

When We Seem to Have It All

Mark 10:17–31

Last week we completed a series of messages based on texts containing the phrase “that it might be fulfilled.” My intention is to start a new series soon, but while I pray about it, the Lord laid today’s text on my heart as I was reading the Greek text of the gospel of Mark this past week. Here is the fascinating account of Jesus’ encounter with an unnamed man. In the parallel account in Luke he is identified as “a certain ruler,” and the Matthew account describes him as “young.” All three accounts observe that he was very rich, so this man is known to history as the rich young ruler. It is likely that he held ecclesiastical rather than political office, as Nicodemus, mentioned in John 3, who is identified as “a *ruler* of the Jews.” Perhaps he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council and tribunal of the Jews that developed after the return from the Babylonian captivity. We know that the Jewish Council hated Jesus, refused to accept him as Messiah, and sought to destroy him. The Gospel accounts record again and again that when members of the Sanhedrin came to talk to Jesus it was for the purpose of entrapping him. They didn’t want to *learn* from him, they wanted to *destroy* him. But in contrast, this young ruler came to Jesus out of a sincere desire to learn, and that is commendable.

Think about that idea for a moment. Do *you* have a sincere desire to learn? Are you a seeker after truth? The Lord Jesus is the second Person of the Holy Trinity come in human flesh. He is the wisest man that ever lived—wiser than Solomon, wiser than Daniel. The Lord Jesus was sent by the Father for the express purpose of saving his people from their sin. He did not come to advance himself, but to serve his people. He is the greatest human ever to live. There is no one else in history quite like him, and he has had a great impact on human history. Is it *your* desire to learn from him? Do you come to worship—as it were, to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn from him? Or do you consider the things of this world to be more important? But, honestly, what could be more important than knowing him who is “the way, the truth and the life”—the only one who can reconcile us to the Father, deliver us from hell and take us to heaven? You may think to yourself, *I have everything I need—Jesus is not that important to me*, or you may think, *I’ve got lots of time; I’ll learn about Jesus later*, but in the end, you, I and everybody else will stand before Christ as Judge, and on that day we will learn what was *really* important. That day may come sooner than we think.

We will examine this story under three headings: (1) What must I do? (2) One thing you lack. (3) Sell all that you have. First,

1. What must I do?

The rich young ruler addresses Jesus with the respectful title “Good teacher.” Certainly he did not realize the full extent of the truth of his words. Jesus is “good”

—*supremely* good. He is the “just One”—“Jesus Christ the *righteous*,” the only one in history who kept God’s law perfectly. He did everything the law requires and did not do anything that the law forbids. He served the Father with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and did everything, every moment of his life for the glory of God. He is the supreme example of goodness.

Furthermore, he is the teacher. Many of God’s creatures are born with an innate knowledge, but the human species needs instruction. This is why it is important for covenant children to be raised in godly homes, to learn by example and instruction how we are to live. The parent’s duty is: “You shall teach [God’s precepts] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”¹ We have our young children for just a few short years before they go off into the world, and we are to use that precious time to teach them about the true God, and what he requires of us. If we know all human knowledge and fail to know Christ, we will be unprepared on the day of judgment.

So the rich young ruler addresses Jesus with the respectful title “Good teacher,” and asks him, “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” His mind was not on earthly things, as was the man who came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Imagine that—to stand in the physical presence of the Lamb of God who came to die for our sins, and ask his help in acquiring more earthly possessions! The Bible says, “having food and raiment let us be content.” Our heavenly Father knows that we need such things! After all, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

To his credit, the rich young ruler was thinking about eternal life. A lot of young people don’t think about that. Death seems so distant. They want to live for the present. They want to enjoy the pleasures of this world. Popular culture has such allure, such glamor, such attraction, such appeal! The current doings and carryings-on of movie stars, singers and influencers seem much more interesting than the teachings of Jesus. Checking Facebook seems more urgent than seeking God’s face in his Word.

In one sense, the rich young ruler’s query, “What shall I *do* that I may inherit eternal life?” is the wrong question. After all, there is nothing that *we* can do that can merit eternal life. Yet Jesus did not object to his question. Neither did Paul and Silas when the Philippian jailer asked them, “Sirs, what must I *do* to be saved?”

In an ultimate sense, there is *nothing* that a fallen, spiritually dead son or daughter of Adam can do to merit salvation. After all, the Bible specifically teaches that “as in Adam all *die*” and “you hath he quickened, who were *dead* in trespasses

¹ Deut. 6:7

and sins.” Man is not like a swimmer, inundated by the raging sea, his energy spent, gasping to draw his last breath before he drowns, trying vainly to grab a life ring that was thrown to him but is just beyond reach. Rather, he is already drowned, sunk to the bottom of the sea. His body is cold, lifeless, dead, unresponsive, oblivious to any efforts to save him. A dead man cannot *do* anything. Observation teaches us that there is a finality to death. Once a person draws his last breath and goes out into eternity, he cannot be recalled. Whatever one might have wanted to say to him before he died cannot be said now. Scripture teaches: “*Today* is the day of salvation.” Today is all we have. None of us can be sure we will have a tomorrow. The young man that was killed on M-52 a few weeks ago, his body thrown out of the car by the force of the impact, did not know, when he woke that morning, that it would be his last day on earth. Four people in the small town of Union City, just a little over an hour from here, perished in a tornado two days ago. As we in Lansing heard the large chunks of hail hitting our windows Friday night, people were dying in collapsed structures 70 miles away. The fact is, we can take every precaution, we can live a sober and careful life, but one day we too will die.

A spiritually dead person knows intuitively that there is a God, that he is sovereign, and that he will someday give account to God. He might even be able to repeat the outline of the gospel—that we are sinners on our way to hell; that Christ, the Lamb of God, died for sinners; and that all who put their trust in him are saved—but unless God’s Holy Spirit enables us to hate our sin and long for fellowship with Christ, we will die in our sin.

The Lord did not take issue with the young man’s wording, “What shall I *do* that I may inherit eternal life?” Rather, he said to him, “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’” Jesus emphasized man’s second-table duties—our duty to our neighbor. What was the young man’s answer? “Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.”

At this point Mark records something unmentioned in the other Gospels: “Then Jesus, looking at him, *loved* him.” This is remarkable. This is not the love of friendship, such as when two people are emotionally drawn to one another because they have so much in common. Rather, this was the love of commitment—the exact same word used in John 3:16, “God so *loved* the world.” The fact that Jesus loved him encourages me to think that, after reconsideration, the rich young ruler did indeed commit himself to Christ.

But consider point 2,

2. One thing you lack.

Jesus speaks of the commandments—the law of God. As you may have noticed, we have the reading of the law almost every Lord’s day. In contrast, dispensationalist churches generally ignore the law, believing that it applied only to

Old Testament Israel. If any of you have attended a dispensationalist church that regularly had a reading from the law, I would be keenly interested to hear about that.

The law shows us our sin, gives direction to civil rulers, and serves as a moral guide for believers. The fact that the Ten Commandments were spoken audibly by God from heaven, chiseled onto two stone tablets, and stowed in the ark of the covenant in the Holy of holies in the tabernacle illustrates their importance. Israel was not to forget the Ten Commandments. They are a summary of all the moral commands in the Bible.

We cannot be saved by keeping the law, because no one except Christ ever kept it perfectly. The law shows us our sin and the impossibility of us earning our salvation.

Curiously, in the case of the rich young ruler, our Lord doesn't mention the first table of the law. Not because it is unimportant. Elsewhere, when he was asked, "Which is the first commandment of all?" (Mark 12:28), he answered: "The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like [it], namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

But in this case he omits the first commandment and concentrates on the second. Why? I believe it is because he knows that the rich young ruler, being an observant Jew, was outwardly keeping the laws having to do with man's relationship to God. He worshipped the LORD as the true God. He did not worship false gods. He did not take the name of the LORD in vain. He observed the Sabbath. Jesus, knowing his heart, zeros in on second-table duties: "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not bear false witness," "Honor your father and your mother." To these he adds "Do not defraud," which is an application of the eighth and ninth commandments.

Here was a young man who was financially well-off. He led an outwardly virtuous life and lived a comfortable lifestyle.

Now there's nothing intrinsically wrong with having wealth. Several Bible characters had great wealth and were men of honor—Abraham and Job come to mind. God promises that if we honor him, he will honor us—"that it may be *well* with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth" (Eph. 6:3). He wants us to be wise stewards of what he gives us. He wants us to save for the future. With so many people, money burns through our pockets. We spend our entire paycheck and go into debt. God wants us to be content with what we have and seek him as our highest good. He wants us to provide for our own needs and generously share with the needy. "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with

his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth” (Eph. 4:28). One thing we must *not* do is make a god of our wealth. “You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24 ESV).

As humans we need physical things—food, clothing and shelter—and God knows that! He says, “your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:32–33). If we obey God and seek him first, he will supply our needs according to his riches in glory. Since government has taken over the care of the poor, we have more poor. Self-serving politicians have convinced many that government will take care of them—“just elect me, and I will get you benefits.” “Tax the rich!” But the problem with socialism is that eventually we run out of other people’s money. It’s best to do things God’s way.

When Jesus quoted the law, what was the young man’s answer? “All these things I have kept from my youth.” To this, the Lord replied, “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.” Jesus was a master at zeroing right in at a man’s root problem. What was it? It was greed. He had made an idol of *himself*—his possessions, his happiness, his comfort. At Jesus’ word, the young man went away sad. The word for “sad” means to have a gloomy appearance. The young man’s face fell, and he went away sorrowful. He really liked Jesus. His teachings made sense. He was drawn to him. But when he was challenged with the conditions of discipleship, they were too much for him. Sadly, he “went away.” He was no longer interested in being Jesus’ disciple. Sad indeed! He was choosing physical comfort in this life over eternal comfort in the arms of the Savior.

Thirdly, consider:

3. Sell all that you have.

These words are a call to radical discipleship. We cannot have Jesus as an add-on to a self-centered life. A lot of people would like a little bit of religion without full commitment to Christ. “Sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me” is not just for the well-to-do. It is for all of us. What Christ is calling for is full commitment. If you are comfortable with your life as it is, and do not want to change, then Christ is not for you. What Christ demands is full commitment. He wants us to be fully devoted to himself. He wants us to deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow him.

If anyone else made such total demands, we would say, “You are crazy! What right do you have to ask such a thing?” But Jesus is the Lord of all, the ruler of the kings of the earth, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the great Creator. He made us for himself, and he knows exactly what we need.

Some people get very nervous when they hear these words. “Sell all that you have, take up your cross, and follow Me.” They think, “Do I have to give up *everything*? Can’t I keep anything for myself?”

Christ asks you to give up everything to gain everything. This is a *paradox*—a statement that is seemingly contradictory and yet is true. This is the way of life that Christ requires. As he says elsewhere, “whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35). Or in the words of Paul, “I . . . count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord . . . and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

Christ calls us to sell all that we have and follow him. By the way, that doesn’t mean be irresponsible and go live on the street. He wants us to provide for our own needs, and the needs of our families.² But we ought to sell or give away anything we love more than Christ. He calls us to do this, not to impoverish us but to enrich us with true riches that cannot be taken away from us. He calls us to lose everything we have in order to gain him who is life itself—our true riches. Will you, like the rich young ruler, go away sad, or will you follow Christ and be blessed forever?

In the current issue of *Voice of the Martyrs* there is an article about a woman named Anu Dani, of Nepal, who had been a worshiper of the Hindu god Shiva, known as the Destroyer. She renounced the material world and would spend hours in meditation at his temple. She was thought to have the ability to tell fortunes and heal people, which is how she made her living. But when her daughter became gravely ill, and she couldn’t heal her, even after repeated visits to different doctors and hospitals, she went to a church that she heard could free people of evil spirits. The Christians there gladly prayed for the little girl and she was healed. This seemed to Anu as evidence that Christ was greater than her god, Shiva. When she and her husband were baptized, she was rejected by her family and considered an untouchable. People in India and Nepal who want to follow Christ often have to make a choice: sell all that they have—including relationships with their families, or keep their families and not make waves. Here in the USA we don’t necessarily have that stark choice, but the Gospel calls us to sell all we have, so to speak—everything that is once was important to us—and follow Christ.

When we seem to have it all, we do not need Christ, but when we recognize our spiritual poverty and give up everything to follow him, we are indeed blessed. Jesus is the treasure hid in a field, that a man found, and went and sold everything he had, and bought the field.

² 1 Tim. 5:8

Brothers and sisters, let us give up everything to follow Christ. As the missionary martyr Jim Elliott said, “He is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”³ Amen.

³ <https://www.kevinhalloran.net/jim-elliott-quote-he-is-no-fool> accessed 3-7-26