

“Jesus and Riches”

5/19/19; Mark 10: 17-31

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//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?”//

—Mark 10:17 (NIV)

How many times have you imagined yourself to be rich? There are so many ways to answer that question. Imagining yourself winning the lottery and then wondering what you would do with millions of dollars. Seeing a beautiful mansion, or simply a house greater than your own and wondering what kind of place you would build if you had unlimited riches and resources. Or, maybe, seeing a need in your family or community or in the world and wondering how you might address it if you could pour millions of dollars in that direction.

Well, here we have a man who doesn't have to imagine himself being rich. He already is, in many ways. We see, not only from our scripture in Mark, but in the parallel passages in Matthew 19 and Luke 18, this man is very rich financially; he is also richly powerful and influential as he is a ruler, possibly in some governance over the synagogue; and he is relatively young, so he is rich in the potential of his many years yet to come.

Yet, this rich, young ruler is trying to imagine himself rich toward God and the kingdom of God. Evidently he's coming up short, though, and has eagerly sought out Jesus. He's fallen on his knees before this one he's calling “Good teacher,” and is asking him what he must do to “inherit eternal life.” Every expectation from the onlooking disciples must have been: “Surely here is a good man to follow Jesus and join with us in his ministry.” And if we didn't already know how this encounter ends, we'd probably have very similar expectations. Even in *knowing* how this ends, there is still a shock that comes to us when we hear Jesus' words for the man to “...sell everything you have...” and when the rich man walks away in sadness.

Let's revisit that shock. At least the first two. There are a number of shocking things around it. But let's not walk away from any of it, or try to gloss it over. Let's hear what Jesus is saying to this rich man and what this passage is saying to all of us.

1. First shock: “Why do you call me good?”

//“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.”//

While earthquakes have aftershocks, Jesus gives this man a pre-shock. The man is trying to compliment Jesus, but he's using this word “good” in a careless and superficial way. And Jesus calls him on it. Like God himself, this

word is indicative of a very high standard of worth and merit. It ought not to be used “in vain” so to speak.

People still do this today when they talk about Jesus being a “good man,” when what they mean is that he’s “as good as we dare elevate him without being challenged by his more radical and shocking claims.”

People sometimes point to this verse as if it indicates Jesus is shying away from such a high complement, even denying his own divinity. But if that were the case Jesus didn’t do a very good job of it. Consider Revelation 22:8-9 where John bowed down before an angel, an action which also should be reserved for God alone. Listen to what the angel said: //9 But he said to me, “Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!”//

Jesus did not deny this word being used to describe him, nor did he deny his divinity, because he made no denial at all. In fact, he went out of his way to make the word that had been carelessly applied to him be carefully understood as being applied to God. If anything it is the opposite of a denial.

People are still shocked today by this exchange. But they probably aren’t shocked enough.

Are you shocked here? Is it enough to make you think again? Rightly?

2. Second shock: “One thing you lack...”

//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.”//

When this rich, young ruler affirms he has kept all the commandments since he was a boy, which wasn’t all that long ago, he is again being careless and superficial with the standards of which he speaks. He doesn’t realize it, but he has too low a view of God, goodness, and the commands of God. And he has too high a view of himself. It’s easier to do this when you’re young. Just as it’s easier to think you’re a better driver than you really are when you’ve only passed the Driver’s Ed test and not much of the real life test. It’s also easier to have too high a view of one’s self when you are a ruler over others and, of course, richer than others.

The man is unaware of all this. And rather than leave him with that false impression of himself and of God and his commandments, Jesus loves the man with another shock. And this is a big one. But, again, it may not be what it seems on the surface. On the surface it is tempting to hear only the first five words of Jesus. “Go, sell everything you have... .” Boom! That’s it. End of story. This sounds impossible. It’s a non-starter. It even seems a bit cruel of Jesus, for we think he doesn’t ask this of everyone. This wasn’t asked of Zacchaeus, though he did volunteer to give half of his wealth, and then some. Peter still owned his boat and house in Capernaum. What about them? No fair!

But if we think this way, we’re probably thinking the same way as the rich, young man. For in fact, Jesus wasn’t asking anything more of this man than he was asking of all of his disciples. Jesus calls everyone who would follow him to

take up their cross, deny themselves and die daily for his sake and the Gospel. He has even put it in the shocking form of **//If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.//** (Luke 14:26). He puts it in the form of the parable of the “Pearl of Great Price” where the man sells everything he has just to buy a field where the pearl was found. He just doesn’t put it in the form of money every single time. But when he does put it that way, he’s not being unreasonable or unfair. People spend hundreds and thousands of dollars, they even spend more money than they have to spend, on things like cars, boats, lottery tickets, cosmetic surgery, even serious surgery—even though its effects are temporary. What do you suppose a person might pay if they could actually purchase a resurrection? Real estate in the kingdom of God? Life eternal?

To be clear, Jesus wasn’t calling this man to purchase any of those things. They aren’t for sale. They are for the asking by faith. This is because Jesus himself would give his all by shedding his blood in order to purchase them for us. So he was calling this rich, young ruler, to faith. He was challenging him to shift his faith from mammon to God and to follow God through his Son Jesus Christ.

Listen to this verse again. **//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.”//**

This isn’t cruel at all. This is love. Jesus knew what the man lacked. He lacked a heart that was free to love and serve God, as he was loving and serving his other master—mammon. Money had him like a man possessed. But Jesus wasn’t going to command the man’s money to leave the rich, young ruler. He was going to command the man instead. Give it up. Give it to the poor. Then come, follow Jesus.

And don’t miss that last part. Just as the first five words might make you miss the rest of what Jesus says, these last three words should more properly make you forget the shock of those first words. “...come, follow me.” Jesus was giving this man the opportunity to join with his disciples, to be one of his followers. What an offer this was! Can you imagine the pain of looking back at that offer in hindsight? He had the opportunity of a lifetime. Of an eternal lifetime. And he turned it down. This rich man felt he couldn’t afford it?!

You and I have this same offer today. Jesus is calling “whosoever will” to follow him—not superficially, not carelessly, and not without a cost—but with a profound, carefully considered cost of faith. Jesus wants us to follow him whole heartedly. And daily. And his reward makes any cost to us look like two pennies in a billion dollar bargain. As C.S. Lewis put it in the last line of one of his poems: ~”The price was cheap; the price was all I had.”~

This offer Jesus is giving the rich man is the same one he gives to everyone else. And to us today. Even as we are following Jesus, we still face these choices every day. And so we must die to ourselves... over and over. Let’s not walk away from it, or try to gloss it over. Let’s receive it for what it is: the love of God in the voice of Jesus, calling us to follow him at any cost. This is indeed shocking. Shockingly wonderful if you can believe it.