WHEN BLESSINGS BECOME CURSES

When he was a young Australian entrepreneur, Julian Archer escorted mafia drug dealers around Italy, negotiated with terrorists in the Himalayas, and made millions of dollars. Now as a regional leader for the Adventist Church, Julian believes that when a person is financially blessed, they’re in the most spiritually dangerous stage of life. “The richer I became, the less I felt my need for God,” said Julian. “I wanted to put God first, but I had so many other pressing priorities—and I really loved money and all that it gave me,” he added.

Being a church member, he knew that Jesus asked the question “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26, NKJV). He also knew that Jesus said that we can’t love both God and money. He finally realized that being a church member didn’t necessarily prevent anyone from loving money.

By God’s grace, Julian accepted His invitation to follow Jesus wherever He led. “As a result, we sold the family business, increased our systematic and sacrificial giving to God’s priorities, and started to put God first.” “I still struggle to keep my eyes on Jesus every moment of every day,” says Julian, “but I have learned this powerful lesson: As my blessings go up, my knees must go down.”

Understanding the risk of being blessed, Julian listened to Jesus’ invitation and surrendered his life to Him. This week’s narrative will focus on a biblical character that was also blessed, heard Jesus’ call, but failed to follow Him. How can we learn from his mistake, and make right decisions while it is still time?
Write out Matthew 19:16–22 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Matthew 19:21, 22. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map it.
A RADICAL INVITATION

He was a young well-known leader in his “church,” and very affluent. Honestly seeking God, he believed that he was complying with all of His requirements. Nevertheless, he felt as though there was still something else missing in His spiritual life. There was, but he couldn’t see it. As sometimes happens to those who excel in what they do, his apparent flawless behavior was preventing him to see the truth about himself!

Jesus had “departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (Matt. 19:1) when the rich young ruler saw Him healing the great multitudes. In search of a deeper experience with God, he was also attracted to Jesus. Not only did Jesus’ healings impress him—he was also captivated by the tenderness by which Jesus treated the little children and by His wise answers when questioned by the Pharisees. All these were evidences that Jesus was led by a higher power and made him to desire becoming His disciple. Jesus would certainly be able to tune up his already-perfect character, he thought, confirming him the way to eternal life.

As Jesus “was going out on the road,” he finally ran after and knelt before Him (Mark 10:17) asking, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Matt. 19:16). Jesus questioned back, encouraging him to believe in His divinity: “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.” (v. 17). Jesus knew that only by accepting His divinity could the human heart be converted and then enabled to accept Jesus’ radical invitation.

“If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments,” said Jesus (v. 17). Apparently not knowing which ones, the rich young ruler asked for clarification. After mentioning five of the six last commandments, Jesus summarized the second table of the Ten Commandments by saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 19)! This was the point! To love is more than a cliché. It is a state of being essential for entering God’s kingdom.

Unable to apply Jesus’ answer to himself, the rich young ruler focused again on doing, instead of on being: “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” (v. 20). How could Jesus show him what was lacking? There was a way: “If you want to be perfect,” said Jesus, “go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (v. 21). And “he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” (v. 22).

It was the rich young ruler’s kind of time of the end, as Jerusalem would be destroyed in a few years, and he would lose everything anyway. Therefore, Jesus’ invitation was not only meant to prepare his character for eternity, but also to help him move his properties to a safer place above while there was still time. Meanwhile Jesus would certainly provide for him!

This episode is a lesson for those who will also be invited to surrender everything before the time of trouble, when they will no longer be able to dispose of their possessions to advance God’s work. Can we then trust Jesus’ provision and learn to live completely by faith? The rich young ruler decided to trust in his possessions instead and to live by sight. His love for positions and for temporal advantages was still higher than his love for God and for His less-fortunate children. Let us put all we have on the altar and earnestly inquire of God for the right timing for disposing of those things. Note that many have disposed of their properties prematurely, but during the time of trouble in the future, it will be too late! May the Lord reveal the right time!
TRUE RELIGION

According to the popular belief, those who are very “religious” are supposedly nearer to God and more entitled to heaven. But the message to the church of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22) reveals that this false assumption may become one of the most deceiving traps for religious people.

The trap is that “religiosity” (frequently a behavioral/ceremonial focus) may easily be mistaken as true religion (a more relational focus). The word “religion,” from the Latin religare, which means “to bind” (again), refers to God’s initiative to (re)connect a broken relationship with Him. This relationship was broken by the human side in the Garden of Eden. Since then, sin became more than an act. It became a condition of the human nature, causing separation from God (Isa. 59:2) and, consequently, death (Rom. 6:23).

Although essential in a relationship with God, religiosity, zeal, and strict obedience are unable to change that condition of separation from God. A person in this “religiosity” state (who focuses on religion but misses God) may even do what is right while still preferring what is wrong and leads to death. In this way, religiosity may disguise itself as true religion, because both may lead to a zealous observance of rules and ceremonies. To help us to avoid this trap, God left us some signs that would help us to verify if we have truly been walking with Jesus.

Those who are reconnecting with Him will “bear much fruit” (John 15:8). This fruit appears in Galatians 5:22, 23 as having nine essential characteristics, the first of them being love, and the last, self-control. Self-control without God’s given love produces legalism, but love without God’s given self-control may generate nothing else than antinomianism or cheap grace.

According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, no religious observance will profit anything without love. James puts practical love and self-control together, indicating that this is “true religion,” which is “to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).

Ellen G. White presents important principles about how to exercise practical love toward the less favored (Welfare Ministry [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952], chapters 22 and 23):

- No one who asks for food at our door should we turn away hungry (192).
- Our interest should include both, their spiritual welfare and their temporal well-being (190). Taking care of just one aspect will not represent Jesus’ goal for them.
- It is a mistake to give indiscriminately to all who solicit our aid (191).
- The Lord does not require us to support those who are not diligent. Instead, we should manifest tenderness and compassion toward those beaten by unavoidable poverty (200).
- By giving attention to those who do not help themselves, we may encourage idleness, helplessness, extravagance, and intemperance (191).

(Cont. on p. 101)
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What relationship do the following primary verses have with the primary passage?

Amos 5:11, 12
Ephesians 2:8–10
Colossians 3:14
Ezekiel 16:49, 50
Proverbs 19:17
Proverbs 11:24, 25
Matthew 25:31–46
Matthew 19:28, 29

What other narratives come to mind in connection with Matthew 19:16–22?

(Cont. from inTerpret p. 100):
  • “The world owes no man a living who is able to work and gain a living for himself” (192).
  • We should place the poor where they can help themselves, instead of encouraging them to think that they can have their eating and drinking provided free. They should be educated to be self-reliant (194).
  • Donations of money, or institutional welfare should never replace personal welfare ministry (189).
  • “To give thought and time and personal effort costs far more than merely to give money. But it is the truest charity” (199).

What if Jesus shows me this week that I still lack either love or self-control? Would I be willing to commit my life to Him, trusting in His kind ability to produce a change of heart and in behavior? Would I daily invite His Holy Spirit to abide in my body, developing in me trust and a new heart?

(Cont. from inVite p. 102): properties be if, at the end, all things will be destroyed by fire (2 Peter 3:11)? Then everything that was not transferred to heaven and not invested in Jesus’ business will be lost forever.

It is in preparation for those extreme times that Jesus will raise extreme givers. Like Noah, who decided to live by faith, they will invest all they have in the last effort of preaching the gospel to a dying world while it is still possible. They know that “they are accumulating treasure which will be given to them when they shall hear the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’ Matt. 25:23.” (E. G. White, The Desire of Ages, 523.)

(Cont. from inSight p. 103): permitted to keep theirs until a time of need. Then, as the cause needs it, their duty is to sell. (E. G. White, Counsels on Stewardship [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1940], 59, 60.)

But many show by their works that they dare not trust the bank of heaven. They choose to trust their means in the earth, rather than to send it before them to heaven. These have a great work to do to overcome covetousness and love of the world. (E. G. White, Counsels on Stewardship, 151.)

Review your memorized verse from Matthew 19:16–22
Jesus’ true followers will always surrender all they are and have at His disposal. But it doesn’t mean that all God’s children will always be required to sell and to give all their properties, like the rich young ruler was asked to do.

It was especially during difficult times, when His children were about to lose all, that God has required them to deliver all their possessions to advance His kingdom—blessing the poor and supporting His work in the earth. After all, they would lose everything anyway!

When Abraham accepted God’s call, he was allowed to bring all his possessions with him (Gen. 12:5), using them to provide for his family and to promote God’s mission. This was not so with Noah, who lived in a typical “time of the end,” and needed to invest all he had in building the ark. It is only by being developing deep intimacy with Jesus that the Holy Spirit will be able to indicate to His dear children what to do and when.

For the rich young ruler, the act of selling and giving all he had was also a part of Jesus’ work of perfecting his character in preparation for eternity (“If you want to be perfect . . .” [Matt. 19:21]). He would need to develop that kind of love that reflects Jesus’ character which prepares someone to live with angels. It is attested by works for the unworthy or the less favored. Jesus considers this type of work as done to Himself.

The rich young ruler was allowed to see that “his exalted position and his possessions were exerting a subtle influence for evil upon his character. If cherished, they would supplant God in his affections. To keep back little or much from God was to retain that which would lessen his moral strength and efficiency; for if the things of this world are cherished . . . they will become all-absorbing.” (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], 520.)

Unable to trust in Jesus’ ability to know the future and to provide for him, the rich young ruler rejected Jesus’ plan for him. If he could see ahead and how Jerusalem would be destroyed, he would understand that he would not be able to retain anything anyway. By moving his properties to the world above, he would receive them back with interest (Matt. 19:29).

Had he given his belongings as an offering, he would have become a model for those who live just before the time of trouble and would also lose everything. The generation that will see Christ’s second coming will need to exert trust while wisely transferring their properties to the world above and trusting Jesus for all their temporal needs.

During the time of trouble, property loss will be unavoidable. (See this week’s inSight.) Some will have their goods confiscated, while others will need to flee from the infuriated mobs. Those who will not have the mark of the beast will not be able to buy or to sell, and of what use would those (cont. on p. 101)
Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week's study, what are personal applications you are convicted of in your life?

What are practical applications you must make in your family?

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**THE BANK OF HEAVEN**

Good deeds are the fruit that Christ requires us to bear: kind words, deeds of benevolence, of tender regard for the poor, the needy, the afflicted. When hearts sympathize with hearts burdened with discouragement and grief, when the hand dispenses to the needy, when the naked are clothed, the stranger made welcome to a seat in your parlor and a place in your heart, angels are coming very near, and an answering strain is responded to in heaven. . . . The Father from His throne beholds those who do these acts of mercy, and numbers them with His most precious treasures. . . . Every merciful act to the needy, the suffering, is regarded as though done to Jesus. When you succor the poor, sympathize with the afflicted and oppressed, and befriend the orphan, you bring yourselves into a closer relationship to Jesus. (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2 [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1868], 25.)

God has set His own standard of character for all who would become subjects of His kingdom. Only those who will become co-workers with Christ, only those who will say, Lord, all I have and all I am is Thine, will be acknowledged as sons and daughters of God. (E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 523.)

There are poor men and women who are writing to me for advice as to whether they shall sell their homes and give the proceeds to the cause. . . . I would say to such: “It may not be your duty to sell your little homes just now; but go to God for yourselves; the Lord will certainly hear your earnest prayers for wisdom to understand your duty.”

It is now that our brethren should be cutting down their possessions instead of increasing them. We are about to move to a better country, even a heavenly. . . .

The decree will soon go forth prohibiting men to buy or sell of any man save he that hath the mark of the beast.

Houses and lands will be of no use to the saints in the time of trouble, for they will then have to flee before infuriated mobs, and at that time their possessions cannot be disposed of to advance the cause of present truth. I was shown that it is the will of God that the saints should cut loose from every encumbrance before the time of trouble comes, and make a covenant with God through sacrifice. If they have their property on the altar, and earnestly inquire of God for duty, He will teach them when to dispose of these things. Then they will be free in the time of trouble, and have no clogs to weigh them down.

I saw that if any held on to their property, and did not inquire of the Lord as to their duty, He would not make duty known, and they would be permitted to keep their property, and in the time of trouble it would come up before them like a mountain to crush them, and they would try to dispose of it, but would not be able. I heard some mourn like this: “The cause was languishing, God’s people were starving for the truth, and we made no effort to supply the lack; now our property is useless. O that we had let it go, and laid up treasure in heaven!”

I saw that a sacrifice did not increase, but it decreased and was consumed. I also saw that God had not required all of His people to dispose of their property at the same time; but if they desired to be taught, He would teach them, in a time of need, when to sell and how much to sell. Some have been required to dispose of their property in times past to sustain the Advent cause, while others have been (cont. on p. 101)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Which part of my life is God inviting me to surrender to Him now? Physical impulses, a relationship, a job, finances, properties, Sabbathkeeping, health habits, entertainment, what else?

In your opinion, which is more dangerous to spiritual life: prosperity or poverty? Why?

While we are blessed by God, how can we prevent the heart being filled with God’s blessings instead of God Himself? What spiritual disciplines may help us to put things in the right perspective?

What do you believe are the conditions for God’s children to be instructed by Him about when and how much of their properties should they sell and apply in the cause? How can we hear God’s voice?

What are your major takeaways from this quarter on stewardship?