

**“What’s In It for Me?”**

**Mark 10:17-31**

**Commitment Sunday**

**November 22, 2020**

**Pastor Andy Kinsey**

***“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”***

**Mark 10:17**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

From the hour we first believed, O God, to the hour at hand may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable unto you, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

### **Message**

We are entering into a time of the year when the focus on material things is becoming more intense. Despite the pandemic, and to make up for losses, stores will certainly be emphasizing the multiple ways we can purchase “things.”

It has become a part of our cultural ritual to promote such a life by offering the latest in fashion and design, and, as Glenn Howell shared with us last week, to tell us what happiness really entails. The smoke and mirrors of this approach to fulfillment is part-and-parcel of this society, so much so that, like fish in water, we do not even see it: we swim in the waters of consumerism only to fail to realize that we are swimming in the waters of consumerism, all while our deep-seated individualism bobs all around us.

And as always there is the implicit question: “Well, what’s in it for me?”

After all, when I watch a commercial about buying a new car, I witness the personal benefits of that new car. Indeed, when I buy it, I will achieve a new kind of status, a new life. That’s what is in it for me. Or when I look into getting the right smart-phone, I suddenly possess new powers to accomplish more and more. I will be a new person and have a new outlook on life. That’s what is in it for me.

Even with respect to American Protestantism, we find a consumer-mindset in play. We seem to have forgotten, or we do not want to recognize, that the

Christian faith is thoroughly communal and social. It is not about asking the question “What is in it for me?” but rather “What do our lives look like when we act together for the sake of Christ”?

The first question does not require a great deal of imagination: it focuses on an attitude of “Just give it to me,” or “Just let me express myself, regardless of what others may think or how my actions may affect those around me.”

The second question calls for a more biblical response: how might we bear one another’s burdens, as Paul says to the Galatians (6:2). It calls forth the kind of response that speaks to personal responsibility and maturity.

I am thinking here of the old tale about the Native American tribe who lived in Mississippi. They were near a swift river with a raging current, so swift that people could drown.

The day came, though, when another tribe attacked the village, driving the one tribe to edge of the riverbank. What to do? They could *not* go forward, and they could *not* just walk across the river.

What they did, however, was creative: they placed the younger, older, and weaker members of the tribe on the shoulders of the stronger members of the tribe. They then waded into the water. Amazingly, the weight of the weaker tribespeople on the shoulders of the stronger kept the stronger ones from losing their footing. They were able to get to the other side.<sup>1</sup>

*True strength is about how we are able to expand our hearts and minds so that we may meet the true needs of others.*

It echoes the saying that only “the person who is already loved can love; and only the person who has been trusted can trust.”<sup>2</sup> After all, we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:10). In other words, we love “first” because of what we believe about God, not because of what we think about others. We love in response to what Christ has done for us, not because we expect something in return.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if we are loving or giving only because we expect someone to respond in kind, or meet our expectations or obligations, or give us favors, then we are not loving as God has loved us – which is unconditionally.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2020), 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

It is why we proclaim God's grace first, not second. It is why we do not beat people over the head with guilt and shame to give. Rather, as followers of Christ, we realize that our true strength and character come from our confidence in knowing we are children of God, as persons blessed by God.<sup>5</sup> It is why our mission comes down to calling people to do what is responsible: to provide as many people as possible with the opportunity to share their gifts and talents, and not remain stuck in selfishness (1 Corinthians 13:11).

### **The "Rich Young Ruler"**

Perhaps this is why Jesus' encounter with the "rich young ruler" comes as a shock to modern ears. How could Jesus appear to dismiss so easily the biggest pledge of the stewardship campaign, or someone who could bankroll the entire Jesus movement? What is he thinking? Read carefully, this passage raises more questions than answers.

I mean, from all appearances, the "rich young ruler," as he is called, is on the right track. He appears to be a righteous man. After all, when he comes to Jesus, he kneels, a sign of honor (v. 17).<sup>6</sup>

He asks Jesus a good question about what he must do to inherit eternal life, a real sign of devotion (v. 17). He even calls Jesus "good" which is an indication that the young ruler knows about who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing, though Jesus dismisses the claim (v. 18).<sup>7</sup>

And even Jesus' response *to* the young ruler indicates a deep recognition of the young man's spiritual resume: the rich young ruler knows how to keep the Law. He has good values. He has obviously done well for himself, and he knows the commandments – at least, as Jesus tells it, he knows five of the commandments: Do not commit adultery; do not lie; do not covet; do not steal; honor your father and your mother" (vv. 19-20). He knows how to obey rules.

Oddly, we might wonder about why Jesus did not mention the other five commandments: the first three, for example, dealing with God, and the fourth, dealing with the Sabbath, not to mention, do not murder (cf., Exodus 20:1-17).

Perhaps this is where the questions arise, for Jesus obviously loves this young man. Jesus can see goodness in him. There is potential (v. 20). But there is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 64.

also something very much lacking; there is “one thing” missing (v. 21): “Sell all you have and give it to the poor; and then you will have treasure in heaven” (v. 22).

Did Jesus recognize in this young man an inability to recognize God first? After all, that is the first commandment, is it not? You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:4). Or did Jesus sense something the text does not identify like a possessive spirit, an attitude of works-righteousness, or the belief that the young man could buy eternal life?

Or maybe Jesus realized that “Here is a person, when the going gets rough (and it is going to get rough) who was not going to ‘hang in there.’” Would this rich young ruler end up serving mammon over God, putting wealth and prosperity above the cross (Matthew 6:24)?

What we do know is that when Jesus makes this invitation to the young ruler to sell his possessions and follow, the young ruler turns away in disbelief, leaving the disciples perplexed (v. 24-25). After all, if you are Peter, you might be asking yourself, Isn’t it better to be rich than poor? Isn’t wealth a sign of God’s favor? If this person cannot attain salvation by what he has done, then who can? (Mark 10:28-31).

To which Jesus reminds us about the people who “store up treasures for themselves and are not rich toward God; they have hearts as my grandmother used to say, of snow peas, cold and small (Luke 12:21).

On the other hand, Jesus commends another way of life where hearts only increase in size, like a poor widow who puts two copper coins in the temple treasury and sacrifices all she has (Mark 12:41-43); or like the instruction that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). What matters in the kingdom of God is not outward appearance but the inward gratitude of the heart.

### **Jesus’ Offer**

That’s what Jesus is offering to the rich young ruler and to us: a new way of living, not one more new rule. He is changing the question from “What is in it for me?” to “What is God asking of me in light my God-given talents and abilities and in light of our shared mission together – to give, to share, to contribute?” Do you see the difference?

Throughout the Bible, God gives to prosperous people great responsibility. Thank God, for example, that the Good Samaritan had the financial resources to help his neighbor (Luke 10:25-37); and thank God that Aquila and Priscilla had the resources to support the work of the early church (Acts 18:1-2). Such people displayed great strength in how they gave to others. They understood Jesus' words that to whom much is given much is required (Luke 12:48).

Surely, one of the most widespread misunderstandings of our day is how we think giving means "giving up" something, or "being deprived of something," typically, something "I want" or something "I feel I need to have," this sense of entitlement, which only perpetuates an attitude of self-improvement, a smallness of heart and mind.

### **Closing Invitation**

Surely, there is another way, and, of course, if you are a follower of Jesus, there is! It is the way that asks us to examine ourselves to see what we may be lacking: what is the "one thing" that I need to address that prevents me from giving or serving, or from committing myself to Christ?

What is that one thing I need to address?

What do I need to let go of to find eternal life, or salvation, so receive more than I can possibly imagine (Mark 10:30, Ephesians 3:19-21)?

What do I need to offer so that I may be a blessing to others?

May we take time to examine our own hearts in the light of these questions!

Amen.