

Wealth



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

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Year B Proper 23

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
■	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence	■	▲	●	
●	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲			
●	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲			
▲	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past	▲			
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor		▲	●	▲
■	Rich Man - a wealthy		■		
▲	Jesus		▲	●	▲
●	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room			●	●
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus				▲

Scene 1

Mary , Matthew , Phillip , Thomas

{Matthew, Phillip, Mary, and Thomas chat by the fire. Phillip has been asking a reluctant Matthew about all the stuff he had when he was rich.}

Phillip *[enthusiastically]* Come on! What else did you have?

Matthew *[reluctantly]* I don't know. Uh, let's see. Okay, how about horses? I had a couple of riding horses.

Thomas Really? Even Roman centurions don't always have horses of their own.

Matthew I just had a couple.

Phillip That's the best thing yet! Horses! I'm dying!

Thomas What's it like to ride a horse?

Matthew It's nothing really. In fact, it's literally a pain in the ass.

Mary A centurion who...who I knew, once gave me a ride on his horse. It felt like the whole world suddenly came alive. It felt like a storm at sea and I was a drop of rain.

Phillip *[totally captivated]* Wow. That is awesome. God, I wish I were rich!

Matthew *[dryly]* No you don't.

Phillip Sometimes I lie awake at night and wonder who sinned so badly that my family ended up poor.

Mary *[in pity]* Oh, Phillip!

Thomas Hold on. You believe that you're poor because your family sinned?

Phillip The Bible says the righteous are supposed to prosper.

Matthew Jeremiah asked why the *wicked* prospered.

Phillip Oh, I know being rich doesn't necessarily mean you're righteous, because you can gain riches dishonestly, too. *[brightly to Matthew]* Like you!

Thomas Ha!

Phillip Oops! Sorry, Matthew, I didn't mean to be insulting.

Matthew It's all right. I *was* wicked. But I'll tell you a secret: they all are!

Phillip *[with surprising vehemence]* No! No, they aren't! Some of them are noble, and kind, and do the work of God. But people still try to tear them down, and it's unfair! They're the ones who hold up society, and all anyone wants to do is talk trash about them behind their backs!

{There's an awkward pause.}

Mary Phillip, are you talking about a rich man you know?

Phillip Yeah, I guess I am. Our landlord back home. He's a wonderful man. He lets us slide when we fall behind on the rent, and lets the poor glean from his fields, and he comes to our celebrations and invites us to his. You should see his house!

Matthew You know, I think I've heard of him. Didn't he once pay to improve the roads in your entire village, and not just his estate?

Phillip That's him!

Thomas So what do you say, Matthew? Is this guy righteous?

Matthew *[after a pause]* He's pretty close.

Thomas So what kind of stuff did he have that Matthew didn't?

Phillip You know, he didn't really have much. I mean, his house was big, but it was filled with family members. It didn't have any sculptures or paintings like Matthew's did. There were kids all over the place. They would have wrecked anything nice! It was kind of like my own house, except way, way more rooms.

Mary He does seem like a good man.

Phillip He'd throw these parties where he'd invite his rich friends, but he'd also invite the villagers. We would mingle with them! And they were all so nice.

Thomas Gee, Matthew. I guess you were never invited!

Phillip *[to Mary in pure innocence]* That's why I sometimes think you were lucky. I know the work you did was terrible, but at least you got to meet lots of rich men.

Matthew *[scolding]* Phillip!

Mary *[interrupting]* It's all right. *[somerly after a pause]* I did get to ride on that horse once.

Thomas *[gently]* Hey, Mary? If it's not too painful to say: what were the rich men like that you knew? I mean: do you feel they were, on the whole, more righteous than the poorer ones?

Mary *[after a long think]* The rich think they can get away with anything, so you have to be very careful around them. The poor can be so desperate, for...all kinds of things. So you have to be careful around them, too.

Scene 2

Jesus , Judas , Phillip , Rich Man

{The next day, Judas comes running over to Phillip.}

Judas Hey, Phillip? A man has come to talk to the rabbi, but he's also asking after you.

Phillip Me? Why would anyone want to talk to me?

Judas You'll see. Come on, on your feet! We're all sitting down to some bread and wine.

{They go over to the group, where the rich man sits with Jesus and some other disciples.}

**Rich
Man** Phillip!

Phillip Sir!

**Rich
Man** It's good to see you again. It looks like they've been taking good care of you.

Phillip Yes sir. It's been great here. You're the visitor? You're the man who wants to talk to the rabbi?

**Rich
Man** *[soberly]* I am.

Phillip That's wonderful!

Judas *[to Phillip]* It's partly due to you that he's here.

Phillip Really?

**Rich
Man** When you and Nathanael left to join this group, I got curious about it. I begin learning everything I could about your rabbi. And then I heard that Joanna here had also joined, and I got even more intrigued. But here's what clinched it: when Nathanael quit but you stayed on, I thought there might really be something legitimate

happening here. If it had been the other way around, that probably would have ended my interest!

Phillip *[humbly]* I...I don't know what to say!

Judas *[expansively]* Then have a seat and let's begin our talk. *[to the rich man]* What can we do for you?

Rich Man Well, here it is. In my investigations -- and I should confess now, rabbi, that I did more than passively learn about you; I sent out agents who attended your meetings and interviewed people you interacted with -- and I've come to believe that you're more than just a good man. I believe you hold the secret to...I don't even know what to call it! A life of the spirit? A oneness with God? In any case, I've come to learn that secret!

Phillip *[enthusiastically]* You've come to the right man, sir! The rabbi is everything you learned about him, and more!

Rich Man *[kindly]* Your endorsement seals the deal, Phillip!

{Everyone looks to Jesus, but he says nothing.}

Judas Rabbi?

Jesus *[in a quiet, restrained voice all through this scene]* First of all, why do you call me good? Only God is good. Secondly, don't you already know what God requires of you?

Rich Man *[a little taken aback]* Well, uh, I suppose so. You're talking about the law, right? The ten commandments, and the exhortations of the prophets, and so forth.

Jesus Exactly. So it seems you're good. You're set.

Phillip That's wonderful! *[to the rich man]* I always knew that if there was one righteous man in the world, it was you!

Rich Man I appreciate that. I appreciate what you've both said, but I'm sorry, I have to disagree. I know the commandments. I've followed them -- or at least tried -- all my life. And I do all that I can to be a good citizen in this world, to help others and treat them with respect.

Phillip *[interrupting]* It's true, rabbi. He's the best man I ever knew. Before you, of course.

Rich Man *[resuming insistently]* But it's not enough! I feel it. I've always felt it, and my agents have reported you speaking of the exact same things: that there is a life beyond the life of this world, vital and everlasting, beyond our understanding and yet close enough to grasp if we could only see it. I *know* I don't have this life, and I know you do. Won't you help me see it?

{A long pause while everyone waits for Jesus to reply.}

Judas Rabbi?

Rich Man Look, I know you must suspect me of being some kind of dilettante, and I want to prove to you that I'm serious about this. I know I can't buy the knowledge you have, but Judas was talking to me earlier about donating to your cause, and I already said that I'd be happy to.

Jesus You can keep your money. From what I hear, you're already putting it to very good use.

Judas Rabbi!

Rich Man *[with increasing urgency and pain]* Then I don't know what else to do. Tell me what to do! Please! People look at me and see that I'm well off, and they see the work I do in the world and assume I'm integrated, at peace, secure in my place in the universe. But I'm not! I'm lost! I'm lost, and you're the only light I can see, flickering in the distance! Please save me!

Jesus *[with a sigh, after a long pause]* Very well. Here's what you must do to obtain eternal life: sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and come and follow me!

Scene 3

Jesus , Judas , Peter , Phillip

{At dinner that night, Jesus and the disgruntled disciples discuss what happened.}

Peter So, what happened with that rich guy today? Did we get a donation from him?

Judas *[crossly]* No.

Peter Tightwad, huh?

Phillip *[plaintively]* No! he's the most generous man I ever knew!

Peter *[taken aback]* Uh, okay. So what actually happened?

Judas *[bitterly]* Well, the man wanted to support us, but the rabbi said no. He also wanted to be saved spiritually, but the rabbi dumped a ton of bricks on *that* as well.

Peter *[really taken aback]* Uh, okay. *[timidly]* Rabbi, what happened?

Jesus *[with a sigh]* It's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. It would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle!

Phillip *[defiantly]* If that man can't enter the kingdom of heaven, then nobody can!

{Phillip storms out.}

Scene 4

Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Peter

{The same scene as before, but divided here so that the same reader can play both Phillip and Joanna.}

Peter *[subdued]* Whoa. So can someone tell me what happened?

Joanna *[wearily]* I will. The man wanted to know what it would take to obtain what he called everlasting life, something he was sure the rabbi knew the secret of. And it seemed to me -- correct me if I'm wrong -- that the rabbi didn't really want to tell him. But he insisted, and finally, the rabbi said he had to sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, and join us.

Peter Double whoa! And I guess the guy didn't have the stomach for that?

Judas *[impatiently]* Well it's pretty understandable, don't you think? It's basically impossible! When you tell someone that, you're basically telling them "No, you can't have eternal life."

Peter I don't know about that. We all did it, didn't we?

Jesus *[a sudden outburst]* Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields...

Joanna *[interrupting]* Wait, what? It's really just a material investment after all? We sacrifice possessions to gain more?

Judas *[snidely]* If you'd just told that to the rich guy, he would have signed on in a second!

Jesus *[continuing]* ...along with persecutions...

Peter See? It's not all material rewards.

Joanna So it's just a question of whether the hundred fold increase in homes and so forth are worth the persecutions?

Jesus ...and in the age to come eternal life.

Judas Look, rabbi. I feel like you're hiding something. Why did you lay down such hard terms on the guy?

Jesus I didn't want to, you know.

Joanna Yes, I remember that. You tried to get the guy to just obey the commandments, but he wasn't satisfied with that.

Peter He doesn't seem so bright. He should have taken the better deal while he had a chance!

Judas He was honest with himself. He knew that wasn't going to be enough for him.

Joanna *[to Jesus]* Why did you punish that honesty the way you did? Did you dislike the guy from the start just because he was rich?

Jesus I didn't dislike him. I was...very moved by his plea.

Judas Sympathy is usually expressed through a kind or merciful act.

Jesus But love can only speak truth.

Joanna And that was the truth, that the guy is doomed?

Jesus Not at all! You don't know his future any more than you know your own. He may yet surpass you all, and some of you may yet fall far. Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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