

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Challenges to the Gospel in the 21st Century: The challenge of prosperity

Over the years the message of the Gospel, thank God, has never changed, but the way we need to preach has. Year after year in so called Christian Britain we have seen churches closing, Sunday Schools and youth groups stopping due to lack of interest and numbers. Men and women today have neither the desire to go to church regularly, nor see it necessary to send their children. Some do send their children because it gives them time out or because they went when they were young and feel it's the right thing to do. In general there is a lack of "God fearing" which is a phrase that is often used in old fishing communities. What I mean by that is that there is no reverence or interest in a God who not only holds their breath in His hand, but loves them and wants to save them.

Another problem that we have today is the lack of time adults have to even consider the meaning of life and what happens after death. Adults and even young children nowadays are not happy unless they have a phone that allows them to tweet, check their Facebook status and browse the web. Speaking on the phone and texting are almost a thing of the past! Children and some adults dwindle away endless hours on meaningless computer games, all these things filling their time and their minds. Not to mention the television, we need the biggest screen with HD and every channel under the sun. Children tell me that the children's clubs are boring and they would rather be in their rooms playing on their computer. What a sad existence! Children have stopped playing out like we used to do every night. Children are growing up in their own Cyber World, a world of unreality.

Another issue we have today is that we are always busy, more pressures and demands are expected of us at work every day. Husbands and wives both work to finance commitments they have taken on. Children demand more and are never satisfied. We want the best of houses, cars and holidays but all this comes at a price. Less time is spent with the children and we are caught in the trap of always being busy and missing the most important things in life.

The most important thing of course is our relationship with God. Many families in Britain and throughout the West today have no real need; they have all the temporal things they require and more. I am also very aware that some families do really struggle to provide for the basic needs of their family, food, clothing, heating and struggle to pay their bills because of various circumstances. Over the years at certain periods of time we have seen a turning to God. These periods were usually due to hardship of some kind or another. Wars, poverty, suffering and bereavement are to name but a few. At these particular times, men and women do stop and consider the meaning of life. The daily things they are so taken up with become less significant in times of need.

In other countries, thank God, many are coming to Him. In these countries, the people have a simpler and straight forward lifestyle and do not have the possessions we have, but neither do they have the worries. They can struggle with many things but they have time to reflect on the wonderful creation which bears testimony of God. We would class them as being poor, but the many who are finding Christ are becoming rich toward God. I believe that Satan uses today's technology to distract us from God. The Bible states Satan desires to blind the eyes of man (see 2 Corinthians 4:4).

So we ask the questions: How do we get the Gospel across to a society like this? How can we get people to listen and be aware of the Gospel? How can we evangelise in a prosperous neighbourhood? How can we get the Gospel across to our friends and colleagues?

I wish I knew the answers. We often get downcast thinking that we are not doing enough, questioning ourselves as to what we are doing wrong that we are not seeing fruit in the Gospel. We must remember that the Bible tells us that Paul might plant, Apollos might water or pray but it is God who gives increase (see 1 Corinthians 3:6). God has allowed us to be part of the proclamation of His Gospel, but we must recognise it is His work in the power of the Holy Spirit. We must be careful not to make this an excuse not to do the work of the Gospel. So how do we get the Gospel message across to our family, friends and colleagues who have little need?

It is always good to look at the examples the Lord Jesus gives us in the Bible. I began by looking at the word "rich" in a Bible search. One of the first passages to take my notice was in Luke 18:18-29. There the Lord Jesus in answer to the negative reaction of a rich man (Luke 18:23) said, "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 a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:24-25). Right away I thought, Well the Lord points this out very clearly. How difficult it is even for the Lord Himself when here on earth to persuade a rich man to be saved. So in one sense we should not get down about how difficult we find this work.

In the Bible we have many rich men. In the Old Testament we have men like Abraham (Genesis 13:2, 14:23), Isaac (Genesis 26:12-14), Jacob (Genesis 36:6-7), David (1 Chronicles 29:28), Solomon (1 Kings 10:23, 2 Chronicles 9:22), Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17:5, 18:1), Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 32:26-28) and many more. Most of these men lived their lives in tandem with God and He blessed them with wealth. This was not always in gold and silver but in Abraham's case with many herds and flocks (Genesis 13:2).

In the New Testament it is different. We have men who were rich and men who were poor. This clear distinction is seen all through the Gospels where we read of the pathway of the Lord Jesus. We have mentioned earlier the difficulty of a rich man to come to terms with the Gospel (Luke 18:18-29) and how so often it was the needy that were ready to accept the Lord Jesus. We read of many who were sick, lame, blind and crippled. We read of others who had various diseases like leprosy, blood problems and many more. We read of beggars, the outcasts of society, all who recognised they had a need and asked the Lord Jesus to meet their need. But we can't just say that we are going to concentrate our Gospel effort with the poor and needy, although it is our responsibility as Christians to help in a practical way to meet their needs, which often results in salvation. We must be ready to preach the Gospel to all men. God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). So we must desire to reach the rich as well as the poor. But again we ask the questions: How do we do this? How do we get through to them?

At this point, if you are just joining us this morning, we are talking about the challenges to the Gospel in the 21st century and today we have the topic of the challenge of prosperity.

Zacchaeus and the Ethiopian eunuch

I would like to bring your attention to six men in the Bible of whom it clearly says that they were rich. Rich men can be saved as in the case of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). One of the key things that I noticed was that the change or interest started in their hearts. I believe it was the Holy Spirit at work which gave them the desire to seek the Lord. Then we see that the Lord uses people like Philip, just as he can use and you and me in a remarkable way to be there in the right place at the right time to witness to others and help bring them to salvation. For this we need to be ready in season and out of season (see 2 Timothy 4:2). We need to be a faithful witness, one who is respected in the work place, one in whom others can confide, but above all we must have the desire to be ready, willing and able to serve when God demands. The Lord Jesus carried out the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14), but it was the little boy and His disciples who had the joy of providing and serving the people. It's the same when the miracle happens in the salvation of a precious soul.

The story of Zacchaeus is found in Luke 19:1-10. Here we have a man who was a chief tax collector and the Bible states that he was rich (Luke 19:2). He was a man who was hated by others mainly because of his job, collecting taxes for the Roman authorities. There is also a suggestion that he may have taken more than he should have from the people (Luke 19:8); tax collectors were all treated with suspicion. He had his own house (Luke 19:5); he was living comfortably and had no material needs. So what was it that drew him to go and see the Lord Jesus? He had obviously heard of Jesus and the great things He was doing in the area; he would have heard others giving witness of this. He did not let his small size get in the way as he climbed up a tree just to see Jesus (Luke 19:4); some have suggested that he did not want to be seen. But whatever his thinking, Jesus knew he was there, just as He knows where everyone is; He knew his heart. I think that the work of salvation had already begun in Zacchaeus' heart because of the reaction to the invitation of Jesus that He wanted to abide in his house (Luke 19:5). Zacchaeus came down quickly and he received and welcomed Him joyfully. So we ask the question again. What brought this rich man to the Lord Jesus? First of all, the work had begun in his heart, probably realising that defrauding people was wrong and that he was a sinner which was why his offer to pay back what he had wrongly taken (Luke 19:8). Secondly, it was possible that someone had been witnessing to him, and thirdly he came face to face with the Lord Jesus.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch can be found in Acts 8:26-40. He was a man who was in charge of the treasure of Candace, queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27). This man who wanted to do the right thing and he had the right desires. He had travelled a long way to worship at Jerusalem and was travelling home through the desert. He was actually sitting reading the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53:7-8) when Philip came running alongside him (Acts 8:30).

Philip was an evangelist who had been preaching in Samaria, where there was great blessing as we read in Acts 8:4-8. We would all think that the work he was doing there was much more important to God than to leave and go to speak to one man. But God's ways are best. The Bible tells us that "His ways are higher than our ways, His thoughts

are higher than our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8). Philip never questions the command from God and neither should we; he got up and went.

Philip was able to instruct the Ethiopian eunuch in the way of salvation (Acts 8:35); he believed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Acts 8:37) and was saved and then he was baptised (Acts 8:38). Once more how wonderful to see the work of God in this man's life! He was seeking for something more than the ritual of going to Jerusalem and God used His servant, Philip, to carry out the work. We have to accept today that the work of the Gospel is God's work; it begins in the heart by the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit. Once that work has begun, God uses you and me to complete that work, just like Philip. That is why we have to be ready at all times; the Bible tells us we should be ready "in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). So we see in these two men that rich men can be saved.

A certain rich man and a certain ruler

We go on to look at the two unnamed men who turned down the Gospel, known only as a certain rich man (Luke 16:19-25) and a certain ruler (Luke 18:18-30).

The story of the certain rich man can be found in Luke 16:19-25. Here we have a man who wore the very best of clothes, feasted and lived in luxury every day (Luke 16:19). In the story we also read of a beggar who lived at his gate. He did not keep at all well and longed to eat of the food that fell from the rich man's table (Luke 16:20-21). It would seem that the rich man had no thought of what would happen after his death. Was it because he had no need in this world? Was it because he was too busy with his business life? It would seem that he knew about Abraham as he recognises him when lifting his eyes from hell to heaven (Luke 16:23). So he was aware in this life of Abraham and had no excuse for his neglect of salvation. On the other hand Lazarus the beggar in all his need in this world made provision for his eternal security and had great riches in heaven.

We can only assume that the rich man went to the synagogue and knew the teachings of the Old Testament. He may have gone just to look good, to do the religious thing without any interest. I am sure that every time he passed Lazarus that he was reminded of God, possibly because of the poor man's need. It is possible that Lazarus was vocal in asking for help and maybe passing on God's blessings. Lazarus was possibly God's man that would have helped this man to salvation if the desire had been there. I believe that every sinner has someone around them from whom they could hear the Gospel.

Please turn now to Luke 18:18-30 to read the passage about a certain ruler. This man came to the Lord Jesus to find out how he could inherit eternal life (Luke 18:18). This man had lived a perfect life according to the Law (Luke 18:21). But Jesus knew his heart and asks him to sell everything that he has and give it to the poor and follow Him (Luke 18:22). Jesus watched him as he thought about it. The man became very distressed and sad because he had great wealth (Luke 18:23); it was obvious that the wealth meant a lot to him.

What Jesus then said in Luke 18:24-27 is probably the key to our talk today: "Jesus looked on him and said, '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 a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'. Those who heard this asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus replied, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God'". It is very sad that we do not read of this man doing what Jesus said. What can we do in relation to getting the Gospel across to people like this? I think we must understand how hard it is, but we must not let ourselves get downhearted. We must have faith and believe that God can do a mighty work in the heart of any person. Let's get on our knees and pray and depend on God more, that's probably best.

An unnamed centurion and of Cornelius

As time is running out I would like to touch briefly on the two men who showed wonderful Christian character once they were saved. We read of an unnamed centurion in Luke 7:1-10 and of Cornelius in Acts 10:1-33. Both men who were rich and they used their wealth wisely. Cornelius was a God fearing man who gave to people in need and also prayed continually to God (Acts 10:2). He was a devout man and a believer. The other unnamed centurion also had great characteristics. He was very humble, he was kind, he valued others and he had great faith (Luke 7:5-6, 9). Both of these rich men came to know and love the Lord Jesus and used the riches that God had graciously given them to great effect. This was recognised by others and by the Lord Himself. God is the giver of all things. Yes, even all our possessions, so we have a responsibility to use them for Him.

Conclusion

Having considered the challenges in our mainly prosperous country, the conclusion I have come to is that we have an almost impossible task to get the Gospel across. But we must believe that "God's word shall not return to Him void" We must continue in the Gospel. A good way is by being faithful witnesses every day in our behaviour, our speech,

showing kindness and patience to others. We preach a Gospel each day by the things that we do and the things we say. We must also use every available way we can to get the Gospel across: personal witness, media work, written work, dare I say Facebook, twitter etc. Don't tell my children I said that! But above all let us be ready to answer the Master's call when it comes: You might be the one He will use in a mighty way for His praise and glory.

May God bless you and encourage you to continue in the work of the Gospel today. Amen.

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