

SAYING NO TO JESUS

MARK 10:17-31

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The Rich and the Kingdom of God Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.”¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’^[a]²⁰ “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²² At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is^[b] to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”²⁸ Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!”²⁹ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Our passage this morning records one of the things that Jesus and His disciples encounter on his journey with them. He travels to places all around the city of Jerusalem and, as we know, the journey will lead him back to that day when he rides into the city on the back of a donkey. Jesus is taking us on not just any road. We know where this road shall end and the price that Jesus will pay for his walking direction. While walking down the road, in this Sunday’s gospel, a man questions Jesus about a big, grand, complicated subject, called “eternal life.”

Who is this man? We don’t know. And we do not know what happens to him after this event in his life is over. All we are told is that he is “rich,” as if knowing his economic status is all we need to know about him. It is impressive that a rich (therefore powerful) man “knelt before him.” Powerful and wealthy, though this man may be, he seems respectful of Jesus. He addresses Jesus as a “good teacher.”

Of course, we readers of Mark’s Gospel know that Jesus is much more than a good teacher. In the very first verse of this gospel, we have been told that this gospel is, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Therefore, this entire gospel is based upon the fact the Jesus is none other than the Christ, the Messiah, the Lord.

And we know, a favorite designation of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel is “rabbi,” teacher. And to be a good teacher is to be someone we should admire significantly. But we shall find, in this text, that though Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher, he is a very different kind of teacher.

Jesus, the “good teacher,” surprises the rich man, not by directly answering his big question about

“eternal life” but rather by inviting the man to give up his *“great possessions”* and *“come, follow me.”* The rich man has come to the *“good teacher”* with a great, big, but rather theoretical and distant theological idea—*“eternal life.”* The man’s question about a theological idea leads Jesus to worldly concerns about material possessions. Then, into a vocational encounter, a discipleship invitation, *“Follow me.”* Are we being invited to consider the fact that eternal life is somehow directly connected with our life here and now? Are we to assume that eternal life begins now so how we live in this world is important to the idea of Eternal life?

But, back to this event where Jesus is inviting someone to be his disciple. What is the problem in this instance?

In many passages about Jesus, we have people being invited to follow, or as we have noticed in our Wednesday Bible Study, the Holy Spirit acts in such a way that others jump at the chance to follow, to be a part of the early church, which at the time was felt not only impossible, but some considered undesirable.

The stories about Philip’s adventures are examples. Philip is not one of the disciples and yet he goes to Samaria and delivers them from their illnesses and preaches that Jesus is the Christ, and they believe him and go all in. What people? The Samaritans. Remember how the ritually clean Jewish folk would go some distance around Samaria so they would not come in contact with these folks, as we noticed in the story of the Good Samaritan. But Philip is there, in Samaria, and tells them that Jesus is the Christ and they jump at the chance to be a *“follower,”*

This same Philip then encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch, a Gentile and, a rich man who worked in the queen’s court who Philip encountered as the man was in a chariot reading a scroll of the scriptures, this one from Isaiah that said: *“Like a sheep he was led to slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life was taken away from the earth.”* After he read this to Philip he asked him to explain it and Philip did and ending by telling him about Christ, and he believed. The second of a series of examples of hearing the invitation and saying replying answer of yes.

As you have noticed in our reading of Mark’s Gospel that it begins with Jesus not saying, *“Believe me”* or *“Have faith in me,”* but rather, *“Follow me.”* But this story is different. Unlike the other call stories in Mark, this one ends with the call’s recipient turning away and rejecting Jesus. The disciples were invited to follow Jesus, and they said yes. We just shared with you some examples from the book of Acts where people themselves took the initiative and told the messenger, why can’t we stop here—the water is here—and be baptized. But this morning we heard of this man who hears the invitation from Jesus himself and says no.

Whatever this *“good teacher”* wanted to teach seems lost on the man. Or is it? Perhaps this rich man got the teacher’s point: the way Jesus invites people to walk is demanding and costly. And he got the point that it was too costly for him.

Someone is invited to follow Jesus, and the person who is invited refuses, walking away from the *“good teacher.”* And yet, please note that the episode doesn’t end simply with the man’s *“grief”* and his sad rejection. The story ends with Jesus’s joyful affirmation that his disciples (unlike the rich man) have, in truth, relinquished everything and followed him.

This has been a troublesome story for most of us. If we are honest we might identify with him. Most of us (be honest!) are *“rich”* by the world’s standards of riches and poverty. We have all that we need to live and more than enough. We will not most of the time depend upon someone else for the food we will eat day in and day out.

As we reflect on this episode from Mark’s Gospel, we ought to ask ourselves, (1) shall we take our cues from the first part of the text, the rich man who rejects Jesus’s invitation to walk with him, (2) or shall

we focus on the second part in which Peter declares the disciples' allegiance to Jesus followed by Jesus's praise of his disciples, promising them a grand reward for their following?

A successful, rich man comes to Jesus and asks him a theological question, *"I've always been a very spiritual person, and I enjoy religious debate. What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?"*

We might anticipate a long discourse, *"What do we really mean by that phrase, 'eternal life?' Let's attempt a biblical definition. This may take a while."*

No, Jesus says that man already knows the answer to this question, an answer known by everyone there since childhood—we must obey God's commandments. Sometimes, we already know the answer to a question; it's just that the answer is complicated, so we don't like it! Our problem is not that we lack sufficient information or haven't taken the time to find the answer; our challenge is that we already know and are looking for a way around what we know.

The inquiring rich man admits to Jesus that he not only knows the answer but has actually lived the answer, obeying all the commandments since he was a kid. He has been good at being very good.

And maybe to knock him off his high horse that Jesus says he lacks one thing. He must go, sell everything he has, give to the poor, and then *"follow me."* The man wants to have a theological discussion with Jesus about the big, conflicted, intellectually troubling topic of *"eternal life."* Let's bat around some ideas, play with some competing concepts, and have a frank and open discussion of *"eternal life."*

But, Jesus responds, not with ideas and concepts but with active verbs and commands: Go. Sell. Give. Follow.

The way toward *"eternal life,"* the path to start living eternal life begins now? Interestingly, Jesus doesn't ask him to believe, affirm a creed, or feel something in his heart. It's go, sell, give, follow.

Down through the ages, people have wondered why Jesus commanded the man to divest from his earthly possessions. Did Jesus suspect the man was greedy? Was Jesus trying to set the bar so high that the man would be knocked down from his smugness?

Who knows?

All we know is that the man did not go, sell, give, or follow. He slumped down, got depressed, and walked away. And Jesus exclaims to his disciples, *"It's tough to save the rich."*

This is the only place in the Gospels where someone is invited to be a disciple, to come *"follow me"* and refuse. Whatever his reason, the rich man could not imagine his life without all his stuff. He could not imagine this *"good teacher"* knew what he was teaching. He could not imagine Jesus addressing him, telling him the truth about himself and the way to eternal life. He couldn't imagine any way toward the life he wanted other than the path of possessions.

Sad.

I think the contemporary American church often makes a mistake in extolling all of the benefits of following Jesus without the costs of following Jesus. We stress all of those aspects in our life that Jesus can fix without admitting many of the problems that can come to our life that are caused by Jesus!

At least Jesus, the teacher, is being honest.

I'm troubled when, in the interest of evangelism and church growth, we preachers are tempted to present the Christian faith as the best deal imaginable, a sure-fire technique to getting whatever you think you must have that's more important than Jesus.

"Tired?" Come to Jesus, and he'll refresh you. *"Lonely?"* Jesus is the best of good friends who will always stand beside you and watch your back. *"Questions?"* You're sure to find direct, straightforward answers with Jesus.

This sort of *"evangelism"* says, *"Tell me what you think you have just got to have to make your life worth living."* Then the way of Christ, discipleship, is put forth as a way to get whatever you think you must

have.

There is even what is going around in the church today that is called “prosperity religion,” where you will be told, *“give \$20 and before the week is over because of your being willing to give you will end up with \$200 or more.”*

Lay this approach alongside this Sunday’s gospel!

And yet, here’s what I want you to notice. Though this is the end of the excellent teacher’s instruction of this rich man, it is not the end of Jesus’s teaching of his disciples. The lecture continues as they walk down the road. And they follow. They are busy doing what the rich man refused to do.

Say what you will about the limitations of the twelve disciples, and there are many, yet they follow. They keep listening, and Jesus keeps talking. I expect the rich man had many advantages and privileges that the fisher folk disciples did not have. He seems to fancy himself as an intellectual, somebody who has the time to sit around and have deep discussions of subjects like *“eternal life.”* But he does NOT go, sell, give, and follow. At least the disciples do that.

Jesus marvels that the salvation of the rich is a challenging task. It’s as tough as it is to shove a fully loaded camel through the eye of a needle!

Mark says, *“They were shocked even more and said to each other, “Then who can be saved?”*

The teacher replies, *“It’s impossible with human beings, but not with God. All things are possible for God.”* Is that the issue. Was the rich man assuming he could save himself?

Then, it is as if one of his disciples, Peter, gets the point of the lecture; the light goes on, and Peter exclaims, *“Look, we’ve left everything and followed you.”*

And Jesus, the resourceful teacher, exclaims, *“Got it!”*

This is something else we might notice about this text. Do you recall that as we have read Mark, the writer is always pointing out how dumb the disciples were? Most of the time they are the last one to understand Jesus’ teaching. But this one they got.

A rich, well-fixed person is invited to become a disciple of Jesus. The man walks away. But Peter and his fellow disciples have not. They have stayed throughout the semester. They listened. Indeed, they did not understand everything that the teacher taught. There have been many moments when they were confused, shocked, and uncertain of his meaning. And yet, they have paid high tuition, leaving everything, and they have followed.

And so have you. Maybe you haven’t understood everything Jesus has said to you over the years; perhaps you have doubts about the faith and have not left everything to follow Jesus. But you have followed. Here you are, still listening to Jesus.

And let’s be honest, most of us here are *“rich”* by the world’s standards of material success. Most people don’t come close to having as much stuff as most of us have accumulated. We may not think of ourselves as *“rich,”* but we have more than enough. And despite all the excellent reasons Jesus gives you to walk away, you haven’t. Here, you are walking a perilous, risky, sometimes confusing, demanding, life-giving way that most folks don’t want to walk. You’re not waiting until all the data comes in until you have resolved all your doubts and reservations. You walk with Jesus now. *“Eternal life”*—another term for being with God—begins now. Anytime you dare to walk with Jesus, even if he takes you places you’re not sure you want to go, that’s eternal life. We’re learning to walk with Jesus, listen to Jesus, and try to obey Jesus now, expecting to be with Jesus for eternity.

