

Come, Follow Me!

Mark 10:17-31 (ESV)

February 9, 2003

“You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” “Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor...and come, follow me.” What an invitation! The man came seeking, or at least inquiring about, eternal life, and Jesus offered him discipleship and treasure in heaven. Jesus looked into the man’s heart and loved him anyway. There is the mercy of God. Jesus could have chased him away, but he said, “Come, follow me.” There is grace upon grace.

Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, on his way to Jerusalem to be crucified, invited the man to come and be with him. But something went horribly wrong. “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” I believe this is the only time recorded in the Gospel According to Mark that Jesus called someone to follow him and the person failed to do so. Making disciples must be a lot harder than healing leprosy, forgiving sin, walking on water, or raising the dead. This man made a choice, and he made the wrong choice, and his choice is remembered to warn us against it. Lord, have mercy on us! What happened here?

There was only one thing that stood between the unnamed man and his eternal life, between him and heaven, between him and a saving relationship with God and with his Christ, between him and what he was looking for, or at least what he thought he was looking for. One thing! But that one thing had a death grip on our poor man. “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” What one thing has hold of us? What one thing has hold of you? What one thing has hold of me? Is there anything in our lives standing in the way of our following Jesus, or are we already perfect disciples? Have we already arrived at heaven? Are we perfected in our Christian lives? Or is there possibly yet some greater obedience we can yield?

Jesus used the Ten Commandments to diagnose this man’s problem. The commandments have long served as a mirror in which we can see our flaws, imperfections, failures, and disobedience. In short, the commandments can convict us of our sin and drive us to the foot of the cross to seek the mercy of our Lord. But they did not work that way on the first pass here. Jesus said, “You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” And the man said to

him, with a straight face, “Teacher,” (notice he did not say “Lord”), all these I have kept from my youth.” He missed the point entirely.

Have you ever seen one of those mirrors that magnifies your face when you look into it? That is what Jesus pulled out next. In that he could not wring from the man any sense of shortcoming in regard to not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not lying, or failing to honor his elders, Jesus dropped all the way down to commandment number ten, “You shall not covet,” which deals not so much with outward behavior as with inner motivation and attachment, he turned to the special case of greed and avarice particularly in regard to possessions already held, and then he said, “Look into this mirror.” “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor.” This one struck home. This one hit pay dirt. This one opened the depths of the man’s heart, and it was not a pretty sight.

“Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” The commandment against coveting is not a law against ownership but a prohibition of wanting that which one does not have. So we like to tell ourselves that this man’s problem was not his wealth, as such, but his undue attachment to it. Maybe that is right. But it begs the question. The main problem with wealth is its ability to inspire our undue attachment to it. We are creatures made with a heart to love, and there is a love we have which belongs to God alone. But instead of loving God, we love ourselves, or our cause, or our nation, or our race, or our money. God, help us!

Jesus knew where his competition was. He looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were amazed at his words. It was not necessarily that they were wealthy men themselves, but they had been taught for their whole lives that wealth was a sign of God’s blessing. Does that sound familiar? Is that not the way we think today? Then Jesus said that wealth (and we hope that he meant attachment to it) was the very thing that could keep people away from God’s blessing. Now we have a problem. No wonder the disciples were amazed. But Jesus pushed the point even harder and said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” They understood this involved more than the one man.

No wonder the disciples were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” Now we come to the heart of the matter: “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” The problem is not only wealth, though that can be an immense problem. The problem is not only our undue attachment to it, though that can be an

insurmountable problem, humanly speaking. The problem is that we have all sinned and need to be saved, and we cannot save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves by obeying the Ten Commandments. We cannot save ourselves by giving away our wealth. We cannot save ourselves by detaching ourselves from our wealth. We cannot save ourselves by making the right choices, because we no longer make the right choices. We cannot save ourselves.

“With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” All is grace. What we cannot do for ourselves, God can do for us. All is grace. The love that we cannot turn around, God can reclaim as his very own. All is grace. The wealth we own, which threatens to own us, God can redirect for his purposes. All is grace. You see, the danger with money is that we act as if our lives depended upon it. God wants us to learn that our lives depend upon him alone. All is grace. That is the point. As William Temple once wrote, “The only thing I contribute to my salvation is the sin from which I need to be saved.” We do not save ourselves. Salvation is all grace.

The greatest, the deepest, the most important, the most profound human need that we have is to be in right relationship with God. There are many other important things about human life, good and useful in and of themselves, but none of them is as important as this one. And we get into trouble when those other things take priority over this one. Part of what we are told again and again is that our deepest needs are not physical, not food or clothing or shelter, as important as they are. Our deepest needs are not emotional, not friends and family, as important as they are. Our deepest needs are not psychological, or social or political, or economic, or financial, or national, or military, or anything else. Our deepest need is to be in right relationship with God. We were made for that. That is what human life is all about. And without that, nothing else counts for anything. So how do we meet this need?

After Jesus invited the man to sell his possessions and give to the poor, he also invited him, “Come, follow me.” Jesus invited him to have a new center, a new focus, a new orientation for his life. Jesus, the giver of God’s grace, invited this man to find in him new meaning, purpose, value, and security. This would have comprised the eternal life which the man sought. We are not told what the man’s eternal destiny was. That is not for us to know. Maybe he came back to Jesus on another day. What we do know is that on that day he made a bad choice. “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” This is remembered not for us to look down on him, but as a warning to us not to do the same thing.

That is not necessarily to say that we are all being asked to give away all of our money today. Not everyone then was asked to do so. It appears to have been that man’s particular problem. Of course, that raises the question as to what our

particular problems are. If not to money, then to what things are our hearts unduly attached in ways that interfere with our faith in, love for, and obedience to, God? There are dangers involved in allowing anything to stand in the way. And there is always a special danger with money. It is good for so many things that beyond merely using it we begin to love it, and therein lies the problem. It would have been that man's salvation to have been shaken loose from this master which drove him so harshly.

Notice that Jesus urged him not only to liquidate his wealth but also to give to the poor. Again, this shows that wealth as such is not evil. Money is a device to hold and transfer value. The history of philosophy tells of a man in ancient Greece who freed himself from the grip of wealth by throwing all of his money into the sea. But that was stupid. It accomplished what he wanted, but the value was lost to humanity. Jesus, by way of contrast, did not urge simple sacrifice, but sacrifice with a point, a purpose, a reason, and a mission. "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor." There were people in desperate need of the very thing holding that man back from God. Giving substantial and sacrificial offerings to and through the church can help us to moderate our immoderate love for money today, can help us to declare our independence from that hard master, can help us to pledge our allegiance to God, and can help us to help those in need.

"Come, follow me." Here is the gracious invitation of our living Lord and master yet today: "Come, follow me." The gracious invitation still calls for total commitment, complete dedication, all or nothing, a clear decision one way or the other. When you get into your car, you cannot drive in two opposite directions at the same time. When you live your life, you cannot live in two opposite directions at the same time. Either we worship God, or we do not. Either we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength, or we do not. We cannot have it both ways.

Either we remove the obstacles to discipleship and follow Jesus Christ, or we do not, in which case we allow our obstacles to be our god, our comfort, and our security. As Martin Luther said, "Whatever our heart clings to, that is our God." What one thing do we lack? What one thing stands in our way? What provides the center of meaning, purpose, and security for our lives? What gives aim and direction? What resides at the core of our being and affects everything else we think, feel, say, and do? Is it our creator and redeemer? Is it the God and Father of Jesus Christ? Is it the gospel of Jesus Christ? If not, we have a wonderful, grace-filled invitation today to set those obstacles aside, and then to turn and follow Jesus Christ.

God made us to live in relationship with God and in fellowship with each other. Jesus calls us today away from all that keeps us apart from God, away from

all that holds us back from Christ, away from all that holds us separate and divides us. Jesus calls us away from that and to himself. We cannot do this on our own but the power of God can break the hold all these other forces have over us. Do we own our possessions, or do they own us? Theoretically, it is possible to hold great wealth without becoming unduly attached to it. But what is the practical reality in each of our lives? “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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