



RSVP
Mark 10:17-31

Since September Ray and I have been preaching from the gospel according to Saint Mark. Today we come to the famous story of the one who declined the invitation to follow Jesus and who decides not to become a disciple. Our text has a flavor of sadness and tragedy to it - much like the hometown people where Jesus could do no ministry among them because of their lack of faith and unbelief.

The story of the rich young ruler is the story of one who had beliefs and convictions. However, they were poorly focused. Unlike the children who had no status or credentials - this man had it all - but he misses the kingdom while the children are ushered in. The children that Jesus had talked about in **verses 13-16** had simple and uncluttered lives. This man had it all. He had status - a full calendar - was well-known in the community - but he still lacked purpose and fulfillment. The outcome of this story is not a positive or uplifting one. That is why we can learn so much from it. The disciples did - so we can.

As we open our lesson today in **verse 17** we see an encounter between Jesus and the rich man - who is identified by Luke as a ruler - and young by Matthew. He has it all - money, power, and youth. However Mark's gospel shares in the middle part of **verse 17** that he runs up to Jesus. Mark's gospel always has this element of immediacy to it. He falls on his knees - which is a sign of respect and worship. He designated Jesus as a good teacher. He formulates the question and inquires of Jesus - **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Now, please remember church. No answer to a question is absolutely free of judgment or value - especially when you ask such a penetrating question as the rich young ruler does. It demands a verdict and a response.

People don't ask some profound question like the rich young ruler did - if it does not come from deep inside of them. This is how the Alpha Course begins.

Bear Grylls, host of the TV show **Man vs. Wild**, declares, "Is there to life than this?" Even Michael Jackson said despite his fame and fortune, all he wanted was to be loved.

Real joy, inner peace, security, and fulfillment were just as needed and elusive then - as they are today. At this point money is not even mentioned. We know there is a yearning for something greater and deeper in his life - and he goes to the One he believes - can address the missing ingredient and void in his life. The question was honest and direct. No problem with the question. It was the response that caused a crisis.

Jesus was very astute here in **verse 19**. Jesus knew that underneath every real human dilemma there is a spiritual crisis and focus. So, Jesus starts with the obvious.

Since the man is not described as a Samaritan or a Gentile - we can assume he is Jewish.

He probes about the obvious - in order to uncover the real barrier between this individual and God. Jesus, in **verse 19**, shares "You know the commandments do not murder, steal, commit adultery, give false testimony, honor your mother and father."

So in **verse 20**, the rich young ruler replies he has kept these commandments from childhood on. In other words he was saying '**These are part of my routine - but I still can't get any satisfaction that lasts.**' Perhaps the man knew the letter of the law without knowing the spirit of God. He knew about God - but he did not have a living relationship with God that engaged his heart, his head, and his pocketbook. There were a lot of things he did not do - but notice he has no positive testimony as to what he did do.

Maybe he gave God no trouble - but no real love or devotion. His faith does not have this quest or quality to it.

Now, I want to look at **verse 21** - because it often gets overlooked in the sermons I have read or in conversations about this passage. In **verse 21** it says, "Jesus looked at him and love him." This person, like every other human being on earth, is loved by God. Jesus saw great potential in him. Jesus knew the missing ingredient in his life - total surrender and commitment to the Almighty and his purposes. Like others we have studied in Mark's gospel - he knew the written law - but had forgotten the Lawgiver. The law pointed to a great God - but the law was never intended to replace God. Helen Keller was right when she shared:

**The best and most beautiful
things in the world cannot
be seen or even touched.
They must be felt with the heart.**

Wealth or money is a great resource - but it is a lousy master and a very poor god. The commandments the rich young ruler claimed to know - teach this quite plainly. Money has a way of freezing the heart against sharing - and forcing it to hoard. It can destroy the heart's ability to feel and to be moved by a greater power than the one that presently occupies the territory. There are some hungers and thirsts that are so deep in us that they can only be quenched by the living God. As Laurie reminded us in her solo "**I Surrender,**" there are some things that we must simply surrender to God in order to find that which satisfies and fulfills us.

Let us now go to **verse 21**. Here Jesus will give the litmus test of his commitment, loyalty, and focus to God. Now, remember he asked Jesus for his insight and instruction. Like a good, skillful surgeon - Jesus cuts right to the tender spot.

Now, unfortunately we have so emphasized the 'go - sell - give to the poor portion' - that we miss the invitation of '**Come, follow me.**' Jesus wanted this man to be a disciple - but unfortunately the man's wealth froze his ability to say "Yes."

This man was not free despite his wealth. Wealth had put a frozen lock on the necessary relationship in a disciple's life between belief and obedience. As Dr. Fosdick reminds us in his great hymn, "He was rich in things, but poor in soul."

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "**Only he who believes is obedient - and only he who is obedient has the freedom to believe.**" This is why discipleship is so often 'the road less traveled.' Recently Eugene Peterson reminded me that the Jesus Way has never been a popular way. Christianity was never about popularity.

The kingdom of God is simply programmed differently - than the shakable kingdoms of the world. Wealth is a stumbling block - but it is not the only stumbling block. Unfortunately in this person's journey of faith - wealth built a barrier that prevented the reign of God to fully penetrate his head and especially his heart. Instead of God's will being supreme and sovereign, it was only a side show - not the main event. St. Augustine once said, "Lord, make me a Christian - but not right this minute." This in essence is the mindset of this man whom Jesus loved.

Please remember Jesus not only gave instructions - he also issued **an invitation** to join the team. Peter, James, John and the other 9 had to sacrifice. The rules did not change because he was a young upwardly-mobile professional Palestinian. The disciples had to give up racism, tradition, nationalism, stubborn egos and granite-like wills. However, they were teachable - trainable - willing to say their lives needed new management and control. Wealth or the pursuit of wealth has a way of making a person arrogant.

Now, church, before we beat up the rich young ruler too much - can we be honest before God today - that money is a struggle for us as well? A Princeton professor, whose field of expertise is the sociology of religion has written thoughts concerning the financial crisis with U.S. churches.

However, the good professor shares "What makes the present crisis more serious - is that it is also a spiritual crisis. **The problem is not in the parishioners' pocketbooks - but in their hearts.**"¹

Now, do you see why this story and all of the Bible is so relevant in every age? The good professor further shares "Americans are repelled by materialism - yet admit to being caught up in it."² I certainly feel that pull and tug in my life as well.

So, when in **verse 22** it shares, "**The man's face fell.** He went away sad - because he had great wealth," we know that Jesus' insights about him - were right on. Now in all fairness to this man - he was born rich. He probably inherited it - which is why he was concerned about inheriting eternal life. You can inherit wealth - **but not fulfillment.** You can buy a house - not a home. You can buy companionship - but not love. God has no stepchildren. Either you choose to believe - or you choose not to believe. You and I cannot control - whether we were born rich or poor - whether we were born in a secure suburban setting or a slum. What we can control - is what we allow to happen **inside of us.** There is no advantage to poverty - or plush property. The late Mother Theresa found fulfillment by personally endorsing a lifestyle of poverty and simplicity - total identification with the poor. However, the homes, hospitals, and orphanages she founded - needed

Christians with financial means to support them. Jesus never said "burn your bankbooks - or destroy the barns,' but put them to use for something greater than ourselves. We are to control money - not let money have a seductive hold over us. One of my colleagues recently shared "Most American Christians are tithing - unfortunately it is to MasterCard - and not the master's mission."

I love the story of a small lad who goes with his parents to the circus. They buy him a big mound of cotton candy. The cotton candy is twice the size of the little boy. As the vendor gives the cotton candy to the small lad, he says to him, "How is a little boy like you going to eat all that cotton candy?" He answers, "It's very simple, **I'm really much bigger on the inside** – than I seem on the outside!"

This is what is missing in the life of the rich young ruler and he knows it. It is a tragedy that he did not follow through on the deep longings and hungers that he knew were activated in his life. Peace is the most sought-after thing in the world.

About 20 years ago a young business man, a geologist in his twenties, shared the following experience. He had leased some land in Texas for the purpose of drilling for oil. He was a devout Christian. He carried a New Testament in the pocket of his blue jeans. He did not carry it just for show. He read the scriptures daily and prayed over his work.

He had been drilling for some time and there was no sign of any oil. In fact, he was running out of money and notified his crew that all work would stop. He wanted to spend some time reading the scriptures and praying.

After a few days, he summoned his crew and instructed them to keep drilling. The result was that he uncovered one of the most lucrative gushers in that part of Texas. According to the story, he called his crew together and led them in a prayer of thanksgiving. Unlike the rich young ruler, he signed the oil well over to his church with the stipulation that all the profit from the well was to go for ministry and mission to help the poor. This young man knew that all his life belonged to the Lord: his pocket and pocketbook.³

This man knew that you cannot get from money what can only be found in God, which is the sense of purpose and fulfillment in life.

Nothing can be a substitute for a personal relationship with God. Wealth simply cannot compare - to the treasure of faith, hope, and love. The rich young ruler had been programmed to save up - hold on!

If he could only have accepted the invitation, he would have found the journey with Jesus to be the most enriching – exciting - engaging ever taken.

In all honesty today, it would have been very easy for me to simply delete this passage from our preaching schedule.

As young people say today, I could have dumbed down the message or doctored it up to make it easier to take or to make it easier to hear. However, my job as a preacher is simply to declare and deliver the word of God.

What invitation from sacred scripture do we need to respond to, so God is supreme, you are second place? What positive step can we take for Christ today?

GO - SELL - GIVE - COME - FOLLOW. This message is so clear and concise that I don't know if there is any way that I could doctor it up or down. On this decision and response depends your life! **Please choose wisely.** Your salvation depends on it.

The message from Jesus is still the same in the 21st century. What I pray for is this: Our response will be different from this rich - young - ruler. May you RSVP your decision for Christ today.

Amen and Amen!

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ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to Dr. Robert Wuthnow for this material.

2. Ibid, Wuthnow.

³ Thanks to Rodney E. Wilmoth, who got this story from Austin Pardue.