

Modern-day Proverbs Sermon Series
You Can Lead a Horse to Water – Luke 18:18-27
Feb. 16, 2025
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When I was preparing for ordination, I had to meet with a council of pastors and laypeople whose job it was to determine whether or not I was ordainable. Over the course of two hours, they peppered me with questions about theology, worship, and leadership. The one question I remember the most was this: “As a pastor, on what hill are you prepared to die?” Yikes. I wanted to ask, “Is that a hazard of this job? I thought it was only Jesus who had to die on a hill.” I answered with all sincerity, “If the church potluck doesn’t have corn pudding, I’m out.”

I’ve thought a lot about that question over the years. To what in my life am I willing to say “no,” even if there are consequences? Where do I draw the line? To paraphrase our modern-day proverb for today, what water am I not willing to drink, even if I’m led to it? And what if it’s Jesus who is doing the leading? Would I still say “no”?

OK, that’s a lot of questions to start this sermon, so I’ll let you catch your breath and marinate on those as I tell you that we’re continuing our Modern-day Proverbs sermon series, in which we’re looking at sayings that probably should be in the Bible but didn’t make it. Today’s saying is, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” I’ve heard this my whole life without really thinking what this meant. I’ve never led a horse and I’ve never seen a horse refuse to drink. Why won’t he drink? Is he thirsty? Is there something wrong with the water? Geez, Kory, enough with the questions!

This is apparently one of the oldest proverbs in the English language, dating all the way back to the 1100s, when it was rendered in Old English as “A man maie well bring a horse to the water, But he can not make him drinke without he will,” which methinks is a great way to sayeth it. This saying first showed up in, of all places, sermons, and was applied to people who heard the good news of Jesus but chose not to believe. Can you imagine saying no to Jesus?

Well, that’s exactly what happens to the man in our story. This poor guy has his divine denial told in three of the gospels, solidifying his status as the most famous naysayer in history. Jesus offers the man a chance to follow him. Did the man know the magnitude of that question? He would become Jesus’ disciple, he would learn to fish for people, he would never have to order wine again because he would just order water and let Jesus do his thing. Maybe he would write a gospel or be rendered in stained glass in some European cathedral. And the guy’s answer? “No thanks. Not for me.” He didn’t want to drink the living water Jesus was offering.

This strange encounter starts with a question that makes us think this guy is all-in. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Another way to ask this is, “How do I get to heaven?” And right away I have to tell you, I do NOT like Jesus’ answer. There’s no explaining away the bluntness of his words to the rich young ruler. I wish I could tell you that when Jesus says, “sell what you own” the original Greek actually translates to “sell what you no longer need but keep the good stuff.” But it doesn’t. I can’t tell you the Israelites owned really small camels and sewed with really big needles. This passage is what it is. One commentator said, “If this message does not take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved, or amazed, we have either heard it so much that we don’t hear it anymore, or we’ve not heard it enough.”

Here’s another question...is there really anything wrong with the ruler? Sounds to me like he’s done an awful lot of things right. He could have been anyone we know, wearing a sharp three-piece suit and power tie, working his way through life to provide for his family, saving and

investing and splurging every once in a while. He approaches Jesus and offers him a sign of respect by bowing before him. This is a good person, an honest person. You know, like us.

He gives us some insight into his situation: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Inherit" – ahh, that's a wealthy person's word, isn't it? He's not asking, "Where can I serve the unhoused this week?" or "When can I join the next Habitat build?" He knows he's followed the law. But he feels something isn't right. He doesn't have that sense of peace about his faith portfolio. There's got to be something else he can do to make sure he's on the elevator going up instead of down. There's got to be one more thing he can check off his spiritual to-do list that will ensure a reserved seat at the heavenly banquet table. He has the means, he has the desire, all he needs from Jesus is the name to write on the check so he can add "eternal life" to his list of assets.

But to solve this problem, this man doesn't need addition, he needs subtraction. Jesus looks at him and sees, not wealth or status, but an illness in need of a cure. After the man tells Jesus how great he's been at checking all the spiritual boxes, Jesus says, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." What would you do? As we see in our world over and over again, relinquishing power and wealth is the hardest for those who have the most power and wealth to relinquish. But salvation is not for sale, so the man turns his back on Jesus. The water is right in front of him, he's thirsty for eternal life, yet he didn't want to drink.

Jesus has a way of making a mess of people's tidy little faith, doesn't he? It seems like he's always putting down the good guys, like the law-abiding Pharisees, and lifting up the ne'er-do-wells, like tax collectors and lame beggars. And when he has Mr. Moneybags right in front of him, the guy who could bankroll his ministry for the foreseeable future, he doesn't say, "You want eternal life? Here's a pledge card" or "Getting into heaven? A big donation to the capital campaign wouldn't hurt." Instead, he tells him to get rid of the one thing that means the most to this man. If you're brave enough to ask Jesus a question, you better be prepared for the answer.

Here's the issue, as I see it. This rich young man was a fan of Jesus. He'd heard the stories, seen the crowds, knew that Jesus was doing some pretty cool stuff. And he asks the question, "What's in it for me?" So, he excitedly bounds up to Jesus like a groupie looking for an autograph. But being excited about religion isn't the same as trusting in Christ. You see, Jesus isn't looking for fans. He's looking for followers. This man was eager to make sure his spiritual ledger leaned to the positive side, but was not interested in truly following Jesus.

So, what are we? Fans or followers? Do we have our spiritual to-do lists? Go to church, make a pledge, pray (when I remember), do something nice for someone. Look, those are all good things and if you're doing them, I hope you keep doing them. But that doesn't necessarily make you a follower of Jesus. This man who comes to Jesus is a good person, he's fulfilled the commandments to not cheat or steal or murder. It's admirable to never take anything away from someone. But it is Christ-like to reach out and give something to someone, especially something of value to you.

Does that mean for us to move from being a fan to being a follower, we have to sell all we have and give the money to the poor? (Pause) Nope. Shew! Jesus isn't giving that command to us. Jesus wasn't laying down poverty as a requirement for everyone. The Great Physician doesn't write everyone the same prescription. But for this man, the thing that stood between him and God, the thing that kept him at arm's length from Jesus, the thing that held him back from following was his wealth. And, Jesus says, that's what has to go. Jesus leads him right to the

water of salvation, and the man looks in and sees a life without his riches that he holds so dear. And he says “no.”

What has to go for us to move from fan to follower? If our goal is to be a fan of Jesus, then we can probably keep doing what we’re doing. We’ll lead respectable lives that way. But Jesus can’t heal who we pretend to be. If we want to be a follower of Jesus, then we might need to take a closer look at what stands between us and God. What’s in the way? On overloaded schedule? A fear of doing something wrong? A feeling of inadequacy? A gossipy tongue? A grudge? Wealth? Or are we, like the man, looking for what else we have to DO to inherit eternal life? Our eternal life is not a prize to be won. It’s a gift, a gift given to us freely by God. And in return, we give God a gift, the gift of our lives, the gift of giving to others, the gift of following Jesus’ lead in loving and serving.

This is not a story about how money is bad. The Bible tells us about several people who stayed wealthy and followed Jesus, because for them, their wealth was a means, not an end. But those folks had to leave something else behind – a consuming career, an unhealthy relationship, an addiction, a “what’s in it for me?” attitude. What we have to leave behind may not necessarily be bad, it’s just in the way. Compared to being a follower of Jesus, to doing God’s work in this world, it just isn’t that important. As pastor John Ortberg reminds us, at the end of the game, it’s all going to go back in the box. So how can we use what we have now to get us closer to God?

This is hard stuff, but then again, Jesus never said following him would be easy. Faith is a choice, and it’s rarely an easy one. Wouldn’t it be great if we could stay rich or stay comfortable or stay uninvolved and still be a follower? But we can’t, can we? There are days when stuffing a camel through a needle sounds easier than following Jesus. Can we do it? Can we be more Christ-like today than we were yesterday? Can we use what God has given us to make a difference in this world? Can we be, not fans of Jesus, but followers? Jesus has presented us the living water of salvation through him, the opportunity to drink deeply the love and grace of God. What he asks in return is for us to follow him. Some days that just feels impossible. Well, it is impossible, if we try to do it alone. Thankfully, we’re not alone. For God, all things are possible.