

“Why So Sad?”
October 18, 2020

Mark 10:17-27

Today’s story, subtitled in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as “The Rich Man”, can also be found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As a rule of thumb, the more Gospels you find a story in, the more likely the story actually happened. Then again, if the story of the Rich Man never found its way into any of the Gospels, that would probably be okay for most Christians. Because the story contains one verse in it that has troubled believers from the time it was written.

Before I get ahead of myself, though, today’s story starts with a man who ran up to Jesus and asked him the question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Even if you didn’t know it by the subtitle of this story, that question alone would give you a clue about this man’s status in life.

“What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?” is the kind of question someone asks when they have plenty of free time on their hands. When they don’t have a whole lot of concerns weighing them down. When they can afford, literally and figuratively, to contemplate otherworldly ideas.

There is no possible way a poor person would run up to Jesus and ask him about eternal life. A poor person might run up and ask Jesus about where he or she could find some food because they were hungry. Or maybe they would ask Jesus about how they were going to find the money to buy medicine for their child or pay their monthly rent.

Rich people have the luxury of contemplating their lives after their earthly life. Poor people are too busy worrying about daily life in this world.

Anyway, the rich man in the story ran up to Jesus and asked about eternal life. It’s important to note that the story passes no judgement on the rich man because of his wealth. In all likelihood, the rich man earned his wealth through hard work and legitimate sacrifice rather than through some corrupt practice. Nevertheless, Jesus took one look at the rich man and saw right through his question into his soul.

Meanwhile, we can guess how the rich man was hoping Jesus would respond. He expected Jesus to tell him to go to church and put a sizable donation in the offering plate. Or find a beggar on the street and offer to buy him or her new clothes and a nice meal. On a larger scale, perhaps Jesus might have wanted him to underwrite the cost of a park where children could gather and play. All those possibilities would require the rich man to invest some portion of his wealth. But generally speaking, any of those ideas would have been manageable.

In any case, the rich man asked his question and listened carefully as Jesus went through a list of God’s commandments. When Jesus was done, the rich man assumed he

was in good shape. From the time he was a young boy, the rich man had memorized and kept all God's commandments. But the rich man still figured he could do more than just play by the rules. Therefore, he took his question one step further and asked Jesus whether there was one concrete thing he could do. One sweeping, generous gesture that would make the rich man feel worthy about how he was using his wealth.

The rich man's eagerness to soul search and engage in self-reflection is probably why Jesus loved him. Still, just because the story tells us Jesus loved the rich man doesn't mean Jesus decided to take it easy on him. Instead, Jesus replied with a recommendation the rich man didn't anticipate and clearly was not happy to hear. You only have to do one more thing in order to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him. You need to sell all that you have and give your money away to the poor. Then you have to drop everything and follow me.

Sell it all, give it all away, then drop it all and follow me. That particular line is the really tough verse in the story I was referring to at the beginning of the sermon. In fact, scholars, preachers and lay people have been trying to make sense of what Jesus told the rich man for many, many years...mostly by trying to soften the words Jesus used. Let's face it...the fact is the vast majority of people don't want to give serious consideration to Jesus' proposal.

As you can imagine, the rich man didn't want to entertain what Jesus said either. In the wake of Jesus' prescription, the rich man stood there stunned with his head bowed and his shoulders slumped over. According to the story, he was shocked and he went away grieving. Interestingly, it turns out the rich man in this morning's Scripture lesson is the only person in the entire Gospel of Mark who declined to drop everything in his life and follow Jesus after Jesus offered the invitation...

There are two essential conclusions worth drawing from this morning's story. **(1)** To anyone who would claim the story of the rich man is not a story about money, the truth is that it is a story about money. More precisely, it's a story about how money has the capacity to contaminate our lives.

To be sure, money can be a good thing. As human beings, we can earn our money and spend our money and donate our money wisely. On the other hand, as human beings we too often equate money with power. And just like power, people go to great lengths to hold onto money tightly. We are secretive about money. We wield money as a weapon. We seek after money with singular, unrelenting intensity. And Jesus knows all about our human tendencies, which is why he concludes a few verses later in this morning's Gospel passage, "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."

Absolutely the story of the Rich Man in Mark's Gospel is a story about money.

However, here is the other conclusion about today's Scripture lesson. The story of the Rich Man is not just a story about money. If the story were only about money,

then human beings down through history would have given away their wealth routinely as a way to insure eternal life.

Yet there is nothing you or I can do to inherit eternal life. Entering the kingdom of God isn't about keeping God's commandments or donating huge sums of money to worthy causes. Eternal life...God's kingdom...is not something we can buy, no matter how wealthy we might be.

Eternal life in God's kingdom is offered by God to you and to me as a gift. And like any other gift, God gives the gift to whomever God chooses for reasons that are beyond our comprehension. There's only one catch. You and I have to be free to receive the gift. (2)

Unfortunately, money comes with strings attached and those strings can tie us down. Is it possible that the rich man walked away in this morning's story shocked and grieving because Jesus forced him to realize for the first time in his entire life how burdensome his money made him feel? So burdened, in fact, that the rich man ultimately feared living in poverty more than he feared living enslaved to the dead weight his money had become.

The rich man was supposed to have it made. He was presumably well known and widely respected. He was comfortable and content. Yet, the rich man had his definitions wrong. He figured, like most of us, that the opposite of "rich" is "poor"? What he didn't realize, like most of us, is that, in the eyes of Jesus, the opposite of "rich" is actually "free"? Come to think of it, have you seen examples in your own lifetime of people with very little money and very few resources who seemed a whole lot freer than people with large bank accounts and all the material goods anyone could ever ask for...?

I know what you're probably thinking. Yeah, Jesus might be onto something, but what about the mortgage and the insurance and all the monthly bills and saving for the kid's education and spending a few extra dollars on luxuries once in a while. I know...I get it. I'm right there with you. If the story of the rich man is any indication, sometimes it feels like pushing a camel through a needle would be a whole lot easier than truly following Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the great gift in following Jesus Christ is the kind of freedom Jesus promises. A life where we're not tied down and overburdened. A life where we keep perspective about the things that are really important. A life we accept and embrace in the name of Jesus because it's what we asked for and what we really want. Amen.

(1) Brown Taylor, The Rev. Dr. Barbara, *The Preaching Life*, (Cowley Publications: 1993, Boston) pg. 124.

(2) Ibid, pg. 125.

