willing to follow them, and to be imitators of their life and conversation. God crowns and commends men, not requiring you to raise the dead,

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<sup>32</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XC, 4.

or to cure the lame. It is not these things that make one like Peter, but the giving up of one's goods, for this was the Apostles' achievement. But do you find it impossible to give them up? In the first place, I say, it is possible; but I do not compel you, if you are unwilling, or constrain you to it. But this I entreat, to spend at least a part on the needy, and to seek for yourself nothing more than is necessary. For thus shall we both live our life here in security and without trouble, and enjoy eternal life."

### **Selling Everything to Obtain Treasure in Heaven**

Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21). The means to becoming perfect and following Christ is selling what we have and giving to the poor.

This is just what the Church did after Pentecost, where "everyone who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid *them* at the Apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Barnabas, a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold *it*, and brought the money and laid *it* at the Apostles' feet" (Acts 4:34-37). Thus the entire community desired to become perfect by selling what they had and giving to the poor.

John Chrysostom noted<sup>33</sup> that when Christ told His followers to "follow Him", He meant for us to do as He did, and He never had any possessions. The rich young ruler claimed to have kept the Commandments, but hadn't, since he didn't care for his neighbor. If we wish, we can reverse this and trade our worldly possessions for treasure in heaven.

"When the young man said, 'what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (Matthew 19:16), Christ, after repeating to him the other Commandments, ended with the love of his neighbor. Similarly, many of us may say that we also have kept these, for we have not robbed, killed, or committed adultery; yet we may not be able to say that we have loved our neighbor, as we ought to. For if a man has envied or spoken evil of another, if he has not helped him when injured, or given to him of his substance, then neither has he loved him. Now Christ has commanded not only this, but something besides. 'Sell what you have, and give to the poor; and come, follow Me' (Matthew 19:21), terming the imitating of Him in our actions 'following' Him. What do we learn from this? First, that he who does not have all these things cannot attain the chief places in that rest. After the young man had said, 'All these things I have done', Christ, as though some great thing were lacking for him to be perfectly approved, replied, 'If you want to be perfect, sell what you have, and give to the poor; and come, follow Me'".

"Secondly, Christ rebuked the man for his vain boast; one that lived in such luxury, and had no concern for others living in poverty, how could he love his neighbor? So, in this matter he spoke the truth about keeping the Commandments! Let us do both of these things; let us be eager to donate our wealth and to purchase heaven. For worldly honor, men have often spent all they have for an honor, which

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<sup>33</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXIX, 4.

stays here below, and does not even stay with us long. What madness it is to do this, when it is in our power voluntarily to give to others, and so to take with us those things of which we shall even against our will be deprived? If a man were being led to death and it were proposed to him to give up all his goods and so go free, we should think he was granted a favor. Shall we, who are being led to the pit, when it is allowed us to give up half and be free, prefer to be punished, and uselessly to retain what is not even ours, forfeiting what is rightly ours? What excuse shall we have? What claim for pardon shall we have, when so easy a road has been cut for us into life? We rush down precipices, and travel along an unprofitable path, depriving ourselves of all things both here and hereafter, when we might enjoy both in security. Let us stop now, and come to our senses; let us rightly dispose of worldly things, that we may easily receive those which are to come.”

John Chrysostom spoke<sup>34</sup> of almsgiving as part of perfection, using examples such as Nebuchadnezzar, Zacchaeus, and Christ’s instruction to His disciples, “If you want to be perfect”.

“Who was more shameful and iniquitous than Nebuchadnezzar? The man was impious; after signs without number he refused to come to his senses, but cast the servants of God into a furnace; yet after doing these things, he worshipped God. What did Daniel say afterward? ‘O king, let my counsel please you, and atone for your sins by alms, and *your* iniquities by compassion on the poor; it may be God will be long-suffering to your transgressions’ (Daniel 4:27 LXX). In so speaking, Daniel didn’t doubt, but wished to put him in greater fear, and to make a stronger case for doing these things. If Daniel had spoken as if forgiveness was free and easy, the king would have been more apathetic. By leaving it doubtful, Nebuchadnezzar’s fear was made greater, and Daniel urged him on. This is the reason why Daniel did not make forgiveness certain to him. Shall there be pardon for so great impieties? Yes. There is no sin, which alms cannot cleanse, none, which alms cannot quench. All sin is beneath this; it is a medicine adapted for every wound. What is worse than a publican? His occupation is complete injustice; and yet Zacchaeus washed away all these sins. Note how Christ shows this<sup>35</sup> by the care taken for almsgiving (Luke 19:8-10). Paul also says, ‘only that we remember the poor’ (Galatians 2:10); everywhere the Scripture has much to say concerning this matter. ‘The ransom of a man’s soul is his own wealth’ (Proverbs 13:8). With reason Christ said, ‘if you want to be perfect, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and come, follow Me’ (Matthew 19:21). This may well be part of perfection. But alms may be done not only by money, but by deeds. For example, one may kindly stand by a person to aid and defend him; one may reach to him a helping hand; the service rendered by deeds has often done more good than money.”

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<sup>34</sup> John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XXV.

<sup>35</sup> First Zacchaeus gave half his goods to the poor as alms; then he offered fourfold restitution for the cases where he had defrauded anyone, which was the penalty prescribed by the Law for theft (Exodus 22:1). Following this, Jesus said that salvation had come to Zacchaeus’ house.

Cyprian of Carthage noted<sup>36</sup> that the Lord told us to abandon everything and take no thought for tomorrow, since our earthly wealth is a snare and a trap. God rebuked the rich fool, and advised us to become perfect by abandoning our wealth to the poor; we would then accompany our wealth to the Kingdom of God. If we are able to do this, the Lord promises that we shall not lack food.

“We who have renounced the world, and have cast away its riches and pomp in the faith of spiritual grace, should only ask for ourselves food and support. The Lord instructs us, ‘Whoever doesn’t forsake all that he has, cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:33). But he who has begun to be Christ’s disciple, renouncing all things according to the word of his Master, ought to ask for his daily food, and not to extend the desires of his petition to a long period. The Lord again says, ‘Take no thought for tomorrow, for tomorrow itself shall take thought for itself. Sufficient for the day *is* its own trouble’ (Matthew 6:34). With reason, then, does Christ’s disciple ask food for himself for the day, since he is prohibited from thinking of tomorrow; because it becomes a contradiction and a repugnant thing for us to seek to live long in this world, since we ask that the kingdom of God should come quickly. Paul admonishes us, giving substance to the steadfastness of our hope and faith, ‘We brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction. For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:7-10).

“He teaches us that riches are not only to be despised, but that they are also dangerous; in them is the root of seducing evils, that deceive the blindness of the human mind by a hidden deception. God rebuked the rich fool, who thought of his earthly wealth, and boasted in the abundance of his overflowing harvests, saying, ‘You fool, this night your soul shall be required of you; then who’s shall those things be which you have provided?’ (Luke 12:20). The fool who was to die that night was rejoicing in his storehouse, and he to whom life already was failing, was thinking of the abundance of his food. But, on the other hand, the Lord tells us that he becomes perfect and complete who sells all his goods, and distributes them for the use of the poor, and so lays up for himself treasure in heaven. He says that that man is able to follow Him, and to imitate the glory of the Lord’s passion, who, free from hindrance, is involved in no entanglements of worldly estate, but free himself, accompanies his possessions, which before have been sent to God. In order that every one of us may be able to prepare himself, let us thus learn to pray, and know, from the character of the prayer, what he ought to be.”

“For daily bread cannot be lacking to the righteous man, since it is written, ‘The Lord will not allow the righteous soul to famish’ (Proverbs 10:3); and again ‘I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread’ (Psalm 37:25). And the Lord moreover promises, ‘Do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat, or what shall we drink or what shall we wear”’. For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His

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<sup>36</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, IV, 19-21

righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you' (Matthew 6:31-33). To those who seek God's kingdom and righteousness, He promises that all things shall be added. Since all things are God's, nothing will be lacking to him who possesses God, if God Himself is not lacking to him. Thus, a meal was divinely provided for Daniel. When he was shut up by the king's command in the den of hungry lions, the man of God was fed<sup>37</sup>. Thus, Elijah in his flight was nourished by ravens serving him in his persecution. What detestable cruelty is the malice of man! The lions spare Daniel; the birds feed Elijah; while men lay snares, and rage against each other!"

Christ clearly taught that it is good to dispense with one's possessions, and everyone in the Church after Pentecost practiced that. For us to do that today is very difficult, however. There was a great support structure in the Church after Pentecost that is hard to duplicate today. Then the Church was run by Apostles who healed people every day (Acts 5:15-16), and seven of the Seventy Apostles (who also healed people regularly) were commissioned as deacons just to oversee equitable distribution of food. People were of one heart and one soul (Acts 4:32), and everyone contributed to the common effort. If someone tried to be deceitful and not contribute an honest effort, the Apostles had the ability to look right through them and discern it (Acts 5:1-10).

Pockets of this kind of life still exist today, but only in scattered monasteries<sup>38</sup> throughout the world, where the monasteries are typically directed by an Abbot or Abbess, who has the spiritual gifts appropriate for the task.

John Chrysostom made a case<sup>39</sup> for voluntary poverty being not just a great good, but the way to enjoy true riches. Some accuse poverty as being the cause of many evils; this contradicts Christ, who spoke, demonstrated and taught the opposite.

"Let no man regard poverty a cause of disgrace. If virtue is there, all the wealth of the world is not even a speck in comparison. Let us follow after this, if we want to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said, 'Sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in Heaven' (Matthew 19:21). And again, 'It is hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 19:23). Do you see that even if we don't have poverty, we ought to draw it to us? So great a good is Poverty; for it guides us by the hand on the path which leads to Heaven; it is an anointing for combat, an admirable exercise, a peaceful haven."

"But you say, I have need of many things, and I am unwilling to receive handouts from anyone. Nevertheless, even in this respect the rich man is inferior to you; for you perhaps ask handouts for your support, but he shamelessly asks for ten thousand things for covetousness' sake. It is the rich that are in need of many people, often those who are unworthy of them. For instance, they often stand in

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<sup>37</sup> Lancelot Brenton, "Bel and the Dragon", 1:30-42, in The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 1990.

<sup>38</sup> For the development of monasteries in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, where the monasteries initially took on a very similar character to the life in the Church after Pentecost, see the Study on the life of the Evangelist Mark, one of the Seventy Apostles.

<sup>39</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XVIII, 5.

need of soldiers or slaves, but the poor man has no need even of the Emperor himself.”

“Let no man then accuse poverty as being the cause of many evils, nor let him contradict Christ, who declared it to be the perfection of virtue, saying, ‘If you want to be perfect’ (Matthew 19:21). For this Christ spoke in His words, showed by His acts, and taught by His disciples. Let us therefore follow after poverty; it is the greatest good to the sober-minded.”

“Perhaps some of those who hear me avoid poverty as a bad omen. I do not doubt it. This disease is great among most men, and is the tyranny of wealth, that they cannot endure the renunciation of it. Far be this from the Christian’s soul; for nothing is richer than he who chooses poverty of his own accord, and with a ready mind.”

John Cassian stated<sup>40</sup> that some people deceive themselves by quoting “It is more blessed to give than to receive” while they ignore “If you want to be perfect, go sell all that you have”, in an excuse to live in luxury while they donate a little from their abundance.

“Some try to make out a case for their avarice, by quoting the authority of Scripture, which they interpret with vile ingenuity, in their desire to pervert for their own purposes a saying of the Lord Himself. Instead of adapting their own life to the meaning of the Scripture, they make the meaning of Scripture bend to the desires of their own lust. Jesus had said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). By an entirely wrong interpretation of this they think that they can weaken the force of the Lord in which he says, ‘If you want to be perfect, go sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’ (Matthew 19:21). They think that under cover of this they need not deprive themselves of their riches. They declare that they are more blessed if, supported by their belongings, they give to others out of their superabundance. While they don’t embrace with the Apostle that glorious state of denial for Christ’s sake, they are not content either with manual labor or the sparse diet of fasting. These must know that they are deceiving themselves, and have not really renounced the world, while they are clinging to their riches.”

### **Wealth is Not Evil by Itself**

Since some of the early heretics taught that wealth, and all material things are evil, the Church Fathers sometimes went out of their way to correct this mistaken idea. Cyril of Jerusalem pointed out<sup>41</sup> that money and riches are not evil by themselves, but it is the bad use of money that causes problems. Money can become a door to the Kingdom. The devil may claim to control wealth, but we don’t have to believe him.

“Riches, gold and silver are not, as some<sup>42</sup> think, the devil’s, “For the faithful has the whole world full of wealth, but the faithless has not even a penny’ (Proverbs 17:6 LXX). Now nothing is more faithless than the devil; and God says plainly, ‘The gold is Mine, and the silver is Mine’ (Haggai 2:8). If you use it well,

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<sup>40</sup> John Cassian, *Institutes of the Coenobia*, VII, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, VIII, 6-7.

<sup>42</sup> One of the teachings of the Manicheans was that all material things belong to the devil.

there is no fault to be found with money; but whenever you have made a bad use of that which is good, then being unwilling to blame your own management, you impiously throw the blame on the Creator. A man may even be justified by money; 'I was hungry, and you gave Me food'; that certainly was from money. 'I was naked, and you clothed Me' (Matthew 25:35-36); that certainly was by money. Money may become a door to the kingdom of heaven. 'Sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven'" (Matthew 19:21).

"Now I have made these remarks because of those heretics who regard possessions, money, and men's bodies as cursed. For I neither wish you to be a slave of money, nor to treat as an enemy the things which God has given you for use. Never say that riches are the devil's; even though he may say, 'All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me' (Matthew 4:9). One may reject what he says; for we don't have to believe the liar. Perhaps he spoke the truth, being compelled by the power of Christ's presence; for he didn't say, 'All these I will give you, for they are mine', but, 'for they are delivered to me'. He has not grasped the dominion of them, but confessed that he had been entrusted with them, and was for a time dispensing them. But at a proper time, interpreters should inquire whether his statement is false or true."

John Chrysostom pointed out<sup>43</sup> that Paul did not ask the rich to get rid of their possessions, but to be humble about what they have. The covetous man is a slave; someone who is a master of his wealth is not. Those that are free from pride could also become free from the eagerness to be rich. Wealth is uncertain; the one who is truly rich is the one who gives much, not the one who possesses much.

"We should inquire into the reason that Paul does NOT say, 'Command those who are rich in the present world, not to be rich; charge them to become poor; charge them to get rid of what they have'; but instead Paul says, 'Command them not to be haughty' (1 Timothy 6:17). He knew that the root and foundation of riches is pride; and that if any man understood how to be unassuming, he would not make a big deal about the matter. Tell me, why do you lead around so many servants, parasites, and flatterers? Not for necessity, but only for pride; that you may seem more dignified than other men! Paul knew that wealth is not forbidden if it is used for what is necessary. Wine is not a bad thing, but drunkenness is so. A covetous man is one thing, and a rich man is another thing. The covetous man is not rich; he is lacking many things, and while he needs many things, he can never be rich. The covetous man is a keeper, not a master, of wealth; a slave, not a lord. He would rather give anyone a portion of his flesh, than his buried gold, which he watches and keeps with all his effort. How does he hold possession of those things, of which he has neither the free use, nor the enjoyment? Besides this, Paul is not accustomed to command everything for every man, but accommodates himself to the weakness of his hearers, just as Christ did. When that rich man came to Him, and asked Him concerning Life, He did not say at once, 'Go, sell what you have', but He spoke to him of other Commandments. Afterwards, when he challenged Him and said, 'What do I still lack?', He didn't simply say, 'Sell what you have'; but, 'If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have' (Matthew 19:21). 'I lay it down for your

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<sup>43</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, II, 14-15

determination. I give you full power to choose. I do not lay upon you any necessity'. For this reason, Paul didn't speak to the rich concerning poverty, but concerning humility. He did this as well because of the weakness of his hearers, because he perfectly knew, that if he could bring them to be free from pride, he could also free them from eagerness about being rich."

"After giving this admonition, 'not to be prideful', he also taught how they would be able to avoid being so. They should consider the nature of wealth; how uncertain and faithless it is! Therefore, he goes on to say, 'Neither trust in uncertain riches' (1 Timothy 6:17). The rich man is not one who is in possession of much, but one who gives much. Abraham was rich, but he was not covetous; he looked around wherever there happened to be a stranger, or a poor man, in order that he might aid poverty, and be hospitable to the traveler. He didn't cover his roof with gold, but fixed his tent near the oak; he was content with the shadow of its leaves. Yet so illustrious was his lodging that angels stayed with him (Genesis 18:1-16). They didn't look for a splendid house, but virtue of soul. Let us imitate this man then, beloved, and give what we have to the needy. That lodging was crudely prepared, but it was more illustrious than the halls of kings. No king has ever entertained angels; but Abraham, dwelling under that oak, was thought worthy of that honor."

Cyprian of Carthage noted<sup>44</sup> that Christ prescribes nothing more frequently than almsgiving. This He calls perfection and the pearl of great price. He who gives alms according to God's precept believes in God like Abraham. Unfruitful men are cut off and cast into the fire, but the merciful are called into the Kingdom.

"The Lord, the Teacher of our life and Master of eternal salvation, prescribes nothing more frequently than devotion to almsgiving, and laying up heavenly treasures. 'Sell your goods, and give alms' (Luke 12:33). And again, 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:19-21). When He wished to set forth a man perfect and complete by the observation of the Law, He said, 'If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come follow me' (Matthew 19:21). Moreover, in another place He says that a merchant of the heavenly grace, and a gainer of eternal salvation, ought to purchase the precious pearl — that is, eternal life — at the price of the blood of Christ, from the amount of his inheritance, parting with all his wealth for it. He says, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking good pearls. And when he found a precious pearl, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it'" (Matthew 13:45-46).

"He calls those the children of Abraham whom He sees to be laboring in aiding and nourishing the poor. For when Zacchaeus said, 'Behold, half of my goods I will give to the poor; and if I have done any wrong to any man, I will restore it fourfold', Jesus answered, 'Salvation has come to this house, for he also is a son of Abraham' (Luke 19:8-9). If Abraham believed in God, and it was counted to

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<sup>44</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, VIII, 7-8.

him for righteousness (James 2:23), certainly he who gives alms according to God's precept believes in God, and he who has the truth of faith maintains the fear of God. Moreover, he who maintains the fear of God considers God in showing mercy to the poor. He labors thus because he believes that unfruitful trees, that is, unproductive men, are cut off and cast into the fire, but that the merciful are called into the kingdom. In another place, He calls fruitful men faithful; but He denies faith to unfruitful and barren ones, saying, 'If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true *riches*? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?'" (Luke 16:11-12)

### **Impossible with Men, But Possible with God**

Jesus said, "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." When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:24-26).

The perspective of the Twelve was the Old Testament blessing of the Lord on the land and property of someone who is faithful to keep all the Commandments of the Mosaic Law<sup>45</sup>. Someone who is rich had been obviously blessed by the Lord. If he couldn't be saved, who can?

Irenaeus of Lyons gave<sup>46</sup> examples that illustrate that the things which are impossible with men, are possible with God: the ages of the Patriarchs, the translation of Enoch and Elijah, Jonah and the sea monster, and the three young men in the furnace.

"If anyone imagines it impossible that men should survive for such a length of time as the Patriarchs, and that Elijah was not caught up in the flesh, but that his flesh was consumed in the fiery chariot, let him consider that Jonah, after being swallowed by the sea monster, was by the command of God again thrown out safe upon the land (Jonah 2:10). Again, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were thrown into the furnace of fire heated sevenfold, they sustained no harm whatever, neither was the smell of fire perceived on them. The hand of God was present with them, working out marvelous things in their case, things impossible to be accomplished by man's nature. Also, in the case of those who were translated (Enoch and Elijah), the hand of God performed something wonderful. The Son of God appeared, as Nebuchadnezzar the king said, 'Did not we throw three men bound into the furnace? I see four walking in the middle of the fire, and the fourth is like the Son of God' (Daniel 3:19-25). Neither the nature of any created thing, nor the weakness of the flesh, can prevail against the will of God. For God is not subject to created things, but created things are subject to God; and all things yield in obedience to His will. Therefore, the Lord declares, 'The things which are impossible with men, are possible with God' (Luke 18:27). It might seem to people today, who are ignorant of God's appointment, that it is incredible and impossible that any man could live for over 900 years, yet those who were before us did live

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<sup>45</sup> For more details, see the Study for the Epistle Lesson for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>46</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V, v, 2.

to such an age. Those who were translated live as a down payment of the future length of days. It might also appear impossible that a man came out unhurt from the sea monster's belly and from the fiery furnace, yet they nevertheless did so, led out by the hand of God, for the purpose of declaring His power. Some, not knowing the power and promise of God, may oppose their own salvation, thinking it is impossible for God, who raises up the dead; yet the skepticism of such men shall not render the faithfulness of God powerless to confer eternal life on them."

Cyril of Jerusalem stated<sup>47</sup> that the preservation of Jonah in the sea monster's belly is incredible, just as is Jesus' preservation in the tomb. All things are possible with God and Cyril chooses to believe both.

"Let us consider what is harder, for a man, after having been buried, to rise again from the earth, or for a man in the belly of a sea monster, having come into the great heat of a living creature, to escape corruption. Most people don't know that the heat of the belly is so great, that even bones, which have been swallowed, decay and crumble away. How then did Jonah, who was three days and three nights in the sea monster's belly, escape corruption? Seeing that the nature of all men is such that we cannot live without breathing in air, how did Jonah live without a breath of fresh air for three days? The Jews answer and say, 'The power of God descended with Jonah when he was tossed about in hell'. Does then the Lord grant life to His own servant (Jonah), by sending His power with him, and can He not grant it to Himself as well? If Jonah is believable, Jesus is believable also; if Jesus is unbelievable, Jonah also is unbelievable. To me both are alike worthy of credence. I believe that Jonah was preserved, 'for all things are possible with God' (Matthew 19:26); I believe that Christ also was raised from the dead. I have many testimonies of this, both from the Scriptures, and from the operative power today of Him who arose. He descended into hell alone, but ascended with a great company; for He went down to death, 'and many bodies of the saints, who had fallen asleep were raised' (Matthew 27:52) through Him."

Clement of Alexandria summarized<sup>48</sup> the dilemma facing the rich young ruler. It was not just the material wealth that he possessed, but the problem with his soul in loving his wealth more than God. Someone who is rich in virtue can make a faithful use of any fortune and not turn life into outward possession. Someone who is not rich toward God can obtain treasure in heaven by selling his possessions. The rich young ruler made the difficult for himself to be the impossible.

"Rich men that enter the kingdom with difficulty are to be apprehended in a scholarly way, not a worldly way. Salvation does not depend on external things, but on the virtue of the soul, on faith, hope, love, brotherliness, knowledge, meekness, humility and truth. It is not on account of good looks that anyone shall live or perish. He who uses the body given to him in a pure manner and according to God, shall live; and he that destroys the temple of God shall be destroyed. An ugly man can be prodigal, and a good-looking man can be sober. A man who is feeble may transgress from a stubborn temper. A poor and destitute man may be found intoxicated with lusts; and a man rich with worldly goods may be found

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<sup>47</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XIV, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Clement of Alexandria, Salvation of the Rich Man, 18-20.

temperate and pure. It is the soul which is to live; if virtue springing up around it saves, and vice kills, then it is clear that by being poor in those vices, it is saved.”

“He is truly rich who is rich in virtue, and is capable of making a holy and faithful use of any fortune. He is falsely rich who is rich according to the flesh, and turns life into outward possession. In the same way there is a genuinely poor man. He that is poor in spirit -- that is the right thing -- versus he that is poor in a worldly sense, which is a different thing. To him, who is poor in worldly goods, but rich in vices, who is not rich toward God, it is said, ‘Abandon the alien possessions that are in your soul, that you may see God’; which is another way of saying, ‘Enter the kingdom of heaven’. How may you abandon them? By selling them! What then? By introducing in your soul other riches which deify and which bring everlasting life, you shall accrue endless reward, honor, salvation and everlasting immortality. It is for this purpose that you rightly sell the possessions, which shut the heavens against you, by exchanging them for those which are able to save. Let them be possessed by the worldly poor, who are destitute of the treasure in heaven. By receiving instead spiritual wealth, you shall now have treasure in the heavens.”

“The wealthy and legally correct man in the Gospel, not understanding these things figuratively, nor how the same man can be both poor and rich, went away sad and downcast, abandoning the state of life, which he desired but couldn’t attain, and made the difficult for himself to be impossible. For it was difficult for the soul to avoid being seduced and ruined by the luxuries of wealth. It was not impossible, even surrounded with wealth, for one to lay hold of salvation, provided he withdraws himself from material wealth, in favor of that which is taught by God, and learned to use things rightly and properly, and so as to strive after eternal life.”

Another impossibility is seeing God. Irenaeus stated<sup>49</sup> that even though it is impossible to see God, some of those who love Him are permitted to see Him, when and how He wills, as the Prophets predicted.

“The prophets spoke in a prophetic manner; but they did not say that He who was seen by the prophets was a different God, the Father of all being invisible. Yet this is what the heretics declare, who are altogether ignorant of the nature of prophecy. Prophecy is a prediction of future things, a setting forth beforehand of those things which shall be afterwards. The prophets indicated beforehand that men should see God; as the Lord also says, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Matthew 5:8). But regarding His greatness, and His wonderful glory, ‘no man shall see God and live’ (Exodus 33:20), for the Father is incomprehensible. He grants His love, kindness, and infinite power to those who love Him; that is, that are permitted to see God, which the prophets predicted. ‘For those things that are impossible with men, are possible with God’ (Luke 18:27). Man does not see God by his own powers; but when He pleases, He is seen by men, by whom He wills, when He wills and as He wills. For God is powerful in all things, having been seen prophetically through the Spirit, and adoptively through the Son. He shall also be seen paternally in the kingdom of heaven, the Spirit truly preparing man in the Son of God. The Son leads man to the Father, while the Father confers upon him incorruption for eternal life, which comes to everyone by virtue of his seeing God.

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<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, xx, 5.

Those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendor. His splendor animates them; those, therefore, who see God, receive life. For this reason, although He is beyond comprehension, boundless and invisible, He rendered Himself visible, comprehensible, and within the capacity of those who believe, that He might animate those who receive and behold Him through faith. His greatness is beyond finding out, His goodness is beyond expression; by which having been seen, He bestows life on those who see Him. It is not possible to live apart from life. The means of life is found in fellowship with God; but fellowship with God is to know God, and to enjoy His goodness.”

Some people have distorted the things that are possible with God. Ambrose of Milan addressed<sup>50</sup> heretics who claimed that it was impossible for God to forgive sin, even after a time of penitence. Instead they re-baptized people who had sinned.

“Things which are impossible with men are possible with God; God is able whenever He wills to forgive us our sins, even those which we think cannot be forgiven. It is possible for God to give us that which it seems to us impossible. It seemed impossible that water should wash away sin, and Naaman the Syrian thought that his leprosy could not be cleansed by water. But that which was impossible God made to be possible; He gave us so great grace. In like manner it seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through repentance, but Christ gave this power to His Apostles, which has been transmitted to the priestly office. That, then, has become possible which was impossible. By a true reasoning, he convinces us that the re-Baptism by anyone using the Sacrament of Baptism is not permitted.”

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<sup>50</sup> Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Repentance, II, ii, 12.