

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Mark 10:17-31
Eternity! And the Riches that Count

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²¹And Jesus looking upon him *loved* him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21, RSV)

Here St. Mark reveals something of the heart of Jesus toward someone who has crossed his path. Nowhere else does St. Mark reveal the affection that Jesus has for the one to whom he speaks. Here we learn that Jesus *loved* this man. You can do a concordance search on the word “loved,” and you can search high and low in St. Mark, but nowhere else do you read that Jesus loved the one with whom he was dealing. No doubt he did. No doubt he loved all those he dealt with, even his opponents. It is just that the text does not pause to speak of his love. But in this story, the text does speak of the subjective attitude of Jesus toward the one before him. He loved this man. When this man “went away sorrowful,” he was walking away from One who loved him.

Any pastor, I believe, would have felt the same way about this good man. The pastor would have looked with love upon the fellow. It does the soul good to talk with someone who is really *trying* to be the kind of person our Maker intends for us to be. Such a one, this man seems to have been. There is earnestness about him. Some of us neglect the divine dimension and become preoccupied with many things, but not this man. He speaks of eternity. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Many a person goes months at a time, even years and decades, not much thinking about eternity. But this man ponders the future of his soul. He reckons with the ultimate question -- the question of eternity.

Let us take him at his word. Jesus does. He tells Jesus that since his youth he has obeyed the commandments of God. Let us suppose it to be so. Jesus does not gainsay him, so let it be settled: We are contemplating a good man, an extraordinary man, when we think of this man kneeling before Jesus.

If he has obeyed the divine commandments indicated by Jesus, then he is a man of high morality, which is a wonderful thing. If he has obeyed these commandments, then he is someone who constitutes a blessing on earth. Admire him, I say, for his morality. He has honored his parents, poor and lowly or eccentric as parents sometimes are. He has not murdered, but rather, he has cherished life and tried to make things better for his neighbors. He has not broken the hearts of other through adultery. He has not stolen or defamed others. Even his heart is disciplined, such that he does not covet the possessions or the spouse of his neighbor.

Altogether, he is a methodical man. His earthly house is in order, and now he wants his heavenly house to be rightly ordered too. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

There is something pure and guileless about this man. The rich man has said that he has obeyed the commandments of God since his youth, and that seems to be no exaggeration. Jesus does not dispute the matter. Just the reverse: Jesus looks upon the man with love. He credits the man with truthfulness. Furthermore, the guilelessness of the rich man is later revealed in the slump of his shoulders and the hanging of his head:

²²At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

The man is not going to hide his choice. Jesus has placed a plain path before him: the path of voluntary poverty. And the man has openly walked away. He was no pretender, no dissembler. He did not say, “Yes, Lord, by and by I will sell my possessions and give to the poor.” No, he did not mean to do that, and so he walked away. He was “went away sorrowful,” but he went away.

I hope he returns. The Church and the City needs such good people. And he needs the Church. But for now, he is gone. He loves his possessions more than he loves Jesus. He loves his money more than he loves the One who will welcome him back as he welcomes all who come unto him:

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. (John 6:37, KJV)

Peter, listening to all this, simply blurts out what is on his heart. He has listened to the conversation between Jesus and the rich man. He has pondered the saying about the rich man and the eye of the needle. He has summed things up. His mind has done its calculus, and he exclaims his conclusion:

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you.” (Mark 10:28, RSV)

That is, Peter and the other disciples have done what the rich man failed to do: they have left all and followed Christ. We might think it no great matter to leave behind fishing nets and sails and such, but it was the only life Peter knew. That’s what he was: a fisherman. Probably his father had been a fisherman before him, and his forefathers before that. It was his accustomed way of life. But Jesus bid him leave off his nets and follow him, and he had obeyed.

But the rich man in this story had not obeyed. His possessions had too strong a grip on his heart. He could not bring himself to give them up.

One man left all, followed Jesus, and in the following became a saint. The other man refused to leave all and therefore did not walk with Jesus. He kept his wealth. Whether he kept his soul is a different matter.

Two notes come to mind in trying to apply this story to our own lives. First, we should ponder whether Christ is asking us to surrender something for his sake. I believe he is. If so, we should obey him. And second, in surrendering ourselves wholly to Christ, I am not asking us to plunge into irrationality. Just the reverse, I am asking us to become most sane of all. I am asking us to take *eternity* into account, and to remember that heaven measures things differently from earth.

First, is Jesus asking you to surrender something? I believe he is! I do not know whether Jesus is calling you to sell your all possessions and give to the poor, as he called the rich man in today's story to do. But one thing I do know is that *if* Jesus is calling you to do so, don't you dare refuse him. We are your brothers and sisters in the Lord here at Immanuel, and we do not want to be without you. Eternity is a long time, and it cannot feel safe for any of us to walk away from Jesus.

I bet that Jesus is *not* calling you to sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. After all, your situation is not quite like that of the man in our Gospel story. The man in the story had no doubts about the will of Jesus for him. He was standing right there before Jesus, in the presence of witnesses. He was not dreaming or deluding himself about the matter. Jesus was actually calling him to voluntary poverty. Whether you are receiving such a clear call to voluntary poverty, I do not know. But if you are, then obey and follow Jesus. Do not dare walk away from him.

St. Francis exchanged his wealthy garments with a beggar, so that he took on the beggar's rags and the beggar took on his wealthy garments. Indeed, St. Francis and other saints of the Church have followed Jesus by doing what the rich man would not do: selling all they had, giving to the poor, and spending their remaining days following Jesus.

Again, I do not know whether it is right for you or me to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis in this radical way. That is the adventure of our individual walk with Jesus. But one thing is quite certain: we are indeed called to get our love of money under control. Especially we are called to pity the poor and to throw our strength into the mission of the church. You have heard the preaching of Amos, for example, in today's First Lesson. Amos thunders away against Israel for many reasons, but chief among them is the hardheartedness of the prosperous toward the poor. It angers the LORD, it troubles him deeply, that people who bear his name should be cruel toward the poor and needy:

¹²For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins -- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. (Amos 5:12, RSV)

Likewise, St. Paul appeals to Christians to support the mission of the Church with their tithes and offerings. For example, we have St. Paul's earnest appeal to the Corinthians:

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints--... ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has-- not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." (2 Corinthians 8: 1-15, NRSV)

And for many of us, if we are not tempted toward loving money more than Jesus, still there is something luring us -- something that we can have no doubts about, something that Jesus is clearly asking us to surrender for the sake of following him.

That is, the case is clear whenever we are disobeying the commandments the rich young man obeyed. That is, if we are enwrapped in adultery, then Jesus is clearly bidding us to surrender it and come and follow him. If we are a thief, maybe the law will never catch us, but God will. Do not refuse the call of Jesus to honesty. If we are cruel, either because of a quick temper or because we delight in defaming others or hurting them, then let us abandon such disobedience to the Fifth Commandment. For each of us, there is probably some particular way in which we are in disobedience to the revealed will of God for us, and we should repent and mend our ways.

We are the rich man in this story! In some way, Jesus is calling us to surrender something we love overmuch and come follow him.

Yet, I do have something against this rich man. I do fault him for one major mistake: he walked away from his Savior. I know that Jesus had asked him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, and he had refused. Nonetheless, I wish he had walk with Jesus anyway, in spite of his refusal. He was not ready then, but he might have been ready later. I wish he had had the tenacity of the Syrophenician woman who persisted in prayer for her daughter, even fighting through the insult Jesus had given her by calling her a dog.¹ Likewise, with you and me. If we survey our soul and find that have some secret sin we seem to love more than Jesus

¹ Mark 7:24-30

himself, then let us do what we can now to overcome that sin. Even if our progress is meager, still, we have to begin somewhere, and so let us do that. Let us begin. But in no case should we walk away from Jesus. Be stubborn about this! Apart from him, we can do nothing. We would be like branches cut off from our Vine². Do not follow the example of this rich man in walking away from Jesus.

The other thought that comes to me about following Jesus is based on that mysterious final line of our Gospel Lesson:

³¹“But many that are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:31, RSV)

Jesus repeats this line in Matthew and Luke.³ It was one of his themes. It means that heaven measures things differently from earth. For example, here on earth, the rookie stockbroker is paid more than the janitor who sweeps his building, though the janitor might have been ground down by poverty all this days, doing the best he can to provide for his family, living his life with dignity, but pretty much overlooked in this world. Aye, overlooked in this world, but not in the next.

Consider our church staff here at Immanuel Lutheran Church, for example. Compared to the rest of our staff, I am paid more, I get to strut around in these nice robes, I get to dare to stand in the pulpit and preach to the whole congregations, and people honor me with the title “Pastor.” But anyone who knows the other members of our church staff knows that heaven is likely to calculate things differently. For most of us, we will proud to boast in heaven that we know the staff of this church. I certainly will.

This is the divine perspective today’s Gospel story invites us to remember. After all, what good is it to gain everything, but lose eternity? The searching question is asked by Jesus:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

When the rich man in today’s Gospel story walked away from Jesus, I dare say he thereby left Jesus lonesome. Jesus desired the man to come back to him, both because he desired that man’s company, and for the sake of that man’s soul. So it always is with Jesus: he desires us sinners to repent, turn around and start walking with him, to our salvation and to his glory, to whom it belongs, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

² John 15:1-5

³ Matthew 19:30, Matthew 20:16, Luke 13:30