

WHEN THE COST SEEMS TOO HIGH

Mark 10:17-31

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When I first saw that Mark's story of Jesus and the rich man was coming up in the lectionary, I was pleased. We need a serious stewardship push at the end of this year, and we have much work to do in that regard to prepare the way for the next pastor, and what better way to set the stage than with a passage about relinquishing riches! Of course, that was when I was reading the story as applying to *you*, rather than to me. It was also before it dawned on me that *Jesus himself* had made a direct appeal to the rich man in the story, and the man had walked away, which made me wonder what chance I might have with you.

Still, it is a powerful story...an unsettling story. And I keep coming back to it. Just six weeks ago we looked at Luke's version of the story. In Mark, the passage that immediately precedes our text ends with Jesus saying, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." This rich man in today's text apparently was absent for that teaching, for just two verses later he asks Jesus, "What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?" What must *I* do? Rather than receiving the kingdom in complete dependence as a child, the rich man wants to know what *he* can do to inherit such life. It's an odd question, really, if you think about it. Chuck Campbell notes, "One can rarely *do* anything for an *inheritance*; by definition, an inheritance can only be given."¹

Still, this man comes to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life... and Jesus reminds him of the commandments of God... and the man counters that he has been faithful in keeping the Torah... and Jesus looks lovingly on him and wants him to have what he wants...and so Jesus offers him a simple, yet imposing prescription of five verbs: "Go, sell, give, come, follow." All five are important. What Jesus was asking of him was a radical turning. *Go, sell* what you own, *give* the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then *come, follow* me.

It is the only occasion in Mark's Gospel, indeed in any of the gospels, in which Jesus calls someone, and the person responds by walking away. The disciples, to a one, had heard Jesus beckon them to follow and had left much to go with him. Others had joined the parade along the way in response to his teachings or his healings. Now, a man who in some significant ways seemed more genuine and earnest in his piety than the others had approached Jesus, asking for instruction and guidance, only to turn away when he discovered the cost of following. Will Willimon asks that we understand the man's dilemma.

Can we not sympathize with this man? We can certainly identify with his ... encumbrances. Like him, [most] of us have many possessions, more than we need to live. We know how concern about all of our stuff tends to chain us to the stuff. Yet more

¹ Charles L. Campbell, "Mark 10:17-31: Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 165.

than that, *don't we all know how risky a matter it can be to be met by Jesus? Can we blame this man for walking away rather than following?*²

So, maybe you see why this might not be an ideal text for a stewardship sermon. Even among self-described Biblical literalists, this is a story no one wants to take literally. It seems almost too demanding. Indeed, rather than providing us an example of faithful stewardship, the man declines Jesus' invitation. My guess is that we all identify with his reticence and the losses he fears – the loss of power, the loss of control... in his mind, perhaps, the loss of his very identity. It's easy to be tempted to confuse what we own with who we are. Jesus invited the man to follow him, he laid out the conditions; and the man walked away. He was grieved by the decision, Mark remembers, but he walked away.

Now, I wish I could say Jesus isn't *really* talking about money and possessions. It certainly would be an easier text that way. New Testament scholar Matt Skinner says the urge to soften Jesus' demand has an almost universal appeal, and so preachers and scholars have sought to do so for centuries. He offered four examples:

- An ancient scribe added words to make 10:24 read “how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God” (see the King James Version), as if the problem highlighted by the rich man is not being rich but *putting faith* in the wealth a person has or craves. This solution ignores the overall thrust of [our text], where Jesus speaks quite plainly about the real obstacle that wealth presents.
- A ninth-century interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called “the eye of the needle,” through which camels could pass only if stooped and unladen. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed, and Jesus' words in [our text] fail to recognize such distinctions about wealthy people's *attitudes*.
- Countless preachers have told us Jesus omnisciently perceived that wealth was this particular man's special “weak spot,” and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we *really* do not want to give up—only our [love of the theater] or fried foods, for example.
- Other preachers assert that Jesus only tests the man by issuing a demand meant to expose the futility of his supposedly self-striving piety. But such an interpretation makes a mockery of Jesus' love for the man and the man's grief [at Jesus' instruction]. If Jesus is not serious, why does he not chase after the crestfallen man, saying, “Wait! Here comes the good part! Let me show you grace now!”³

² William H. Willimon, “The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus,” *Day 1* sermon, Alliance for Christian Media, broadcast October 11, 2009.

³ Matt Skinner, Working Preacher, 2009, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=10/11/2009&tab=4.

I saw a cartoon from an Episcopal site this week that depicted the senior warden of a parish church addressing a young deacon at the church door after worship. “Let me commend you on your forthright approach to stewardship,” he says, “but ‘Show me the money!’ is not one of the approved offertory sentences.”⁴ It may be that a good stewardship sermon should make us feel good about filling out a pledge card and giving generously for the sake of Christ’s church, but the young deacon may have been closer to Jesus’ tone. This is a story about relinquishing everything. As our friend Jon Walton often said, the fundamental question of Christian stewardship is not how much we give of all that we have, but how much we keep, and why.⁵ This rich man, as noted earlier, was a man of earnest piety. He was no doubt a generous person, and willing to give energy and passion to his commitments and to share of his resources. But Jesus said he lacked one thing; it was what he kept for himself that stood in the way of giving himself fully to God. Jesus invited him to a life of relinquishment, but as Jon said, the man felt a deep need to hold onto his security, his wealth, and it was that that kept him from the freedom and true security he sought.⁶ We never hear from this man again in the gospel, but you have to wonder how the rest of his years went.

John Killinger remembers a conversation he had some years ago with a very successful businessman. The man was talking about his life, and he told Killinger he had once felt a clear sense of call to the ministry, but that he didn’t want to follow the call because he despised most of the ministers he had known and didn’t want to commit himself to what he saw as a life of penury. He decided he could offset the calling by living a life of great public service. So he made a lot of money and became well known in business circles and used his influence to do good things in his community and well beyond it. But years later, Killinger said, the man was diagnosed with the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease and was beginning to experience a tragic loss of power and memory. One of the things he *did* remember was his failure to respond affirmatively when he had felt Christ’s call. “I wish I had done it,” he said. Recalling that conversation, Killinger asks:

Don’t you imagine the man in our text felt the same way for the rest of his life? Imagine being asked by Jesus to follow him and turning down the invitation. It would haunt a person, wouldn’t it? You could never quite drown out the sense of having missed a great opportunity.⁷

The problem was that at the time it didn’t look like a great opportunity at all; it felt like a harsh demand, a cost too high. All the rich man could hear in Jesus’ words was loss – the loss of stability and security, the loss of influence, the loss of his very identity. Perhaps he wanted to retain a measure of flexibility for his life, a measure of control. Maybe he just couldn’t give up the possession of all his stuff, even though it was really possessing him. But the loss he thought would accompany saying “yes” to Jesus was nothing compared to the loss he surely experienced for saying “no.” Perhaps he understood such a truth even at the time, for Mark says, “he went away grieving.”

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/clergycoachingnetwork/photos/a.553233241362454/2137139696305126/?type=3&theater>, accessed October 8, 2018.

⁵ Jon Walton, in a sermon on this text Westminster Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware, on October 9, 1994.

⁶ Walton.

⁷ John Killinger, “The Real Way to Personal Fulfillment,” *Thirty Good Minutes* radio broadcast, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, March 9, 1997.

He was willing to do everything for the sake of eternal security except the one thing that would have led him to it. It just didn't sound like opportunity to him. Frederick Buechner reflected on Jesus' comment about camels and the eye of a needle and said, "Maybe the reason is not that the rich are so wicked they're kept out of the place but that they're so out of touch with reality they can't see it's a place worth getting into."

How do you hear Jesus' words, "one thing you lack"? As a great opportunity, a gracious invitation to a new form of security? Or as a harsh demand, as bad news? Will Willimon said he figured most people heard it as the latter until one night when he explored this text with some university students and found himself surprised by their responses:

"Had Jesus ever met this man before?" asked one of the students.

"Why do you ask?" [Willimon] asked.

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my experience, a professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple."

Another student said thoughtfully, "I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."

I was astounded [said Willimon]. What I had heard as severe, demanding *bad* news, these students heard as gracious, *good* news.⁸

Which way do you hear Jesus' words to the rich man? I have to be honest with you; I hear them as both. This story of the rich man and Jesus challenges me, and I want it to challenge us all. It is a story about wealth and what we will do with all that we have. It is a story about what we will give, and about what we will keep, and why. It is a challenge to all that we may believe to be essential in life, a challenge to all we believe and all we will teach our children about real security. It is about who we are and whom we will choose to follow...about *whether* we will choose to follow. This is a *radical* invitation Jesus offers, in that it goes to the *root* of what we have and what we will relinquish in order to follow him. It is nonetheless an invitation of grace... not simply an invitation to relinquish all our stuff, but also an invitation to gain a passionate, faithful life, lived in community with Christ and with others who will share the journey with us. A gracious invitation, rooted in God's possibilities, for indeed with God all things are possible.

One day a rich man came to Jesus and sought his counsel. Jesus presented him with a choice. That same choice comes to us in some form almost every day. Most every day, Jon Walton said,

⁸ Willimon,

[t]here comes a moment in some very practical and unexpected way when a choice is before us, and without realizing it something of our soul, our character, our being is at stake – you might even say the kingdom of heaven is at stake – and we have to decide, yes or no.⁹

Go, said Jesus. Sell. Give. Come. Follow. In the short run, it will always be easier to think the cost is too high, to walk away, to hold on to what we have...our own self-constructed securities. But then, in the long run, what we may have thought we would save by doing so will be precisely what we have lost.

⁹ Walton, cf. note 5.