

“The One Thing You Lack”

Luke 18:18-30

Sermon Series: Kingdom Come Week 8: The Camel and the Needle

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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Sooner or later, all of us lack something. We discover, to our dismay, we miscalculated figures or misplaced keys. Occasionally, a miniscule error can lead to a major disaster. Mariner 1, the first American satellite to Venus was guided by a computer program with thousands of lines of code. Despite intensive checking procedures, one equation lacked an overbar which is like a hyphen over a letter. When it was launched from Cape Canaveral on July 22, 1962, this tiny mistake sent the rocket not into space but careening toward populated areas on earth. The \$18.5 million rocket was destroyed. Science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke called it “the most expensive hyphen in history.”

Sometimes lacking something is not all bad. A woman went to the police with her next door neighbor to report her husband was missing. When the police officer asked for a description she said, "He's thirty-five years old, six foot two, has dark eyes, dark wavy hair, an athletic build, weighs 185 pounds, is soft-spoken, and is good to the children." The next-door neighbor protested, "Wait a minute! Your husband is five foot four, chubby, bald, has a big mouth, and is mean to your children." The wife replied, "Sure, but who wants him back?"¹

Winston Churchill was chubby, bald, big mouthed and short in stature. But it was not a lack of physical attractiveness that most wounded him. England's greatest Prime Minister lacked the attention and affection of his parents. They entrusted him to the care of a nanny. When his father wasn't absent, he was violent and abusive toward the boy. Eventually Lord Randolph Churchill died leaving young Winston to head the family. Churchill was no closer to his mother. He wept more for his nanny when she died. Yet he idolized his father and dearly loved his mother from afar. Some wonder if this complete lack of affection from his parents, this longing to please them, gave him an insatiable taste for power and drove him to prove himself. Churchill was a classic self-made man, a hero to his nation, but he lacked one thing we all need – the love of his parents.

Let me tell you about another self-made man who lacked one thing. Dressed in expensive robes, sporting an impressive head covering, with rings on his fingers and sandals on his feet, he walks up to a poor holy man in rags and asks,

Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Luke 18:18.

As in other parables, Jesus questions his question. Yet the question is troubling.

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.” Luke 18:19

¹ An Encyclopedia of Humor, Copyright © 1998, 1999 by Lowell D. Streiker, Ph.D., Published by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA All rights reserved.

Is Jesus denying He is God? Those who reject the Deity of Christ down through the ages have seized on this passage as proof. Unfortunately, the tone of Jesus' question does not come through. In effect, He replies, "When you call me good, do you realize you are calling me God?" Leaving this question hanging in the air for the moment, Jesus plays along with the rich man by listing commandments one must obey to enter heaven.

You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother." Luke 18:20; Exodus 20:12-16; Deut. 5:16-20

A few things to notice: Jesus only mentions five of the Ten Commandments. All come from the second part which focuses on our relationship not with God but with others. And yet there is one missing. The rich man smiles. This is his kind of "To Do" list. He's been doing them since he was a kid. He gives himself an A+. He's got eternity in the bank.

Yet as he starts to leave, Jesus looks intensely into his eyes. The Gospel of Mark (Mark 10:21) says there is love in that look. Warmth, compassion, grace are conveyed through Jesus' eyes. But the rich man also senses Jesus is looking straight into his soul. Despite all his fine clothes, he feels naked and vulnerable under that powerful gaze. The Teacher spies what is missing inside him. It relates to the last commandment – the one Jesus didn't mention – the commandment about not coveting, eyeing, envying what belongs to others. Jesus sees the rich man is in love with his stuff so He says,

You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. Luke 18:22

The rich man is confused. The one thing he lacks is ... everything he has? How can you lack something when you have everything? Is he supposed to sell his home and property, auction off all the contents, trade in his transportation and empty his bank account? Should he put his family on the street and then abandon them to follow this penniless Teacher? He is willing to build synagogues, endow orphanages, offer large sacrifices in the Temple, even finance Jesus' ministry. But given the choice between lacking eternal life and lacking everything he's got, he decides to keep everything. Sadly, he shuffles away dragging the burden of his great wealth.

As he walks off with head bowed, Jesus looks at his disciples and observes,

How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Luke 18:24-25

On hearing this the disciples are dumfounded. In Jesus day, some assume the rich are especially blessed and loved by God. That's why they are rich. Even today, some try to reinterpret Jesus' parable to make it possible for the rich to get in. "When Jesus says a

camel he doesn't mean a dromedary but a rope which is hard to get through a needle's eye but not impossible." Or they say, "The needle's eye is a small gate which a camel can get through if he bows his head, bend his knees or lightens his load." But both are wrong. Jesus means just what He says: it is impossible for the rich to enter God's kingdom.

Now I'm sorry to break this bad news to you – but everyone in this congregation is rich. Even the poorest one in this community is still richer than four-fifths of the rest of the world. If we take Jesus' words seriously, it is impossible for you and me to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This doesn't apply just to the rich. There is nothing anyone can do to inherit eternal life. Whether you are a rule follower or a rebel, rag-covered or rich, it is impossible to enter the Kingdom of God by your efforts. But, Jesus adds,

What is impossible with people, is possible with God. Luke 18:27

There is nothing you can DO to inherit eternal life. Inheritance is a gift. And so is salvation. So what is the way in? The ruler is close to the answer at the beginning. No one is good but God alone. This is why God came in Jesus to make us good by His grace. This is why Jesus' ultimate answer to the rich ruler and all of us is "come follow me." He is the Way to eternal life. It is impossible, not only for the rich, but for everyone to enter the Kingdom of heaven ... if they lack this one thing.

What is the one thing you and I lack? A saving, loving relationship with Jesus Christ. His Cross is the bridge to eternal life. God builds the bridge, God opens the way to the Kingdom through Jesus. The one thing we can do is place our lives in His hands, follow Him, unconditionally surrender to Him, simply love Him. Then you and I will have the one thing we lack that leads to life.

Does this mean we can ignore the part about selling all you have and giving to the poor? Not so fast. Jesus may have given this extreme challenge to the rich ruler to prove he could not earn eternal life. Yet sacrifice is part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life." Luke 18:28-30

Sacrifice is not a requirement for salvation. Sacrifice is the natural result of a life that is saved. When Jesus is King in your life, idols begin to lose their grip on you. Sacrifice removes the idols which block your relationship with God. The rich man had his chance. Jesus lovingly offered Him eternal life and treasure in heaven. But he chose to worship another god – his possessions here on earth. We, like the ruler, can be perfect on most of the commandments and "still lack one thing" – still have a few idols we can't let go.

Jesus is looking with love at you. He sees past the façade into your soul. He is able to identify the one thing you lack – the things which hold you back from fully trusting and following Him, from receiving the full abundant life He wants to give you. Are you clutching power and control, a possession you can't let go, a passion that is out

of control, a pain that wounds your soul? Here's how to tell if it's an idol – does Jesus' suggestion to let it go cause you sorrow, anxiety, anger or all of the above? Make no mistake, sacrifice is painful – something has to die in order for us to truly live. What prevents you from completely following Jesus? It turns out we are like the camel. We carry heavy burdens which weigh us down. What do you need to unload off your back?

Over the last month I've been asking members and guests of Woodside to let us know what they plan to give to God's work at Woodside in 2021. Some call this a pledge, some a commitment. I call it a plan. We depend on your plans. When you tell us what you plan to give, we know what we can plan to do. Thanks to your faithful giving in 2020, Woodside was able to stay strong and serve boldly through this pandemic. Next year will be equally difficult. If you already let us know what you plan to give in 2021, thank you. If you have not let us know your plan yet, please take the step online or in person today. We don't give to earn our way in to heaven, to pay for our sins, to wipe away our guilt, or to pay our dues. The only reason to give is because you love Jesus who first loved you, because you have surrendered your life to Jesus who first surrendered His life for you, because you are willing to give Him your all who first gave His all for you.

This Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, the greatest gift ever given, Woodside will have a special offering called Home for Christmas. We want to support the building of a Habitat for Humanity house in Bristol for Stacey, her two daughters and her grandson. We also want to make desperately needed repairs to the leaking roof over the children's wing of our building. This year, let's give a home for Christmas to Stacey's children and our children. Let's discover what the rich man missed, there is joy in giving.

Chuck is a rich man who knows this joy. Forbes magazine tells the story of Chuck Feeney "The Billionaire Who Wanted To Die Broke" Feeney, 89, cofounded airport retailer Duty Free Shoppers in 1960. He amassed billions while living a frugal lifestyle. Over the last four decades, Feeney has donated more than \$8 billion to charities, universities, and foundations worldwide through his foundation. And he did it all anonymously. Because of this clandestine, globe-trotting giving campaign, Forbes called him "the James Bond of philanthropy." And his example ignited a movement of radical generosity by such rich people as Warren Buffet and Bill Gates. Inspired by Chuck, they created the Giving Pledge which more than 210 billionaires have signed. Chuck Feeney summarized his mission in a few sentences.

I see little reason to delay giving when so much good can be achieved through supporting worthwhile causes. Besides, it's a lot more fun to give while you live than give while you're dead. I am very satisfied. I feel very good about completing this on my watch. And to those wondering about Giving While Living: Try it, you'll like it.²

² Steven Bertoni, "Exclusive: The Billionaire Who Wanted to Die Broke . . . Is Now Officially Broke." Forbes (9-15-20)