

So You Want to Follow Jesus...

Mark 10:17-31
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Today is Remembrance Day and i am planning to speak about discipleship. I do think the message is timely, and I want to take a moment to explain why. On Remembrance Day we honor those who lost their lives to war, particularly to the Great Wars of the 20th century, and particularly to the soldiers who fought in those wars. Of course not all who died in the wars were soldiers. Also, of the soldiers who fought in the wars, not all carried weapons. Throughout the Second World War there were a group of German Christians who were alarmed at the direction their nation was heading and who opposed it heart, mind and soul. I count them soldiers in the kingdom of God. One of these men was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1939 Bonhoeffer escaped conscription into the Nazi army by accepting an invitation to join Union Theological Seminary in the United States. He made this decision with much turmoil and came to regret it. He wrote to a friend that:

“I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.”

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany and worked to subvert the Nazi regime. Along with several fellow Christians he was imprisoned in 1943, and on April 9, 1945 he was stripped naked and led out into the execution yard of the prison camp to be hung by the neck. Two weeks later the camp was liberated by the Americans, and two weeks after that Nazi germany officially surrendered.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the life threatening decision to leave the safety of the United States and return to his hostile homeland because in his particular situation he perceived it as the way to follow Jesus. Discipleship is a central theme in his writings, and he knew, in a way that many of us simply don't, how *costly* it is to be a true follower of Jesus. On this Remembrance Day as we honor those who died fighting in War, I ask that we also be mindful of those who died opposing the War from within Germany. Accordingly, I think it appropriate to spend our time this morning considering something of great importance to Bonhoeffer and his allies.

One day a rich young ruler approached Jesus. I like this guy. I like him a lot and basically I am going to use out time today to explain why. The rich young ruler gets a lot of disdain from Christians, and although the end of this short story in the gospels is tragic, I think the guy deserves a lot more respect from us than he typically gets. It is easy to pigeon-hole him as a lover of worldly wealth who prized his possessions more than the Lord Jesus. It is also easy to see him as someone with a purely academic interest in the necessary conditions for inheriting eternal life, who gets very uncomfortable once Jesus makes the matter personal and starts making unreasonable demands on him. There might be some truth to those charges, and there are lessons to learn from them. Still, there is more to the story and my hope is that you walk away from this passage today with a new perspective on the rich young ruler.

Part of the reason that there are different lessons to take from this story is that there are small but significant differences in the versions recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke (it does not appear in John's gospel). I've purposefully chosen to focus on Mark's version of this story, but one thing I want us to appreciate is what a great gift it is to us to have four accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. Often these accounts don't agree perfectly with one another, and this can be distressing when what we want from the scripture is the pure undiluted truth. Muslims believe that the Qu'ran was dictated to the prophet Muhammed word for word as a direct revelation from God. Christians don't view the scriptures in quite the same way. In the Gospels we have four accounts of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus and we believe that these accounts are *both* inspired by the Holy Spirit of God *and* influenced by the humanity of the four authors. They are God's words incarnated into human form. I believe that this is a strength and a gift rather than a weakness. In any case, I have here a comparative version of the four gospels; it shows the content of the gospels in side-by-side columns for each of the four authors, so that you can see differences in the stories they each relate, and also what content is related only in one or two of the gospels. I highly recommend something like this for any of you who are interested in learning more about the life and teachings of our Lord. You can also find an online version at www.para-gospel.com

OK back to our story. One day a rich young ruler approaches Jesus. In Mark's gospel we are told only that a man approaches him, although it is clear by the end of the story that he is a wealthy man. It is Matthew who tells us that he is young, and it is Luke who tells us that he is a ruler. It is only by considering all three accounts that we get a fuller picture; this is a young man who, as a ruler, likely inherited his wealth. As a young man he is passionate and zealous, and perhaps not yet set in his ways, as some of us older farts are. As a ruler, this is a man with power and prestige, one who is used to others bowing down before him. This all becomes significant to his encounter with Jesus.

Notice that immediately before the story of this young ruler, in all three synoptic gospels, a crowd of people have brought their children before Jesus and Jesus welcomes them despite the rebukes of his disciples. And notice that before *that* Mark relates an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees about divorce. The Pharisees apparently had a debate amongst themselves about when it was permissible for a man to 'put away' his wife and children, presumably to

pursue other interests. Jesus lays the smack down and tells them “what God has joined together let no man separate.” When we put some of this together we can set an interesting context for our story. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees about women who have been “put away” by their husbands. Presumably the topic comes up because they are in the presence of a crowd of such women. Having been ‘put away’, these women are single mothers whose children have been abandoned by their fathers. Socially, they are the lowest of the low, they would be poor to the point of destitution and their children would be hungry, poorly clothed, and unclean. These are the children that approach Jesus and this is why the disciples rebuke them and their mothers; they figure Jesus has better things to do than get distracted by dirty street orphans. In fact, Jesus does NOT have better things to do, and he lays the smack down yet again on his disciples for assuming otherwise.

The point for us today is that to get before Jesus at all at this time, our rich young ruler would have had to push his way through a crowd of commoners, including the same street orphans that Jesus’ disciples considered unclean to touch. It is not every day that a ruler in the first century has such pressing business that he would be seen anywhere near such company, much less *touch* them in order to get close to Jesus. But this man does so.

Mark tells us that he ran to Jesus, and cast himself upon his knees before him. Understand how undignified it was for a man of status to run through the streets. Understand that this is a man who would be used to having others bow and scrape before him, rather than kneeling before others. Understand that this is all happening before a crowd of onlookers. None of that matters to this man. He runs through a crowd of folks at the bottom of the social ladder and throws himself to his knees before Jesus because he has a question he needs answered, and his burning need for the answer eclipses everything else in his life. His question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” I see nothing but complete sincerity in this. Here is a man who hungers and thirsts after righteousness, who wants it badly enough to flout all the social conventions of the day and to throw himself on his knees in the mud of the street before the poor itinerant preacher Jesus, out of his hope that Jesus just might have what he desires.

Jesus starts by giving him a general answer; the same general answer that would apply to all men and women who want to enter into eternal life. Keep the commandments.

“You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.”

The commandments were given to humans for the very purpose of conditioning them to live the heavenly life. The life of sinful man is characterized by taking what one wants without restricting one’s desires; by lying whenever it is convenient to do so, by cheating to gain any advantage. The heavenly life is characterized by giving to others even when it harms oneself, by radical honesty out of simple love of the truth, and by honoring those who deserve to be honored. The

way forward out of the sinful life and toward the heavenly one is by following the commandments.

As Christians we understand that following the commandments is not sufficient, even when it is possible. Sin has worked its way in and out of our very souls and it is only through the atoning sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross that our problem of sin is actually dealt with. However, I believe it is also a mistake to think that the commandments are thereby made irrelevant. Christians are easily lured into thinking that because Jesus has dealt with all our sins on the cross, *it doesn't much matter how we live our lives*. Since I trust Jesus to forgive my sins, I can just continue on sinning, confident that it won't really harm me in the end. Nowhere do we see such an attitude endorsed or encouraged in the teachings of Jesus. Justification is not the same thing as sanctification, and what God wants for us is not merely the removal of the burden of sin from our shoulders, but nothing less than for us to *be holy, as He is holy*. I'll say more on this later. For now, I think we should take Jesus' answer to the young ruler at face value. If you are interested in inheriting eternal life, you should be interested in keeping the commandments.

Our rich young ruler gives an astonishing reply: "All these I have kept since my youth." Even more astonishing is that Jesus seems to accept this answer. Who among us can claim the same? I certainly cannot. Here is a man who has devoted his life to right living. Keeping the commandments does not come naturally to any human being; our natural inclinations drive us toward self-promotion and disregard of our neighbor, and it takes incredible discipline and self-restraint to observe all the commandments since one's youth. And yet this is what the man claims, and Jesus does not question it. Notice what Mark says here: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." We know from elsewhere in the gospels that when Jesus looks upon a man, he *sees* him. He sees him through and through, down the depths of his soul. Consider:

"The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?" (Luke 5:21-22)

"At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?" (Matt. 9:3-4)

"Others, to test him, were demanding of Him a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls." (Luke 11:17)

When Jesus looks at our young man, he knows what is in this man's heart. Seeing what lay there, Jesus loved him. Again, let us appreciate his sincerity. This man has kept all the commandments since his youth, and yet he refused to let that fact be a comfort to him. He wanted *more* of the heavenly life. He wanted to go further, and he sensed that he was still

lacking. How many folks do you know who consider themselves 'a pretty good person' and simply rest content with that knowledge? That is a very normal thing for us humans! This young man was not simply 'a pretty good guy', he had devoted his life to following the commandments, and yet he was still distressed that it wasn't enough.

Looking at him, Jesus loved him. Out of that love, you might have expected that Jesus would give him a pat on the shoulder and confirm what a good job he's done in keeping the commandments. You might expect that Jesus' advice would be something along the lines of, "Well done! Now you can just keep on as you've been and coast to the end!" Of course that is not Jesus' response. Instead Jesus lays before the young man the next challenge, and it is important to recognize that Jesus does this precisely because he loves him. His goal for the man is nothing less than his full glorification; he wants the man to grow into his full inheritance as a child of God; to become holy, and his Father in heaven is holy. A pat on the back and sending along his way at this point would have been a disregard of the man's most pressing need. Jesus loves him, and he will not disregard his needs. "Go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me. But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one that had great possessions."

It is an easy thing to condemn the man for being too in love with his riches, and it is an easy thing to imagine that you and I would have done differently in his shoes. Do not fool yourself; there was *nothing* easy about what Jesus asks this man to do. Note, first, that although this man is face-to-face with the Lord, Jesus has not yet been fully revealed as the incarnate Son of God. The young ruler knows him as an interesting travelling teacher with some exciting things to say about the coming kingdom of God, but he couldn't have known then that Jesus was anything more. It is not as if the challenge comes from the Jesus we see in the book of Revelations, coming from the clouds with eyes blazing like fire and feet like bronze glowing in a furnace. To all appearances the challenge comes from a simple carpenter-turned-traveling preacher. Second, understand that for a man born into a wealthy ruling household, giving up all he possesses means not just parting with a favorite silk robe or fancy gems on his jewelry, it means giving up land and title, and along with them the power and influence that defined his social position. This man's wealth was not simply a collection of possessions but a core part of his very identity. It defined who he was in this life, and it determined all of his relationships with other humans. Giving up all he owns would be nothing less than giving up his very identity; the entirety of his life to that point. It means stepping out of one entire way of living and leaving it behind to enter into a new and completely unknown way of living. Third, notice that the man goes away deeply saddened. How many of us, if given the same challenge this man was given, would think to ourselves: "*Of course* I would give up everything to follow Jesus, if that's what he really wanted. I'll give it all up right now, 'in principle'. I'll divorce myself from my belongings in my heart, and in so doing there won't be any need to give them up in actual fact. Having done so, I can continue to live my life much as before." We would then walk away from the challenge relatively unphased.

Not our rich young ruler. He walks away deeply saddened, precisely because he is honest enough with himself to admit that Jesus is not merely testing his resolve. Jesus was dead serious about the next step in seeking eternal life, and the man refuses to allow himself to rationalize it away as being anything else. He is also honest enough with himself to understand the enormity of the challenge and his own current inability to take that step. In this lies hope. Tragically, he walks away from Jesus that day, but we never learn anything about what came later. Walking away deeply saddened is obviously not as good as immediately leaving everything to follow Jesus, but it is not as bad as walking away indignant at Jesus' extraordinary challenge. I want to know what that sadness resulted in, and I'm frustrated by this story in that we never find out. I don't think there is anything but speculation behind it, but I did once hear a pastor suggest that this rich young man is actually Saul, who later, after giving up all he has to follow Jesus, becomes the apostle Paul. We don't know that that is true, but it does seem to fit.

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of lessons we can learn from this event in the life of Jesus, but I am just going to try to scratch the surface today. A handful of things that stand out to me:

First, do not be distracted by the heading to this passage. Just before Mark 10:17 your Bible likely describes this passage with something like "The Rich and the Kingdom of God." That heading is not a part of the original text, and I am convinced that it is a grave mistake to treat this section of scripture as a warning only to the wealthy. Do not allow yourself to skip over this exchange as being relevant only to rich folks, with a reminder in the back of your mind that if you ever win the lottery, you'll be sure to revisit it and study it more carefully. This passage is not primarily about the special difficulties that the wealthy experience when they try to follow Jesus. Rather, Mark 10:17-31 belongs with a group of other passages on how difficult it is for *anyone* to follow Jesus. For example:

57 As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

59 He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:57-62)

25 Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-27)

Jesus is absolutely consistent throughout his teachings about the costs of true discipleship; following him costs a person everything, period. Our story about the young ruler belongs to the same group of passages. Yes, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; harder than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Why is it so hard for the rich? Because it is that hard for *anyone at all* to enter the kingdom of heaven, and worldly wealth gives you no advantages here (as it does in all worldly matters). Don't fool yourself into thinking that following Jesus is an easier matter for you if you are not wealthy.

*** Interruption *** - Hang on, Dave, are you saying that we, here and now, *actually* need to give up all we possess if we want to follow Jesus?

I'm glad you asked that, because it takes us to a second lesson. I am going to give you what I hope will be a straightforward answer, but first let me answer your question with a question: Have you followed all of the commandments since your youth? You don't have to answer that, but consider it. If you can honestly answer yes, then here is the follow-up question: Having followed all of the commandments since your youth, do you allow yourself a measure of self-satisfaction or confidence in just continuing as you are, or do you still hunger and thirst for righteousness to the extent that you would go to great measures just to learn about what else you might do to inherit eternal life? In short, are you in a comparable position to the rich young ruler? Even if you ARE, then we gotta ask one more question: is the particular thing that Jesus is now asking you to do, the very same as the particular thing that he asked the young ruler to do? Remember that Jesus' challenge to him came after he *looked* at him. Jesus is looking into your heart as well, and I am not going to guess about what he sees. The thing for you to do in

your pursuit of eternal life, however, is going to depend completely on what Jesus sees, right now, in your heart.

Let me give a longer answer. It is evident from their speech and actions that some Christians consider salvation from sin, through acceptance of Christ, as the whole of the Christian life. Once that is accomplished, they think, then what lies before us is just coasting through the rest of this life until we enter the gates of heaven in the next life. I think this is wrong, and I also think that it is more threatening to true faith than anything else we face. Salvation from sin is not the end goal; it is the beginning of the path of discipleship. Many of us enjoy the outdoors, so consider an illustration: suppose that there is a great mountain with a path leading to its summit. At the summit is the end, the goal, the *telos* that God has in mind for us. If Jesus is to be believed, this is nothing short of absolute perfection; it is the point at which we are holy, as our Father in heaven is holy. Consider Jesus' response to Peter when Peter points out that he and the other disciples have taken exactly the step that the rich young ruler couldn't bring himself to take (Matthew's version):

“Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold,^[d] and will inherit eternal life. (Matt 19:28-29)

Many folks live without any knowledge of the mountain at all. They have their backs turned to it and although they may hear rumors and whispers of it from time to time, for the most part they go about their lives without paying it any attention.

Repentance from sin and acceptance of Jesus Christ into your life is a turning point in one's life, and is unquestionably the single most important turning point you will ever experience. It is the point when you turn to face that mountain and put your foot upon the path leading to its summit; but the mountain still needs to be climbed! Nothing about our faith suggests that it is acceptable to stand there looking at the mountain but not move any closer toward it! Now, at every point along that path of discipleship, there is a next step that needs to be taken. Some steps are tougher than other; some might involve scrambling over rock scree and others might involve climbing with your fingertips. In the passage we've been considering, Jesus makes the next step plain for the rich young ruler he encounters. That man has already lived in accordance with the commandments for some time. He has been obedient to the point that he has learned not to be content with mere obedience, and he has allowed that hunger for something even more to consume his life. Given where he is at on that path to the top of the mountain, the next step before him is to forsake his wealth, and everything that goes along with it, and to follow

Jesus. You and I should not concern ourselves so much with the next step along the path of discipleship for that guy; what matters to us is the next step before us. Our next step might not be anything like that guy's next step. So, Jesus might *not* be calling you and I to sell everything we possess and give it to the poor.

BE CAREFUL if that is a relief to you. Basically what I am saying is that we shouldn't get too big for our britches. The rich young ruler was called to give up all that he had, but he was *fit* to receive that call! If the same demand has not been placed on you, it is because you are not yet at that stage in discipleship; perhaps it is enough for you to keep struggling with the commandments. If you catch yourself thinking, "Whew. I'm glad I don't have to actually give up everything in this life after all," then remember that the rich young ruler at least went away *saddened*, not relieved. His sorrow should be mine, only compounded many times over. While he was unable to answer the call of the Lord, at least he was called! I haven't been asked to give up all that I have because I am not yet fit to take that step. That ought to bother me a great deal, and if you can say the same to yourself, then it ought to bother you just as much.

Finally, remember that we do not know what happened with the young ruler after that encounter that gave him so much sorrow. Perhaps he went home and gave up his pursuit of the life everlasting, and ate, drank, and made merry until he died. On the other hand, perhaps he came back to Jesus on another day and was able to do then what he could not do during the story we read. Some of you here today know, in the depths of your heart, what it is that the Lord demands as *your* next step along the path of discipleship. Some of you have known that step for years but have not found the resolve to take it. Perhaps it is as momentous a step as the young ruler was asked to take. Perhaps it involves divorcing yourself from something you take to be at the very center of your identity. Perhaps it means letting the old die away and stepping forward into something new and unknown. The next step always lies before you, and a failure to take it at one moment in time does not mean that you cannot take it at a later time.

There is nothing easy about following Jesus. In fact, if you have found in your life that following Jesus has been relatively easy, then there is a good chance that you have NOT been following Jesus! But take heart: what is impossible for Man is possible with God. Through faith in Jesus Christ we have been given what the rich young ruler sought desperately: an inheritance of eternal life. What remains is for us to step out of our old life and fully into this new one. It is the path of discipleship that will take us there.

BENEDICTION

May you depart knowing the invitation of God, to move

- from comfort to insecurity
- from what we know to what we have yet to discover
- from where we have been to where we have yet to go
- from safety to a place of risk

Go in the example of the saints before you,

the Israelites in the wilderness,

Paul blinded in Damascus.

Go in the name of Jesus Christ,

who said 'follow me' without saying where he was going,

just promising transformation and relationship

with the Triune God along the way.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

In the name of Christ. Amen

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