

## When Much Is Not Nearly Enough

Mark 10:17-31

This isn't a new story to most of you. It appears in three Gospels. A rich man comes to Jesus inquiring about eternal life. Jesus tells him to sell his stuff and give everything away. He'd rather not, so he walks away. In Matthew, he is young. In Luke, he is ruler, perhaps, a local official.

Where the story falls in the Mark's account is most interesting. Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem. Immediately preceding this event, He became "indignant" because His disciples were rebuking certain parents who were trying to bring their little ones to Jesus for a blessing. Jesus corrected His disciples. Embracing these little ones, He said, "Don't hold them back. In fact, anyone who wants to enter My kingdom must become like one of these little guys." What He had in mind was the weakness and dependency of a child and of all the other "little ones" in this world that a child represents, those who have no particular social standing.

We must all come to Jesus in weakness and dependency for there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. That was something to think about, but could the disciples really grasp it, at least until a man of lofty standing came seeking the kingdom only to walk away empty-handed?

This man was the polar opposite of a child. He was a young man, at the peak of his physical strength. In contrast to a child's dependence, he was rich. In contrast to a child's vulnerability and lack of standing, he was a ruler. Typically, the world is impressed by the things this rich, young ruler brought to the table, but he would walk away from Jesus with nothing. The disciples had to see this in order to begin processing how in God's kingdom, strength is manifested in weakness while what the world calls "credentials" may, in fact, prove to be liabilities.

### I. Enthused by One's Own Piety (17-22)

<sup>17</sup>As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

<sup>18</sup>"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good - except God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.' "

<sup>20</sup>"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

<sup>21</sup>Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

<sup>22</sup>At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

#### A. Any Other Preacher's Mouth Would Be Watering

Two men were marooned on an island. One paced back and forth worried and scared while the other laid back, sunning himself.

The first man said his companion, "Aren't you afraid we might starve?"

"No," said the second man, "I clear \$100,000 a week and tithe faithfully to my church. My Pastor will find me."

This man was just the kind of prospect too many Christians drool over when he walks through the door of the church; youthful, affluent and well-connected. He was spiritually thoughtful. He was morally respectable. Best of all, he was anxious to join. He “ran up” to Jesus. Back then, the speed with which one moved reflected one’s status in society. Rich folk sauntered casually. Slaves hopped to it. That’s not so hard to picture. Have you ever seen Queen Elizabeth hurry? Even her regal wave is slow. Mark treats it as noteworthy that such an impressive man would run and then humbly kneel before this poor, itinerant preacher on the dusty roads of Palestine.

This man knew that Jesus was a rabbi of note, which is why he addressed Him as, “Good teacher,” even though Jesus felt he was being a bit careless with his superlatives. “Why do you call me good? God is good, and you’re coming to Me thinking that I can tell you how to wrestle salvation from God.” Was Jesus inviting the man to make a confession of faith similar to the one Peter had made? This man stopped short of saying, “Jesus, I believe you are the Christ of God.”

Still, this man did suspect that Jesus knew the secret to eternal life. Based on a little exchange between the two, it seems that he was pretty solid at observing the Law. Jesus queried him on a half-dozen or so specific commandments to which he responded, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” This almost certainly meant that at age thirteen, he had become *Bar Miswah* in a special ceremony that Jews still observe to this very day. *Bar Miswah* means “a son of the commandment.” It is the point when a Jewish boy becomes a man accountable to the Law.

The mindset that righteousness before God was earned by works of the Law permeated all of Jewish thought. But, had this man really believed that his law-keeping was adequate for pleasing God, as so many of his contemporaries believed it was adequate, then, he would not have come to Jesus to ask for that one, big ultimate, salvation-securing thing to do. Maybe Jesus would recommend a project. Even after a Boy Scout earns all the required merit badges for Eagle, the highest rank, he still has to tackle some big project to seal the deal. Maybe, Jesus would send him on some important quest like a squire pursuing knighthood. Whatever was required, this man was ready to do it. Whatever eternal life cost, he was ready to cut the check.

## **B. Only Love Can Say the Hard Thing**

Mark alone records that Jesus looked at this man and “loved him.” The word is a form of *agape*, which suggests that Jesus was going to say what was in this man’s best interest even if it wasn’t what he wanted to hear. Jesus could have said any number of things to win this guy’s affection. He could have secured his support, monetary and otherwise, simply by affirming him as a righteous, law-abiding citizen. A ragtag bunch like the entourage traveling with Jesus could have used a donor like this. Or, Jesus could say precisely what the man needed to hear if His heart was to ever truly be turned toward God. Of course that would carry the risk of losing his support.

“One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

In the twinkling of an eye, the man knew he had spoken rashly. He had implied that he would do anything, but this was way too much for Jesus to demand. But, it was a simple call to self-denial. His self-identity was tied up in his wealth and Jesus said, “That’s not the identity I have in mind for you. I don’t need a self-reliant, rich young ruler. I need a vulnerable servant of others who finds his security in hanging with Me.” Riches, the very thing every lottery ticket holder thinks will make him deliriously happy is exactly the thing which made this man miserably sad.

## C. What Should Our Response Be to “That Man’s” Challenge?

A preacher asked a farmer, "If you had \$200, would you give \$100 to the Lord?"

"Sure would," said the farmer.

"If you had two cows, would you give one cow to the Lord?"

"I would."

"If you had two pigs, would you give one of them to the Lord?"

The farmer replied, "Hey, that's not fair. You know I have two pigs."

Jesus' words to this one man are not intended as a universal command for believers ... There, you're off the hook. Isn't that the thing we always listen for whenever someone teaches this story of the rich young ruler who is told to sell all his stuff? Once the preacher assures us that Jesus doesn't mean us, we can breathe a sigh of relief and enjoy the rest of the sermon.

The fact is Jesus has every right to command that you hand your wallet over to Him. Everything you have, you received from the One Who really owns it. This man called Jesus "good" and suggested that He knew the way to God, but when the rubber hit the road, he could not bring himself to trust Jesus with his life more than he could trust himself and his things. This is why Jesus asked the man, "Why do you call me good? He was saying, "Stop and think. Are you just flattering Me or do you really trust me to the point of putting your resources where your mouth is?"

One lesson from this story that might benefit any of us would be to examine our hearts and our words to insure that they are in harmony. God may never tell us to liquidate all our holdings in one gesture, but our stewardship over what has been entrusted to us either affirms or undermines the praise of our lips. We might be inclined to think that Jesus spent the bulk of His time talking about God, love and heaven. In fact, the topic Jesus addressed more than any other was money, not as a good or bad thing, but as the most basic of all things that reflect the authenticity of our loyalty to His kingdom. Do your profession of faith and your checkbook tell the same story?

## II. Encumbered by One's Own Possessions (23-27)

<sup>23</sup>Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

<sup>24</sup>The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>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."

<sup>26</sup>The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

<sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

### A. Why Were the Disciples Blown Away by Jesus' Words?

Jesus upset their theology of wealth. A little girl who was accustomed to receiving one dollar from the tooth fairy for a lost tooth learned that her little friend received five dollars. When she realized this, she called her friend's mother and asked, "Mrs. Smith, would you do me a big favor? Would you please call my mom and tell her which tooth fairy you use?"

The Jews thought that with the exception of rich people who were clearly corrupt, like tax collectors, wealth evidenced God's favor upon a man. "Who then can be saved?" was the obvious response of men raised to think that God enriches His favorites. They were asking, "If rich people, those who we always assumed were God's favorites, cannot be saved, then who can? We always assumed they were shoo-ins, and we have much less evidence that God likes us than they do!"

But, Jesus compared a rich man trying to squeeze his way into heaven with all his stuff with a camel trying to squeeze its way through the eye of a needle, *AND* He gave the camel the edge in the likelihood of succeeding. He was talking about the perils of wealth; how it can ground a man's imagination to the material world, how it can buffer him from the suffering of the world around him and, especially, how it can cause him to forget his utter dependence upon God.

### **B. Was Money or Its Use Really the Crux of this Story?**

The short answer is, "No." - Okay, you got me, I don't do short answers. This real issue is where you place your hope. Jesus was not condemning wealth, but only warning of the unique temptations that come with it. Money helps us fulfill our responsibilities, legal ones and moral ones. It takes money to raise a family, to support the ministries of a church and to care for the hurting. We already heaved our sigh of relief when we heard that Jesus did not command us to sell our stuff, but it is not enough to know what a passage does not mean. Embrace what it does mean.

Where is your security? Is it bound up in what you have and in how the world sees you? It could just as easily be bound up in your lack of holdings and in all that you have sacrificed. If this man had given away everything he possessed, that one great adventure still might have backfired. The key to eternal life was not the "sell your stuff part." It was the "follow Me part" at the cost of surrendering his self-reliance. What if the man had performed this "mother of all deeds" only to never get over himself for having done it? What if he had tagged along with the group but, rather than seek authentic righteousness at the feet of Jesus, he only continued to glory in this swell thing he had done that had allegedly merited heaven? He would have gained nothing.

When Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God," He was not just speaking of a rich man's salvation, for by human effort or sacrifice, one man's salvation is just as impossible as the next. With God, the salvation of any man, rich and poor, is possible. A rich man's wealth does not make him righteous in God's eyes, but don't think for one minute that a poor man's poverty makes him one bit more righteous, especially, if he uses his poverty to draw attention to his piety. Peter would try to use his own great sacrifice in following Jesus to solicit applause, and Jesus responded.

## **III. Enthralled by One's Own Poverty (28-31)**

### **A. Peter Still Could Not Resist Looking for Perks verse 28**

<sup>28</sup>Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"

That sounds innocent enough, but Matthew provides the fuller quote:

Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"  
- Matthew 19:27

Peter spoke the truth. He had walked away from his nets. Levi had abandoned his tax collecting gig with Rome. They had left everything for a simple life on the road. Maybe Peter recalled hearing something when the 5000 were miraculously fed that the Gospel writers forgot to record. Maybe the little boy said: "About my loaves and fishes, could I get a receipt for tax purposes?" Peter had sacrificed, but his words betrayed the fact that his motives were less than pristine.

## **B. Jesus Spoke of the Perks, Sort of ... verses 29-30**

<sup>29</sup>"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup>will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields - and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life ...

Jesus assured Peter that he would be compensated, but we have to see the rest of the New Testament story unfold to realize what He meant. Loyalty to Jesus would cost these men some earthly ties, but they would enter into a fellowship more powerful than earthly ties. In the book of Acts, a community was formed where those who had nothing were cared for, because no one insisted that any piece of property was his own. Each shared what he had as the need arose.

Paul's transition from persecutor of Christians to Apostle of Christ must have cost him in terms of family and social ties, but he never wanted for hospitality or affection. He freely used the terminology of family to describe his new relationships. He called Timothy "his son in the faith." He said, Onesimus "became my son while I was in chains" (Philemon 10). In Romans 16:13, he wrote: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too." Paul lost His standing, but he found he still had resources and family.

The peddlers of the prosperity gospel refuse to go away. There may always be a market for a message that promises worldly riches. But, lest anyone think that Jesus was speaking here of some materialistic *quid pro quo*, He mentions one other reward His disciples can expect, one the televangelists omit - persecutions. Still, for one who has made Jesus the secure foundation of his life, to suffer for His Name is a rich inheritance. Persecutions simply remind us that the world is noticing that we are representing our Lord even as we await our final reward, eternal life.

## **C. No Obsession with Reward Is Certainly the Greatest Reward verse 31**

... <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

The rich man was gone when Jesus said this. These words were directed at the disciples, who spent too much time reflecting on how their personal sacrifices might result in a payoff. In eternity, God will examine hearts. Worldly oppressors will have the tables turned on them, but those who think of religion as merely a means to reward may have the tables turned on them as well, for in their imaginations, they are thrusting themselves to front of the line. One day, only faithfulness to Jesus will matter. Only an authentic hunger for the righteousness that reconciles us to God will matter. Serving Christ just for what we hope to get out of it one day may find us disappointed when all has been settled. Jesus must be embraced simply out of a hunger for God.