

## REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

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Grace Church in New York  
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*Jesus said to them again, "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." (Mark 10:25)*

Today's readings from the Gospel of Mark and the Book of Amos remind me of an old movie from the 1960's starring a young George Segal. The film is called *King Rat*, and it tells the story of a World War Two American corporal who finds himself incarcerated in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. Through his own smarts and savvy, Corporal King soon masters the meager black market of the camp and becomes the wealthiest man within its pathetic economy. While others are starving, he is feasting. While others are merely trying to stay alive, he is enjoying manicures, shoe shines, and cigarettes. Soon he has everyone that matters on his payroll, and he rules the place. The forsaken little world of the camp becomes his kingdom. He is King Rat, a name he earns by selling rat meat to others.

However, a strange reversal in the fortunes of King Rat is on the horizon. One day without warning the guards gather the prisoners into the central yard, where most expect some harsh treatment to be inflicted upon them. But much to their surprise the news they receive is that the war is over, and that they will soon be free. Suddenly, King Rat's ill-gotten, carefully hoarded supplies of food and prison-camp valuables are just so much junk. That which he laid up as treasure in one kingdom will be worthless in the next kingdom. Worse yet, his treasures will likely incriminate him; they will prevent him from getting through the eye of the needle. King Rat's well-groomed, well-nourished appearance puts him under suspicion as a collaborator with the enemy, and it's hard to imagine anyone whom he kept under his heel rising to his defense. King Rat will not enjoy the new reality that liberation brings. In the words of Jesus, *How hard it is the enter the kingdom of God. 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.*

For two-thousand years, preachers and Biblical commentators have spoken of the man we meet today in the Gospel of Mark as if he were a first century version of King Rat. But rather than King Rat, the man in question is better known as "the Rich Young Ruler." Actually, Mark describes him only as rich. In Matthew he is young and rich. In Luke he is a rich ruler. But put them all together and you get the Rich Young Ruler. Could you ask for better adjectives to capture your image? You could ask, but you wouldn't get them. First of all, he's rich: he has lots of money to buy lots of things. Secondly, he's young. He has many years ahead to enjoy his wealth, to spend it, to count it, to play with it. He should have no worries about the meddlesome signs of aging appearing on his body, not with his thick head of hair, flat stomach, and naturally wrinkle-free face. Thirdly, he's a ruler. He has power and influence to impose his will. You know the old Mel Brooks' movie line: "It's good to be the king." Well, it's even better to be the Rich Young Ruler. If he were to be among us today, you might envy him, you might hate him, but you'd never turn down an invitation to one of his cocktail parties.

But wait, something is wrong. When Mark wrote about the Rich Young Ruler, what he chose to record wasn't anything about his enviable state of being. Instead, Mark noticed that the Rich Young Ruler rushed up to Jesus with an anxious query: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's an excellent question. Wouldn't we all like the answer? I wonder what prompted the man who had it all to ask it. A financial setback? A threat to his security? A death

in the family? Perhaps he was passing a kidney stone! Stranger things have happened. But I think what he was really asking goes something like this: “Good teacher, I have everything the world can possibly offer, but I am miserable and unfulfilled. What can I do?” The answer that Jesus eventually gave was this: *you lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.* You know the rest of the story: the Rich Young Ruler went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions.

As you can well imagine, the Rich Young Ruler has been a favorite punching bag for preachers as churches across the country ramp up into annual pledge campaign time. So perhaps right now you are bracing yourself for the accusation that we are all too much like him. You’re thinking, “Here it comes: *the word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword.* He’s going to start criticizing my expensive designer bag.” If shame and blame is what you think is coming next, relax. I come today not brandishing any swords. For one thing, I would never criticize your pricey designer bag, unless, of course, it clashed with your shoes. For another thing, I am frequently awed by the generosity of you, the people of Grace Church. Last year’s capital campaign to restore the ceiling was a wonderful success. Through the years our annual campaigns either have held their own, or grown. We’ve raised the money to restore two abandoned houses in Queens. So it would be downright false and patently rude for me to accuse this congregation of being unwilling to share and dig deep for the glory of God. You have been willing, and the evidence is all around us.

Nevertheless, we cannot be complacent. It is our constant temptation to worry about how much we need in order to enjoy life to the fullest. What shall we wear? What shall we eat? Where shall we live? We live in a culture that constantly lures us to have more and more. The tricky thing is, we are so much a part of the culture that we don’t even recognize when we have too much. John C. Bogle is the founder and former CEO of the Vanguard Mutual Fund Group. He begins one of his books with an anecdote that was originally a poem in a 2005 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine. It seems that two important authors, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, were chatting with each other at a cocktail party given by a billionaire on Shelter Island. Vonnegut looked around and said, “Joe, how does it make you feel to know that our host only yesterday may have made more money than your novel ‘Catch-22’ has earned in its entire history?” Heller answered, “Yes, but I have something that he will never have.” “What on earth could that be?” asked Vonnegut. Heller replied, “The knowledge that I have enough.” The title of Bogle’s book, by the way is, *Enough*.

How much is enough? In the Gospel of Mark, the Rich Young Ruler’s anxious demeanor leads me to believe that the one thing he lacks is the knowledge that he has enough. What is the danger of losing sight of how much is enough? The danger is in developing a spiritual ailment. The danger is in catching a virus that attacks, weakens, even kills faith in God. It works like this: the more things I have, the more I am inclined to find security in those possessions. My things are a buffer between me and death. My things set me apart and define my edge, my style. My things divert my attention from bothersome first-order questions of existence. My temptation is to place my trust in my things. And the more my trust is in my possessions, the less is my trust in the living God. In today’s Old Testament reading we’ve heard how the prophet Amos saw the same spiritual ailment infecting the Israelites (Amos 5:6-15). They put their faith in their pleasant vineyards and houses of hewn stone. Theirs was a bad case of the spiritual malady of materialism, and the bad news is we’ve all contracted it to one degree or another.

What can we do, then, to inherit eternal life? I think one powerful reason to come to church is to get and stay spiritually healthy. To that end, sometimes Jesus, the Great Physician has a bitter pill for us to swallow. For the Rich Young Ruler, the remedy involved giving it all away. In this instance Jesus really did mean for the Rich Young Ruler to let go of it all. The cold-turkey

treatment plan was the only way this one could be free. So the young man walked away sorrowful. What was he thinking as he departed? We are left to wonder.

You and I may take it as good news that the gospel is not a one-pill-cures-all approach to spiritual health. The cold-turkey, give-it-all-to-the-poor remedy that Jesus prescribed for the Rich Young Ruler isn't the only solution. We have a word for the other approach to the malady of materialism – a word you've heard before. The word is stewardship. Stewardship is a more gradual course of treatment. It involves a lifetime of turning over to God the things that we borrow only briefly, and will not keep anyway. It involves a lifetime of learning to let go. Stewardship says, I may be a rich young ruler, I may be a poor old peasant, or I may be somewhere in between, but whoever I am and whatever I have, all of it is only on loan to me from God. All of it belongs to God. How does God want me to put it to use to build up the kingdom? And so, in these weeks leading up to Pledge Sunday on October 28, think of the coming annual campaign as a gift. Yes, a gift. It gives us the opportunity to work on the concept of stewardship in our life, and while we still have time, reposition ourselves in the great reversal of fortune that awaits us all.

Little did King Rat know that a new reality was about to sweep over and upend his kingdom, and that in the new order of things, his former treasures would be worthless. Likewise the prophet Amos warned that an even greater reversal of fortune was at hand, one that would render meaningless the ownership of stone houses and pleasant vineyards, and perhaps even incriminate those claiming such treasures as collaborators with the enemy. In the same fiery prophetic tradition, two-thousand years of preachers, with very few exceptions, have vilified the Rich Young Ruler as the poster boy for greed. They have concluded that when Jesus said *go, sell what you have, and give the money to the poor*, the Rich Young Ruler went away sorrowful, grieving, because he could not – would not – let go of his great possessions. He could not let go of them in order to take hold of the treasures in heaven that Jesus promised.

But I wonder. I wonder if we are wrong to crown the Rich Young Ruler as the King Rat of his day. Remember that Jesus did not vilify this man. Quite the contrary, he looked on him *and loved him*. So perhaps, just perhaps, the great truth burst upon him, and the young man was off to do exactly what Jesus said he should go off and do: repent, reorient himself to face the coming new kingdom. He was off to sell what he had and give the money to the poor so he could have treasure in heaven. Talk about estate sales: his would be enough to make anyone sorrowful.

People can change: the Rich Young Ruler, you, me, even those to whom Amos spoke. Amos held out hope when he said, "*Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.*" It may be. It just may be that even the likes of us can be saved. Even the likes of us may fit through the eye of the needle, hard though it is to enter the kingdom of God.

Remember, it is our Lord Jesus himself who looked on the Rich Young Ruler and loved him and said, "*With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.*"