

ENCOUNTERING JESUS
The Rich Young Man
Mark 10:17-31
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The last two Sundays we've focused on Jesus' healing of a boy possessed by an evil spirit and of an invalid who'd been crippled for 38 years. The encounter we're exploring today wasn't with someone possessed by an evil spirit or someone who had a serious physical ailment, but this person was no less in need of Jesus' healing. Based on your memory, what can you tell me about Jesus' encounter with the rich, young man found in Matthew and Mark's Gospels?

This is one of the more difficult interactions Jesus had with someone recorded in Scripture. We don't have many examples where someone approached Jesus with a legitimate question or a need and that person ended up walking away, not receiving healing. And Jesus' encounter with the rich, young man contains some of Jesus' most hard-hitting teaching. *"Go sell everything you have and give to the poor,"* and *"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"* were not easy statements to digest, especially for someone who was wealthy. And yet, while Jesus' words were hard-hitting and the man ended up walking away, Jesus' love and compassion for him was deep. Let's walk through this passage together...

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?" Mark 10:17

This man (Matthew's Gospel identifies him as a young man) approached Jesus with appropriate respect—he knelt before Him and addressed Him as "Good teacher"—and he asked a great question: *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* This man was wealthy, but he wasn't just thinking about making money and enjoying himself here on earth. He was thinking about his destiny and life after death. In his response Jesus kind of poked him.

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. 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.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Mark 10:18-20

Jesus isn't just engaging in some playful banter with this young man. He's not toying with him; He's trying to help him see himself clearly. Jesus asks, "*Why do you call me good?*" And then He says, "*No one is good—except God alone.*" Jesus challenges the young man's framework with a question about what "good" is. The young man is operating from a perspective that says if you do good while you're on earth you'll earn an eternal reward.

Jesus went on to list some of the 10 Commandments, but He only cited 6 of them: Honor your father and mother; don't murder; don't commit adultery; don't steal; don't bear false witness; and, don't defraud (or covet). Interestingly, Jesus lists the last 6 commandments, commandments that focus on our interaction with others. If we think of it in the context of Jesus' statement: "*Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself,*" Jesus focuses on the commandments that address loving our neighbor. By not focusing on the commandments that address our worship of God and our love for Him, Jesus is setting this guy up, not to embarrass or belittle him, but to speak truth to his heart.

The rich, young man responded, "*All these I have kept since I was a boy.*" Jesus gave him a checklist in answer to his question about inheriting eternal life and the young man breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Great! I've done all that. I haven't killed anyone. I've not committed adultery. I haven't stolen or given false witness or defrauded anyone. I honor my parents." Check, check, check. And he no doubt thought to himself, "Cool! I have this covered." But Jesus wasn't finished with him.

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."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Mark 10:21 & 22

The 7 words, "*Jesus looked at him and loved him,*" are so important, because they put this exchange in context for us. Jesus wasn't being hard on this guy, because He was anti-wealth or because He wanted to put a privileged, rich, young man in his place. Jesus was revealing truth to this man because He loved him. He hoped he might see the grip that wealth had on his heart.

"*Go sell everything you have and give to the poor,*" seems extremely harsh...definitely not sensitive and compassionate. But Jesus spoke those words because He saw this man was

trapped by his great wealth. His money and possessions had a death grip on his heart and only radical surgery was going to bring healing.

After Jesus said this, I think the young man got it, but he chose his wealth over worshiping and following Jesus. Verse 22 says, *“He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”* It might seem to us like his wealth forced him to walk away, but he could have chosen differently. Jesus gave him that choice when He highlighted his struggle for him.

The rich, young man could check off the commandment boxes that dealt with how he treated his neighbors, but he couldn’t check the boxes that addressed loving God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength.

Then Jesus took the opportunity to speak to his disciples.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, *“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”*

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, *“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.”*

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, *“Who then can be saved?”* Mark 10:23-26

When Jesus was speaking to the rich guy the disciples could keep emotional distance from his teaching. After all, He obviously wasn’t speaking to them. They weren’t rich by anyone’s standards. They had left their careers to follow Jesus around. But now Jesus’ words were hitting home for them. When Jesus said it’s hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, they were amazed, because they knew a lot of good, rich people who loved God. And then Jesus became ever more explicit. He said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom. Everyone knew a camel couldn’t go through the eye of a needle. Was Jesus really serious? Is it impossible for rich people to enter God’s kingdom? Whoa! The disciples pushed back with the question, *“Who then can be saved?”* And Jesus answered in verses 27-31:

Jesus looked at them and said, *“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”*

Then Peter spoke up, *“We have left everything to follow you!”*

“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 gospel 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” Mark 10:27-31

Jesus came right out and said it’s impossible for anyone to be saved without God, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter, who was always quick to speak, asked, “What about us? Remember, Jesus, we’ve left everything we had to follow you.” And Jesus reassured Peter and the others that those who devote themselves to Him and his message (the Gospel) will be saved.

So, what do we do with this? Some here this morning are rich by our country’s standard and others aren’t. What do we learn from Jesus’ interaction with the rich, young man and from his words? Is Jesus telling all of us to go, sell everything we have, give it to the poor and then follow Him?

As we reflect on what God has to say to us this morning, keep in mind the love and compassion Jesus has for each of us. The words, “***Jesus looked at him and loved him***” are true for each of us. **Every insight God gives, every truth He reveals and every conviction He brings always flows out of his heart of love. He looks at you and He looks at me and He loves us.** If we don’t start with that premise, it will be difficult for us to receive anything from God in the way He intends.

As I reflect on Jesus’ encounter with the wealthy, young man I see Him emphasizing two truths throughout this exchange. Jesus repeatedly emphasizes that **Our good works won’t cut it. Without God’s help it’s impossible for any of us to gain eternal life.** I would guess that most of us understand this and believe it. We know that apart from God’s grace we’re lost. And yet how often do we default to focusing on what we do for God. Jesus uses pointed language in this passage of Scripture to illustrate we can’t achieve eternal life ourselves.

The second emphasis I see in this story is really a question Jesus asks, “**What is the thing that has me in its clutch—that grips me so tightly I’m in danger of missing God’s grace?**” Like the young man are we gripped by wealth? Or is a relationship? Our spouse or our family? Our job? Our retirement account? Our reputation or prestige? Our goals or dreams for the future?

Is there anything that consumes us so that we're unable to fully give ourselves to God? I'm reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 6. He's talking specifically about money and possessions, but the truth applies broadly. Jesus said, "*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*" (Matthew 6:24) Is there anything competing with God for supremacy in your life—anything God is revealing to you by his Holy Spirit this morning? If so, I encourage you to confess that to Him in prayer and listen for his direction for your life.